“Nowhere But Here”: Becoming Advocates for the Halakhic Prenuptial Agreement
Kimberly Hay, p. 5

Reflections on Political Involvement in the Broader World Jewish Community
R. Yosef Blau, p. 6

An Interview with R. Dr. Dov Zakheim
Gavriel Brown, p. 8

An Interview with Ruth Messinger
Gabrielle Hiller, p. 9

A Time to Mend?: Halakhic Perspectives on Tikkun Olam
Adam Friedmann, p. 10

Teshuvah: Inspiration and Action
Davida Kollmar, p. 13

Creative Arts Section
P. 13-16

www.kolhamevaser.com
Politics and Activism

Rejoinder: In Defense of a Relationship with the Christian Right
In defense of Orthodox political cooperation with the conservative Christian community.

“Nowhere But Here”: Becoming Advocates for the Halakhic Prenuptial Agreement
The prenuptial agreement is the single most effective way to solve the agunah crisis, and the YU community has a unique responsibility to help remove the stigma still associated with it.

Reflections on Political Involvement in the Broader World Jewish Community
The Senior Mashgiach Ruchani of RIETS tells the story of his involvement in American Jewish politics as an Orthodox rabbi.

Living Alongside Your Brother: Of Usury, Triage, and Political Philosophy
How a sugya in Bava Metsia speaks to one of the most divisive issues of modern politics.

An Interview with Rabbi Dr. Dov Zakheim
R. Dr. Dov Zakheim speaks about his career in the U.S. government and the religious challenges he had to face during that time.

An Interview with Ruth Messinger
AJWS president Ruth Messinger speaks about her years of public service and activism.

A Time to Mend?: Halakhic Perspectives on Tikkun Olam
Is there basis in halakhic sources for the trend towards the centrality of tikkun olam in our practice of Judaism?

Creative Arts

Teshuvah: Inspiration and Action
A new look at the teshuva process through Dr. Erica Brown’s new book Teshuva: Daily Inspiration for the Days of Awe.

Three Events, One Medium:
A Selection of Posters from the Yeshiva University Museum
A history and comparison of twentieth century posters detailing American Jewish political life.

Images from the Yeshiva University Museum
Poster for the Jewish Relief Campaign
Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Mordecai Manuel Noah
Poster: “Food Will Win the War”
Poster announcing the appointment of Pauline Dolitsky as President of the Women’s League of Yeshiva University
Poster stamp endorsing George Frankenthaler for Supreme Court
Campaign button endorsing Oscar S. Straus for Governor
FOR THE LENINIST GENERAL LINE, FOR THE PARTY AND THE COMINTERN
VOTE FOR SLATE NO. 18
Armistice Day Poster
Campaign button endorsing Oscar S. Straus for Governor
Editors’ Thoughts: Kings and Queens of Flesh and Blood

By: Chesky Kopel

An obscure midrash called Aseret Melakhim describes the reigns of ten kings who ruled or will rule over all of humanity, “from one end of the world until the other.” Among the stories and interpretations there appears the following account: “The eighth king is Alexander [the Great] of Macedon, who ruled from one end of the world until the other... Nor is this all, but he even tried to ascend to Heaven and discern what is there... Nor is this all, but he even tried to go to the Land of Darkness and discern what is there...”

This is a fair legend, considering just how much Alexander did conquer. His short-lived empire extended from Greece to the Himalayas in the fourth century BCE, encompassing more than enough to qualify as “one end of the world until the other” for the classical-era author of this midrash. Alexander conquered his way to this author’s home from distant lands, and then just went on conquering. So far as we can tell historically, Alexander of Macedon was absolutely undefeated in battle. In the author’s imagination, even the boundaries of this world could not contain such a mighty leader. He marched his armies right up to Heaven to check out what was going on up there, then turned around and paid a visit to Hell.

The implications of such a claim cannot be overstated. The other-worldly realms and their sacred truths, inaccessible to most mere humans even through years of contemplation, seemed open to Alexander through his imperial power. In the larger context of this midrashic list, his domain surpasses even that of the King Messiah, and parallels only that of God Himself, the Creator of Heaven and Earth.

It sometimes seems that in the Jewish tradition, human political prestige exists on the same spectrum as the divine, maintaining the same sort of authority and differing from ultimate omnipotence in quantity rather than quality. We recite the berakhah of “she-halak mi-kevodo li-yere’av ([God] apportioned from His glory to those who fear Him)” upon seeing a Jewish king and “she-natan mi-kevodo le-basar va-dam ([God] gave from His glory to flesh and blood) upon seeing a Gentile king; in both cases, the political prestige of the human leader is identified as deriving from God’s own glory.

This special awe of human leadership becomes more nuanced in an age of democratic regimes, free speech, and the power of popular activism to influence government policy. Shades of the Alexandrian do still manifest occasionally, as in the twentieth-century demise of the mighty British Empire: The “Iron Lady,” UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, demonstrated this seeming anachronism when she spoke of the British failure in the 1956 Suez Crisis as sparking a “Suez Syndrome,” in which Britons “went from believing that Britain could do anything to an almost neurotic belief that Britain could do nothing.” This painful symptom of empire withdrawal was alleviated only, in Thatcher’s understanding, by the fierce 1982 military campaign in which Britain successfully protected its Falkland Islands possession from Argentinean assault.

But Thatcher’s attitude was of the Old Order, and imperial expansion is no longer in political vogue in the West. Our politics have a more liberal and equitable nature, even when they seem fraught with self-interest and power struggles. Today we are called upon, as individual citizens of independent nations, to participate in the political process as voters, activists, and elected leaders. And though earthly power has taken a new form since the time of Alexander, it remains a God-given establishment of sacred importance for Jews.

In this issue, Kol HaMevaser marks the recent American election season and its upcoming counterpart in Israel by exploring the interactions of Jewish values and law with the many expressions, methods, and products of public policy in Jewish experience.

Rejoinder: In Defense of a Relationship with the Christian Right

By: Akiva Berger

In response to Mr. Kopel’s article, “Rabbi Dr. Meir Soloveichik, Yeshiva University, among the Jews,”1 I must take issue with a litany of points he makes with regard to the American political-religious landscape and how it relates specifically to the Jewish community. While I cannot comment on the “Christian-centric”2 nature of R. Dr. Soloveichik’s public speaking engagements, I find Mr. Kopel’s overall characterization of both the “Christian Right” and American Jewry as considerably detached from reality. The argument contains both broad generalizations as well as misconceptions with regard to the fundamental views of both groups. It is this flawed understanding that may lead Mr. Kopel, as well as many others, to be- moan the political alliances Orthodox Jews are forging with factions historically hostile to their own parents and grandparents.

Let us start with the so-called “Christian Right.” Mr. Kopel’s argument rests on the repeated assumption that, in contrast with Jews, this group tries to “impose its values” on American society “to ensure that society and government abide by Christian morals.” Heaven forbid, Christians “speak about God to [their] neighbors” and may even “try to convince [someone] of His presence and role in worldly matters.” As an aside, being a religious Jew, I cannot really find anything wrong with having more people recognize God and see His hand in their lives (we even pray for it every day in Aleinu). Moreover, Mr. Kopel asserts that Christians are pre-occupied with the “nisar” (the hidden), and “perceive transcendentally that which [they] see around [them].”15 Together, these characterizations of the Christian Right represent a false impression, promulgated precisely by those who lack familiarity with actual members of this group. The numerous charges Mr. Kopel levels ring untrue in light of the contact I have been privileged to have with members of this much-maligned voting bloc.

For almost all of my life, I have lived in the Deep South (Georgia), where most of my interactions with gentiles were specifically with conservative, religious Christians. My personal dealings with these wonderful people have shown me a slightly different perspective regarding those whom the media often portray as Tea Party radicals. A Salvation Army family has been our neighbors for over a decade. This past summer, I volunteered at the Good Samaritan Health Center (an overtly Christian

1 Midrash Aseret Melakhim (Hebrew) in Otzar Midrashim (Bibliotheca Midraschica), ed. by J.D. Eisenstein (New York: 1915), 463. Otzar Midrashim is a two-volume collection of small, obscure midrashim, many of which are difficult to find in any other compilation, published by Judah David Eisenstein. Each passage in the collection is introduced with information on all its traceable sources and textual variants. Midrash Aseret Melakhim is said to appear in certain editions of Yalkut Shim'on on Sefer Melakhim and Pirkei de-Rabbi El'azar, but its best-known source is an earlier compilation called Beit Eked ha-Aggadot by a certain H.M. Horowitz. In that context, the order of kings is slightly different and the editor there postulates that the passage’s author lived a short time before the period of the ge'onim.


3 Berakhot 58b; Mi'shuneh Torah, Hilkhot Berakhot 10:11; Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim 224:8.

What a majority Mr. Kopel refers to the

This may sound harsh, but I think it

In the current cultural landscape, where many perceive traditional religious values to be objects of attack and ridicule from the increasingly secular left (especially as transmitted by the media), it is entirely sensible for Orthodox Jews to align themselves with the Christian Right.

Perhaps by “imposing values” Mr. Kopel refers to the Christian Right’s political activism concerning social issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and the death penalty. Personally, I see it completely within reason to use religious sentiments to inform one’s sense of morality, which in turn dictates one’s political views. Doing so should not automatically be considered an attempt to shove one’s religion down other people’s throats. If political positions are not to be based, at least partially, on one’s own moral sensibilities (which may be shaped by religion), then what are they to be based on? Take gay marriage as an example. Most of the states that have voted on the issue have voted to maintain the “traditional” definition of the word “marriage,” even those that have granted couples with same-sex unions the same, full legal rights as married couples have. Activists, unsatisfied with mere equality in the legal arena, have tried to go further and fully re-define the word “marriage.” The aforementioned voters who have altogether rejected such advances view the attempt by courts and activists to re-define the word “marriage” as an imposition on them. They see it as coerced, and the community to abandon an age-old definition, one that has held true in venerable, moral societies both religious and secular. To them, their vote is an attempt to defend longstanding social and religious institutions in the face of mounting pressure from the wave of secularization taking hold of the country. This shifting of perspectives to see where the other side is coming from can be done with regard to almost any social issue. Now, I am not at all arguing that as Jews we should align ourselves with particular Christian positions, nor am I judging the merits of Christian stances on any social issue. Rather, we must recognize that these individuals harbor deep moral sentiments that inform their vote is not, in their own view, an attempt to “impose religious values” on society. It would be foolish to suspect that the Christian Right’s political motivation is to convert America into some Puritan utopia in which everyone adopts the fundamental tenets of Christianity. The sense I have gotten from my interactions with members of the so-called “Christian Right” runs contrary to Mr. Kopel’s portrayal of the motivations he attributes to them.

Perhaps by “imposing values” Mr. Kopel refers to the Christian Right’s political activism concerning social issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and the death penalty. Personally, I see it completely within reason to use religious sentiments to inform one’s sense of morality, which in turn dictates one’s political views. Doing so should not automatically be considered an attempt to shove one’s religion down other people’s throats. If political positions are not to be based, at least partially, on one’s own moral sensibilities (which may be shaped by religion), then what are they to be based on? Take gay marriage as an example. Most of the states that have voted on the issue have voted to maintain the “traditional” definition of the word “marriage,” even those that have granted couples with same-sex unions the same, full legal rights as married couples have. Activists, unsatisfied with mere equality in the legal arena, have tried to go further and fully re-define the word “marriage.” The aforementioned voters who have altogether rejected such advances view the attempt by courts and activists to re-define the word “marriage” as an imposition on them. They see it as coerced, and the community to abandon an age-old definition, one that has held true in venerable, moral societies both religious and secular. To them, their vote is an attempt to defend longstanding social and religious institutions in the face of mounting pressure from the wave of secularization taking hold of the country. This shifting of perspectives to see where the other side is coming from can be done with regard to almost any social issue. Now, I am not at all arguing that as Jews we should align ourselves with particular Christian positions, nor am I judging the merits of Christian stances on any social issue. Rather, we must recognize that these individuals harbor deep moral sentiments that inform their vote is not, in their own view, an attempt to “impose religious values” on society. It would be foolish to suspect that the Christian Right’s political motivation is to convert America into some Puritan utopia in which everyone adopts the fundamental tenets of Christianity. The sense I have gotten from my interactions with members of the so-called “Christian Right” runs contrary to Mr. Kopel’s portrayal of the motivations he attributes to them.

Perhaps by “imposing values” Mr. Kopel refers to the Christian Right’s political activism concerning social issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and the death penalty. Personally, I see it completely within reason to use religious sentiments to inform one’s sense of morality, which in turn dictates one’s political views. Doing so should not automatically be considered an attempt to shove one’s religion down other people’s throats. If political positions are not to be based, at least partially, on one’s own moral sensibilities (which may be shaped by religion), then what are they to be based on? Take gay marriage as an example. Most of the states that have voted on the issue have voted to maintain the “traditional” definition of the word “marriage,” even those that have granted couples with same-sex unions the same, full legal rights as married couples have. Activists, unsatisfied with mere equality in the legal arena, have tried to go further and fully re-define the word “marriage.” The aforementioned voters who have altogether rejected such advances view the attempt by courts and activists to re-define the word “marriage” as an imposition on them. They see it as coerced, and the community to abandon an age-old definition, one that has held true in venerable, moral societies both religious and secular. To them, their vote is an attempt to defend longstanding social and religious institutions in the face of mounting pressure from the wave of secularization taking hold of the country. This shifting of perspectives to see where the other side is coming from can be done with regard to almost any social issue. Now, I am not at all arguing that as Jews we should align ourselves with particular Christian positions, nor am I judging the merits of Christian stances on any social issue. Rather, we must recognize that these individuals harbor deep moral sentiments that inform their vote is not, in their own view, an attempt to “impose religious values” on society. It would be foolish to suspect that the Christian Right’s political motivation is to convert America into some Puritan utopia in which everyone adopts the fundamental tenets of Christianity. The sense I have gotten from my interactions with members of the so-called “Christian Right” runs contrary to Mr. Kopel’s portrayal of the motivations he attributes to them.

Perhaps by “imposing values” Mr. Kopel refers to the Christian Right’s political activism concerning social issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and the death penalty. Personally, I see it completely within reason to use religious sentiments to inform one’s sense of morality, which in turn dictates one’s political views. Doing so should not automatically be considered an attempt to shove one’s religion down other people’s throats. If political positions are not to be based, at least partially, on one’s own moral sensibilities (which may be shaped by religion), then what are they to be based on? Take gay marriage as an example. Most of the states that have voted on the issue have voted to maintain the “traditional” definition of the word “marriage,” even those that have granted couples with same-sex unions the same, full legal rights as married couples have. Activists, unsatisfied with mere equality in the legal arena, have tried to go further and fully re-define the word “marriage.” The aforementioned voters who have altogether rejected such advances view the attempt by courts and activists to re-define the word “marriage” as an imposition on them. They see it as coerced, and the community to abandon an age-old definition, one that has held true in venerable, moral societies both religious and secular. To them, their vote is an attempt to defend longstanding social and religious institutions in the face of mounting pressure from the wave of secularization taking hold of the country. This shifting of perspectives to see where the other side is coming from can be done with regard to almost any social issue. Now, I am not at all arguing that as Jews we should align ourselves with particular Christian positions, nor am I judging the merits of Christian stances on any social issue. Rather, we must recognize that these individuals harbor deep moral sentiments that inform their vote is not, in their own view, an attempt to “impose religious values” on society. It would be foolish to suspect that the Christian Right’s political motivation is to convert America into some Puritan utopia in which everyone adopts the fundamental tenets of Christianity. The sense I have gotten from my interactions with members of the so-called “Christian Right” runs contrary to Mr. Kopel’s portrayal of the motivations he attributes to them.

Perhaps by “imposing values” Mr. Kopel refers to the Christian Right’s political activism concerning social issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and the death penalty. Personally, I see it completely within reason to use religious sentiments to inform one’s sense of morality, which in turn dictates one’s political views. Doing so should not automatically be considered an attempt to shove one’s religion down other people’s throats. If political positions are not to be based, at least partially, on one’s own moral sensibilities (which may be shaped by religion), then what are they to be based on? Take gay marriage as an example. Most of the states that have voted on the issue have voted to maintain the “traditional” definition of the word “marriage,” even those that have granted couples with same-sex unions the same, full legal rights as married couples have. Activists, unsatisfied with mere equality in the legal arena, have tried to go further and fully re-define the word “marriage.” The aforementioned voters who have altogether rejected such advances view the attempt by courts and activists to re-define the word “marriage” as an imposition on them. They see it as coerced, and the community to abandon an age-old definition, one that has held true in venerable, moral societies both religious and secular. To them, their vote is an attempt to defend longstanding social and religious institutions in the face of mounting pressure from the wave of secularization taking hold of the country. This shifting of perspectives to see where the other side is coming from can be done with regard to almost any social issue. Now, I am not at all arguing that as Jews we should align ourselves with particular Christian positions, nor am I judging the merits of Christian stances on any social issue. Rather, we must recognize that these individuals harbor deep moral sentiments that inform their vote is not, in their own view, an attempt to “impose religious values” on society. It would be foolish to suspect that the Christian Right’s political motivation is to convert America into some Puritan utopia in which everyone adopts the fundamental tenets of Christianity. The sense I have gotten from my interactions with members of the so-called “Christian Right” runs contrary to Mr. Kopel’s portrayal of the motivations he attributes to them.
“Nowhere But Here”: Becoming Advocates for the Halakhic Prenuptial Agreement

By: Kimberly Hay

This past summer, I had the privilege to intern at the Organization for the Resolution of Agunot (ORA). Although I rarely worked directly with any of the agunot, I was often responsible for answering the office phone, and occasionally a woman would call, asking if ORA could help her. After speaking with a few of these women, I began to garner a sense of who these women were and get a glimpse of characteristics that were discernible even during my brief conversations with them. These women’s voices often betrayed a sense of uncertainty, their words a disbelief in our ability to help them. Hopelessness, doubt, and fear were often conveyed through the short telephone conversations. Soon, I began to wonder what the experience of simply calling our office must be like. I pictured a woman standing alone in her house after making sure that all of her children were out of earshot, while she mustered the courage to admit to a complete stranger that she fears her husband will never give her a get (writ of Jewish divorce). I wondered what it must be like to cope with such a reality. Divorce, and certainly get-refusal, is usually the farthest thing from a woman’s mind as she plans for her wedding, and now, perhaps a few months, years, or even decades after the wedding day, the idea of divorce and the fear of being held an agunah likely occupy many of her waking hours.

Until relatively recently in Jewish history, the term agunah was used to describe a woman who was unable to remarry because her husband was either lost at war or at sea and it could not be determined whether he was alive or dead. A “modern day agunah,” however, may be looking at her husband from across the room at a divorce proceeding or through a car window as he packs up their children. Her inability to remarry stems not from an uncertainty as to whether or not her husband is alive, but from his refusal to issue her a get after their marriage has functionally ended.

Unlike the secular court system, in which a court official has the power vested in him or her to declare a marriage null or to divorce, Jewish law views marriage as a contract between two people whose status cannot be effected by a third party. According to Halakhah, a beit din (halakhic court) is incapable of divorcing a husband and wife. Rather the husband must be the one to issue his wife a get to terminate their marriage.

As Beth Din of America director R. Shlomo Weissmann explains, in years past, if a beit din ruled that a marriage was irrecocnscilable and that a husband should issue his wife a divorce, the Jewish court had the authority necessary to enforce its ruling, and could threaten a recalcitrant husband with excommunication or even physical violence in some cases. Today, however, Jewish courts of law in the Diaspora lack the necessary authority to enforce their rulings. To threaten physical violence against a recalcitrant husband for not complying with a beit din’s ruling is considered murder by Jewish law, and the threat of excommunication means little today due to a lack of cohesiveness within our Jewish communities.

The combination of these factors has led to a situation in which it is possible for a husband to use the get as a weapon to exert significant financial or child-custody related concessions from his wife, and in some cases may withhold it merely out of spite. Without a get, a Jewish woman is unable to remarry within the confines of Halakhah, and if she were to have children with another man, those children would be considered mamzerim by Jewish law. In the fram community, a woman without a get “will not even go out for coffee with another man, let alone strike up a serious relationship,” leaving her chained to a marriage that has ended but unable to move on to a new relationship or have more children.

A solution to the agunah crisis was suggested twenty years ago by R. Mordechai Willig (Segan Av Beth Din at the Beth Din of America and a rosh yeshivah at YU). In coordination with many halakhic and legal experts, he devised a halakhic prenuptial agreement that holds the promise of “ending the agunah problem as we know it” (as expressed by R. Weissmann). As explained on the website of the Beth Din of America, a couple signing the halakhic prenup agrees, in essence, to two things. First, that if at some point in their marriage one spouse summons the other to beit din, they both agree to appear before the mutually-agreed-upon beit din specified in their prenup, and to abide by the ruling of that court with regard to the get. This stipulation helps to prevent the prolongation of the legal process by ensuring that there will be no disagreement as to which beit din the couple will attend, and establishes the beit din as the vehicle through which the issue of the get will be decided.

Second, the couple agrees that, in the event of separation, the halakhic obligation of the husband to support his wife “is formalized, so that he is obligated to pay $150 per day (indexed to inflation), from the date he receives notice from her of her intention to collect that sum, until the date a Jewish divorce is obtained.” If, however, the wife fails to appear before beit din or to abide by the decision of the court, she is no longer entitled to receive those payments. Since the prenup is a legally binding arbitration agreement, a civil court is able to enforce the financial obligation, which the rabbinic court is powerless to do, thereby giving the husband a financial disincentive to refuse to issue a get.

Halakhic prenuptial agreements have received widespread rabbinic support—including in a letter signed by twenty-one of our own roshie yeshivah endorsing their use and a Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) resolution declaring that none of its nearly 1,000 member rabbis “should officiate at a wedding unless a proper prenuptial agreement has been executed.” Other leading posekim of our generation have also given their stamp of approval to the prenup, including R. Zalman Nechemia Goldberg (prominent Torah scholar and poseik in Jerusalem), R. Gedaliah Schwartz (Av Beth Din of the Beth Din of America), R. Osher Weiss (Rosh Kollel of Machon Minchas Osher L’Torah V’Horah), and R. Ovadia Yosef (former Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel), among others. So far, the prenup has also held up to its claim of preventing cases of agunot. According to R. Weissmann, the prenup “has been utilized in scores of cases before the Beth Din of America, and has consistently prevented the use of the get as a tool for improper leverage or extortion.”

The prenuptial agreement can only be effective on a wide scale if it is adopted as a community standard, since those who are most likely to need it are usually those least likely to sign it. In class, I once heard R. Saul Berman draw an interesting parallel between the halakhic prenuptial agreement and the ketubbah, a measure instituted by Hazal to protect a woman financially in the event of divorce or the death of her husband. Hazal decreed that no woman was permitted to waive her right to a ketubbah, even if she was financially secure and seemed to have no need for it. Rabbi Berman explained the rationale for this law as follows: Hazal understood that if a woman could choose not to have a ketubbah, it may lead to a situation in which a husband could pressure his wife into forgoing the ketubbah with a claim of, “don’t you trust that I would take care of you?” It is, of course, these women who are most vulnerable to being exploited. So, too, even if a woman is absolutely confident that she has no reason to doubt her hatan, by failing to sign a prenuptial agreement she makes it easier for another woman to be in danger of being pressured by her fiancé to not pursue a prenup because he claims it is unnecessary. If we could create a situation in which it is as unheard of to get married without a prenup as it is to get married without a ketubbah, the risk of women falling prey to such pressures would disappear.

At Yeshiva University, we have a unique opportunity to implement the prenup as a communal standard, if not for world Jewry but certainly for our small corner of Manhattan. The student population of Yeshiva University is, to my knowledge, the best educated group of Jewish students in the country with regards to the importance of signing a halakhic prenup. Nowhere but here do we have a rosh yeshivah who is the primary author of the most widely used version of the halakhic prenup today, and nowhere but here do we return home to our dormitory rooms to find a packet of information about the prenup left on our doorsteps by ORA, with the phrase “Friends Don’t Let Friends Get Married Without the Prenup” looking back at us.

While I would love to say that the result of this heightened awareness is that all Yeshiva University students who are walking down the aisle sign a prenup beforehand, I know that this is not the case. Just a few weeks ago a young woman who I am friendly with at Stern refused to sign one before getting married because she was convinced it was unnecessary. Tamar Epstein, who was called “the country’s most famous agunah” by The New York Times and who has been waiting for over four years to receive a get, is a Stern alumnus who was unaware of the prenuptial agreement at the time of her marriage. She said last year at a panel on the agunah crisis hosted by Yeshiva University that she believes that had she signed a prenuptial agreement, she would have likely already received a get.

As students informed about the importance of the prenuptial agreement, we have a special opportunity and obligation to ensure that not another single alumnus of Yeshiva University becomes involved in an agunah situation that could have been prevented had she signed a prenup. Although asking a friend if she is planning on signing a prenup while she is on a pre-wedding high may be awkward, if it could potentially save her one day from the pain and suffering experienced by an agunah, then could anything be more important? If we as a student population commit to asking each of our engaged friends about signing the prenup, if we continue to talk about the prenup and remove the stigma that sometimes seems attached to it, we have a real
Reflections on Political Involvement in the Broader World Jewish Community

By: Rabbi Yosef Blau

For more than a decade, I have played an active role in organizations that represent the broad Jewish community. Starting as a delegate in the World Zionist Congress, I was elected to its Va’ad ha-Po’el (known in English as the Zionist General Council), to the General Assembly of the Jewish Agency, and to the executive board of the Jewish National Fund. After being elected president of the Religious Zionists of America (RZA), I have participated in the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, which is the semi-official voice of American Jewry to the American and Israeli governments. There is ample precedent for participation in the Conference of Presidents by figures connected to Yeshiva. The late Rabbi Isra el Miller (vice president of YU) and Rabbi Julius Berman (chairman of the board of RIETS) both served as chairman of the Conference of Presidents.

My ongoing participation involves interacting with Jewish leaders who span the religious and political spectrum. My primary goal has been to represent Orthodoxy, particularly its rabbinate, as principle yet respectful and friendly with those with whom we disagree. At conferences in Israel, I would sit on buses next to non-Orthodox participants, often women. At meals, I would rotate eating with secular representatives of right and left-wing Zionist parties and leaders of different religious factions. While these actions are only symbolic, they can hopefully reduce the stereotype of unfriendly Orthodox rabbis who look down at others.

The World Zionist Organization and its congresses date back to 1897, when it was founded by Theodor Herzl. Israel’s participation in the annual congress is comprised of representatives of the Israeli political parties that define themselves as Zionist, chosen by the results of the Israeli elections. Zionist groups in other countries choose their delegates based on the results of national elections of Zionists, conducted for this purpose. In America, the largest delegations represent Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews.

With the vast majority of world Jewry living in Israel and the United States, the delegations from these two countries dominate the congress. Their perspectives and mentalities differ but alliances are made among them to gain leadership positions in the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency, and the Jewish National Fund in Israel. The issue of recognition of the non-Orthodox in Israel comes up regularly. The makeup of the delegations, primarily non-Orthodox, guarantees that resolutions promoting pluralism are passed. Mizrahi, the group of the Orthodox Zionists, fights to preserve the present system in Israel in order to maintain halakhic standards for conversion and the role of the Israeli rabbinate.

In general, resolutions directing the Israeli government to adopt policies have little effect since the government is free to ignore them. Losing the votes of the organizations that promote pluralism has limited consequences for Israel. It is still important, though, that the Orthodox have a large delegation showing strength in Jewish communities worldwide. The Israeli participants often know little about the Diaspora and are not aware of the growth of Orthodoxy.

In order to participate, one has to be a Zionist, but since there are major disputes between different Zionist groups about every major issue facing Israel, agreeing on a definition of who is a Zionist is difficult. Traditionally, to be eligible to participate, one has to sign the Jerusalem Program, a general statement that reflects the consensus definition of Zionism and its mission. The Jerusalem Program was first adopted in 1951 to replace the original Basel Program with an ideological statement that reflected the creation of the state.

In 2004, this statement was revised. The Reform and Conservative representatives demanded that a statement accepting pluralism be included in the Jerusalem Program. Allied with the primarily secular Israeli parties, this would have made continued participation by the Mizrahi virtually impossible, ending an association with the World Zionist Organization that had lasted for over a hundred years. It would have also had a ripple effect on Mizrahi having any influence in the Jewish Agency, fifty percent of whose delegates represent the WZO, as well.

Primarily because we had developed a good working relationship with the non-Orthodox representatives, a delegation of three – Harvey Blitz, Son dra Sokal, and I – succeeded after months of lengthy, unsuccessful negotiations to find a new language for incorporation into the Jerusalem Program that all could accept. The formulation is “marked by mutual respect for the multi-faceted Jewish people.” This choice of words focuses on respecting those with whom one disagrees generally and does not mention religion at all.

The ambiguity of this language is helpful for creating a space for coexistence; the Orthodox can read this as an endorsement of mutual respect without acceptance for religious difference, while the other groups can read it as an expression of religious pluralism. This compromise has enabled Orthodox groups to continue to participate, and has led to the recent election of Avraham Duddyevani as the first WZO chairman from Mizrahi.

I have been told many times that the fact that an Orthodox rabbi, who had demonstrated friendship, had been an active participant in these discussions played a significant role in the decision by the non-Orthodox to accept this wording even though they already had the majority of votes needed to pass a version of the Jerusalem Program that would have explicitly included accepting pluralism.

Was this a major accomplishment? It depends on one’s perspective. If one accepts the premise that we as Orthodox Jews care about all Jews and are prepared to work with others whose perspectives and ideologies fundamentally differ from ours for the welfare of Israeli Jewry, then it is significant. There is an ongoing dialogue between Israelis and Diaspora Jews about standards of conversion, a dialogue in which the Jewish Agency has a voice. Without meaningful Orthodox participation, our perspective on Jewish identity would be absent from the debate. Tone, as well as content, is critical to ensure that others will hear what we have to say.

In many areas, there is a growing disparity between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish communities of the United States. This plays out in the political arena both with respect to Israel and to internal American issues. In the Conference of Presidents, which is taken seriously by presidents and prime ministers, personal friendships make a difference. If we want to be part of the decision-making process then we have to participate fully, relating to others with mutual respect.

Rabbi Yosef Blau is the Senior Mashgiach Ruchani of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary.

1 The full text of each edition of the Jerusalem Program is available on the American Zionist Movement (AZM) website, at www.azm.org.
2 Ibid.
Living Alongside Your Brother: Of Usury, Triage, and Political Philosophy

By: Shlomo Zuckier

One of the fundamental questions central to the current American political scene, a bitterly contested matter dividing Republicans and Democrats, is the issue of allocating resources. Should the government employ a system that forces the more successful citizens to assist those less fortunate than themselves, or should it adopt a policy that allows people to give charity willingly rather than through compulsion? What position do Jewish tradition and Halakhah take on the matter? I will not enter head-on into what is clearly an exceedingly complex subject, but I believe that a passage in Bava Metzia may be surprisingly illuminating for this question.

The Talmud (cited in full in the original Aramaic on the column) presents a dispute between R. Yohanan and R. Elazar on the question of whether we say ribbit ketsutah yotse’ah be-da’ayanim or not – whether interest, once collected (illegally), can be forcibly returned by the court to the original borrower. The Talmud proposes several verses and accompanying derashot to support R. Yohanan’s position that the court cannot seize the usurious money. For R. Elazar’s dissenting opinion, the Talmud cites the verse (found in the context of usury), “…ve-hei ahikha immakh – and your fellow shall live with you,” which it interprets to mean “ahader lehi ki heikhi de-neiti – return [the interest] to him in order that he can live.” What does R. Yohanan derive from this verse, if not R. Elazar’s derashah? He uses it to rule (like R. Akiva) in a celebrated case: If two people are stranded in the desert, and one has a jug with water sufficient for only one party to live, then that person should not split the water and allow both to die (as ben-Petura argued) but should drink it himself, because ve-hei ahikha immakh teaches that one’s life takes precedence over that of his fellow.

It is possible to construe the mahaloket between R. Yohanan and R. Elazar as based simply on which context each Amora chooses to deploy the explication of ve-hei ahikha immakh. Does it refer to the context of ribbit, based on those three words: ve-hei ahikha immakh. R. Elazar, in applying his derashah in the context of ribbit ketsutah, explains: “ahader lehi ki heikhi de-neiti.” This sentence enjoins a person to enable his fellow to live along with him, and this understanding derives from a focus on the words ve-hei ahikha. On the other hand, R. Yohanan applies R. Akiva’s derashah in the case of the two people in the desert, which expresses, “hayyekha kodemim li-hayahei kaveherka – your life takes precedence over your fellow’s.” On this account of the verse, the emphasis is placed not on his fellow’s ability capacity to live, but on an overriding right that he himself has to live. My life takes precedence over my fellow’s.

Of course, these two approaches are not, strictly speaking, mutually exclusive. It is possible to affirm simultaneously that one has a most basic right to support his own life, while also establishing that, once that right has been satisfied, he has a responsibility to assist others in living, as well. Despite this possibility, it appears to me that these two opinions dispute one another across the board, with the argument sprawling over (through the medium of the derashah) from one case into the next. In other words, R. Yohanan might disagree with R. Elazar’s derashah from ve-hei ahikha immakh not only because he happens to have an alternate derashah, but because that alternate interpretation, of hayyekha kodemim, dictates his own perspective on both preferential life-saving and interest: this money belongs to me, I earned it, and I cannot be expected to give it up to the other party just because he needs it.

Similarly, R. Elazar’s derashah of ve-hei ahikha immakh, interpreted to mean that one must provide for his fellow to live, might dictate his position about the two people in the desert as well. Perhaps he would argue that the point of the pasuk is that one has just as much of an obligation to his fellow as he has to himself. If so, how can he privilege himself over his fellow? The two must split the drink and both die.

I believe that understanding the issues of returning ribbit and sacrificing oneself to help a person in distress as related can find support in some of the formulations within these two halves of the sugya. In all of the different derashot suggested for R. Elazar and R. Yohanan, a prevailing theme is that of life and death. For R. Yohanan (who holds that ribbit is not collectible) two of his three derashot are based on the notion that a person who charges interest deserves to die rather than to return the money: The verse in Yechezkel says “ve-hai lo yihyei” (he surely shall not live), and the Gemara explicates “le-mitah nittan ve-lo le-hishavon” (it [the interest] is given for death, not recompense). The other pasuk from Yechezkel cited reads “mot yumat damano bo” (he shall surely die; his blood is upon him), and Rava explains that we thus compare charging interest to murder.

In each case, either the lender’s or the borrower’s life is seen as threatened as a result of the ribbit transaction. Of course, R. Elazar’s derashah interpreting the verse in question supports forcible collection, compelling the lender to return the interest in order to allow the borrower to live, as above. And clearly, in the case of the two people in the desert, ve-hei ahikha immakh is an issue of life and death – the question is whether both deserted travelers will die or whether at least one will be able to make it back alive – and R. Akiva’s derashah therefore states “your life takes precedence over the life of your fellow.” Both derashot interpreting our verse frame their position in terms of weighing the relative value of the lives at stake. Now, it is not terribly surprising that ribbit is considered to be a case of life and death. The fact that someone is subjecting himself to aurious loan in the first place bespeaks his sense of desperation, as he agrees to outrageous conditions on the loan to avoid starvation. This fits with the Torah’s formulation of the prohibition as applying to money as well as food, loans with ribbit were often contracted in order to acquire basic necessities.

There is an additional literary connection between the sugyot. The rallying cry of R. Yohanan and his position that the ribbit is forcibly collected is “Il-X nitan ve-lo le-hishavon,” namely that interest is designated only for things other than repayment (hishavon). The question is formulated as whether we coerce the lender to return (meshit) the ribbit. In parallel, the question facing the person with the jug of water in the desert is whether he and/or his fellow will be able to reach civilization, the yishuv. The words yishuv and hishavon bear a clear literary resemblance to one another (though they stem from different sugyot). Additionally, each relates to a state of equilibrium, whether it is returning to one’s proper place or returning things to their proper owners. These two similar discussions, parallel to (rather than intersecting with) one another, thus offer two versions of the same type of question.

And the parallel goes beyond a literary level: One understanding of what is at stake regarding ribbit, as Ramban points out, is the question of whether we treat our fellow Jews as one larger community, almost like family, to the point that we do them favors such as lending to them without interest. Can I privilege my own position, or should I sacrifice my own potential profits in order to help my brother? In what arrangement are all relevant parties given their due, put in their proper place? The desert scenario raises the question of how to weigh one’s opportunity to return to civilization against that of one’s fellow – which of the two has a greater right to return to civilization? Are we all equals, as citizens of one society? Can I privilege my own position, or should I sacrifice my life in order to help my brother? The two cases deal with both life-and-death situations as well as with the question of to what extent a fellow Jew is considered a part of one’s community.

I believe that a deep question of values underlies the matter of how to interpret ve-hei ahikha immakh in each case to which...
An Interview with Rabbi Dr. Dov Dov Zakheim

BY: Gavriel Brown

Rabbi Dov Zakheim served as the Undersecretary of Defense (Comptroller) and Chief Financial Officer for the U.S. Department of Defense from May 2001 to April 2004. He also served in various Department of Defense positions during the Reagan administration, including Deputy Undersecretary for Planning and Resources. He is the author of Flight of the Lavi: Inside a U.S.-Israeli Crisis and A Vulcan’s Tale: How the Bush Administration Mismanaged the Reconstruction of Afghanistan.1

Did your upbringing influence your choice to pursue work in the government?

My father, in addition to being a Rov, was the legal counsel of the Jewish community of Lithuasia and the advisor to R. Moshe Berzinski. He worked both worlds and had a tremendous influence on me in that regard.

When did you decide to enter public service?

I was working in a bank in England that got into trouble after a series of bank failures all over Europe. I went to the man who examined me for my thesis, a man named Alastair Buchan, whose father was John Buchan, the author of The Thirty-Nine Steps and a noted anti-Semite. Alastair was totally different. I had done work on defense-related politics and economics at Oxford University, so I was looking for a job, and he said, “Go back to Washington!” He headed what was then the leading defense institute in the world, known as the Institute for Strategic Studies (now known as the International Institute for Strategic Studies). All he did was place a few phone calls into Washington and by the time I got there I had interviews set up. Within three weeks, I had landed a job in a new office called the Congressional Budget Office. It had been approved in February and I got my job in August. I became the Naval Analyst.

Why did you choose the field of National Defense?

It interested me. It has always interested me. Foreign policy, defense/security policy was what I did my doctorate on. I was also interested in world history, which, at least in those days, was more about political and military history than cultural history.

You have been Undersecretary of Defense, a position in which you undoubtedly had to make some pretty tough decisions. Can you recall your most difficult decision?

Probably, in many ways, the most controversial decision I had to make was when I was Deputy Undersecretary of Defense (the Comptroller of the Pentagon) and I took on the Israelis and cut funding for a fighter plane called “The Lavi,” which made a lot of people consider me a “traitor” to Israel. Actually, though, at the same time I convinced Caspar Weinberger (Secretary of Defense to President Ronald Reagan) to support the Israeli Submarine Program. Just about any Israeli who knows anything about security—certainly anyone in the military—would say that given a choice between a fighter plane that would now be obsolete, or at least obsolescent, and a submarine that they are still using, the choice would be obvious. Still, that was one major and difficult decision.

Most of the decisions that I made as Undersecretary were more along the line of allocating funding to different projects. In our days, the first years of the Bush administration, we did not have problems with funding the way they do right now. It was easy to allocate money when everyone was getting a piece of it. When we were deciding funding for the war in Afghanistan and then the war in Iraq, I had additional responsibilities looking after fundraising and troop-raising for both war operations. That work was not necessarily about tough decision-making but about implementing decisions already made. Sometimes it was very tough.

Did you have to make any tough decisions about halakhic observance while working for the government?

No, no; it was pretty straightforward. In fact, I just wrote an article about halakhic decision-making for government officials in the recent volume of Conversations. I told Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that I was not going to work on Shabbos. He said to me, “Well, that seems fair enough.” I said, “To be honest with you, if life is in danger, I’ve got to work.” He replied, “Great, lives are always in danger in the Pentagon.” I told him I could not come in for ordinary meetings and he understood that. Shabbos was never an issue.

I had a deputy. My deputy was not Jewish. He went to Saturday meetings. Unfortunately, I had to work many Friday nights, week after week. I could not walk away from work. In the Pentagon, it seems that the tough work happens after five o’clock on a Friday. My staff members, some of whom knew me before I came to the Pentagon, were really concerned that I was missing what they called “services” every Friday night. It really bothered them that I had to be working.

Fortunately, I never worked on Shabbos. Though I remember right after 9/11 it was Shemini Atseres and I told Rabbis Bieler, or shul rabbis, that on Shemini Atseres I had a few firsts. It was the first time I worked on yuntif. I was driven by my driver to shul; my Pentagon driver had never driven me to shul before. And I got there just in time for minhah.

You have traveled to Afghanistan and Iraq. How were you able to keep Shabbat and kashrut?

I did not eat meat and I had to eat vegetables. Actually, the military now has kosher MREs, Meals Ready to Eat. Of course, it depends how strict you are. If you are not going to eat salad out, forget it. But, as I have written, a lot of de-rabbanan rules fall away in these sorts of circumstances.

Shlomo Zucker is a rabbinical student at RIETS. He was an editor-in-chief of Kol Hamevaser in 2010-2011.


3 Vayikra 25:36.

4 Bava Metsia, ibid.

5 See Ritva to Bava Metsia 62a s.v. ve-Rabbi Yohanan, who explains the question in this manner.

6 Bava Metsia 62a.

7 Of course R. Yohanan will have to explain why usury is prohibited, but there are many, less robust, explanations of the prohibition, which presumably underlies his more lenient, einah yotse 'ah be-dayyanim, position.

8 This would be a significant logical jump, but it would be supported by the Talmud, which appears to connect these two mahakolok. Further, R. Yeruham Fishel Perlau, in his commentary on R. Sa’adiah Gaon’s Sefer ha-Mitzvos (Helek 3, Parshah 33) argues that Rambam does not follow R. Akiva because he accepts R. Elazar’s reasoning.

9 Yechezkel 18:13.

10 Bava Metsia 61a.

11 Yechezkel, ibid.

12 See Hizkias 25:37, Devarim 23:20, and Bava Metsia 60b-61a.


An Interview with Ruth Messinger

By: Gabrielle Hiller

Note to readers: Ruth Messinger has been the president and CEO of American Jewish World Service (AJWS), an organization that advocates for human rights and works to end poverty around the world, since 1998. Previously, she served for twelve years on the New York City Council and for eight years as borough president of Manhattan. She also received the Democratic Party's nomination for mayor of New York City in 1997. She lectures widely on social justice issues and serves on the board of many social justice organizations. She has been named one of the “50 most influential Jews of the year” for ten years and was included in the Jerusalem Post’s list of the “World’s Most Influential Jews of 2011.”

How did you become interested and involved in social activism?

It really started in my home, growing up. We took it seriously. We were told to “give back to the city and to the country.” You know, “stand for good things and take action.” That’s just the way we were raised. I’ve been involved in social action my whole life at various levels and with various causes.

You have been an activist, an educator, a politician, and a nonprofit CEO. Which occupation is closest to your heart?

I was very happy being an activist during the ’60s. I was involved in various social movements of the ’60s: civil rights, women’s rights, anti-war. Then I went to social work school and started working on New York City issues and challenges and was doing that professionally, including running for office, and being an activist in and around city issues. This was my great passion and love, and I did it for twenty years, until I lost an election. After that I took this position at AJWS and got really interested in the international social change and human rights work that we do. As you probably know, we have always worked on those issues overseas, but we also work on them in the States, doing policy advocacy. I’ve always tried to figure out ways to work on issues in the U.S. to change government policy, either at the city or at the national level.

The simple answer to your question is that I’ve liked all of it!

What do you see as the mission of the AJWS, vis-à-vis Judaism and American Jewry?

Well, I wouldn’t put it that way. I would say that the mission of American Jewish World Service is to be an organization that is motivated by Jewish values and puts those values into practice in order to end poverty and realize human rights for marginalized people in the world. So that’s our mission. We work on that mission internationally by finding really good grassroots social change groups and projects and helping them do their work. And we work on that issue domestically with the American Jewish community, telling them ways that they can get involved in advocacy issues around global justice. So, right now, for the last year and a half, we’ve been working on efforts to reverse global hunger, and our current campaign is to insist that when Congress comes back into session they need to pass the Farm Bill because they’re putting millions of people at risk, both domestically and globally.1

What methods does AJWS utilize to share and spread its values?

We talk to our mission, and we do mobilizing and organizing in the American Jewish community to advance it. For instance, we just organized Global Hunger Shabbat, so we had speakers all over the country – members of our staff, volunteers, and rabbis – give information about the situation and urge people to take action on the Farm Bill. Our website tells people very specifically how to take action and what they can do to make social change, and we communicate with people by email, by direct mail, in public speaking, and, as I said, by taking
many of the people who have done service programs with us and training them as advocates and activists.

Is there a program run by AJWS that you are most proud of?

Nope, I really love them all, and I think it’s just important for people to understand that there is a both a universal and domestic organizing and advocacy program, and that there are over 400 grassroots groups that are making social change around the world, not all of which I’ve visited, but many of which I’ve been privileged to go and see.

Is there anything about American Jewry today, in terms of public policy, values, and activism, that disappoints you?

A great deal on some days. We are a community that has a tendency to look at what’s wrong and not fully recognize the comparative influence and affluence of Jews in America in the twenty-first century and then not use that degree of influence and affluence to make further change and get more Jews involved in social justice. We must recognize the huge interest of your age cohort in doing things to make change in the world and understand that that is, indeed, very much a Jewish thing to do, and that it helps people live their Judaism.

Is there anything uniquely special about the programs run jointly by AJWS and the Center for the Jewish Future at YU?

There’s nothing unique, because we do similar work with people on campuses all over, but YU is one of the unusual places, in that it already has a center, a structure devoted to trying to promote activism and living Judaism in a variety of ways. This makes it very easy for us to work with YU and organize trips with them, because they’re really organized in a way to do that.

What is your advice to a college student interested in getting involved in social activism?

1) Do it. 2) Learn about the mechanisms for mobilizing and organizing. So go out and do something, seek some action, but then realize that you can be part of a team and go to lobby a member of Congress, realize that you can map out a strategy for getting something changed legislatively over time, that these lend themselves to issue campaigns. So people need to learn how to do that and they should, gradually, recognize that the world is a far-from-perfect place, and that some of that responsibility, for better or worse, is going to fall to their generation, and they ought to learn how to do these things collectively. I would hope very much for students to do this with a Jewish lens, from a Jewish point of view, because I think that the work reinforces the commitment to Judaism, and the commitment to Judaism strengthens the work.

Finally, considering recent events and your years of service to New York, do you have any reflections to share on the effects of Hurricane Sandy and the proper response to this natural disaster?

Well, I think this is a wake-up call in terms of the fact, as opposed to “the myth,” of climate change, and the notion that we, all over the world, including in this very developed part of the world, need to be more alert to understanding what the climate change projections are and need to be planning carefully for them in advance. We’re learning – we’ve learned this with Katrina, frankly, and now we’re learning it again with Sandy – that it’s not like the U.S. is a perfect place in which serious natural disasters won’t create real crisis. That’s just not true and we need to do a better job of disaster preparedness. New York and the large relief organizations ought to have been reader to handle the madness, and we need to take that lesson from recent days and start doing the things to make us reader the next time. And another thing, which we actually said in an official statement, is that we know from our experience in working on natural disasters around the world that there’s a huge set of needs immediately, but also a set of much longer-term needs for rebuilding that, in some ways, takes time, and, in some ways, it takes less time to get New York and the United States organized to do some of that rebuilding than it does to get Haiti to do it, but it still takes time.

1 “Farm Bill” is a generic term referring to bills passed by Congress every several years to address changes in agriculture and food policy. The proposed 2012 version of this legislation addresses a range of propositions on water conservation, financial safety nets for American farmers, farmland preservation, and rural prosperity. For more information on the Farm Bill agenda, see www.farmbillfacts.org. To learn how you can take action, visit www.ajws.org/revolutionhunger/take_action.html.

A Time to Mend?: Halakhic Perspectives on Tikkun Olam

BY: ADAM FRIEDMANN

Tikkun olam (repairing the world), or tikkan ha-olam as it is referred to in its original Mishnaic context, is a concept that has captured, and continues to capture, the imagination of American Jewish society. While much of this fervor is rooted in the liberal movements of Conservative and Reform, which have cast tikkun ha-olam as a call for social activism, interest has been piqued among Orthodox circles as well. This has prompted the rise of specifically Orthodox social justice organizations. But what is tikkun ha-olam? What are its definitions and parameters? More vitally, as Jews who are committed to the observance of Halakhah, we may ask from what normative sources, if any, the higayon of engaging in tikkun ha-olam is derived. And, upon discovery of these sources, we ought to be further concerned with how central a role tikkun ha-olam should play in our lives, both on the philosophical and practical levels. A great deal of literature has been produced, both within the Orthodox community and without, which deals with this topic. To attempt an account of all primary sources would be far beyond the scope of this article, and, with all likelihood, the abilities of its author. What follows is an outline and categorization of various Orthodox approaches to tikkun ha-olam. The survey is intended to highlight some major themes and is by no means meant to be exhaustive. The reader is referred to citations in the endnotes as a guide for further study.

Background

The first step in analyzing tikkun ha-olam is to unfetter ourselves somewhat from the restrictions of this particular terminology. The verb t-k-n, meaning to repair, mend, or introduce a legal measure appears in a wide array of contexts in Torah literature. As may be obvious from the rather large scope that is encompassed by these definitions, most of these occurrences are not relevant to the topic at hand. (In many kabbalistic writings, the term tikkun does refer to an attempt to repair the world, but is intended in a purely, or mostly, esoteric sense. This is not the sense of the term I would like to consider here.) For the purposes of this article, I would like to consider the formulation presented at the 1994 Orthodox Forum on tikkun olam, which is to investigate the responsibility “that Jews bear... for the moral, spiritual, and material welfare of society at large.” Therefore, even though we proceed to an analysis of the origins of the phrase tikkun ha-olam in the Mishnah, it is always with an eye towards the above definition.

Tikkun ha-olam enters the halakhic stage in the fourth and fifth perakim of masekhet Gittin. The mishna on tikkun ha-olam recorded a series of measures introduced by the Tanna’im in various realms of Halakhah including divorce, ketubah, monetary transactions, slave ownership, and korbanot. The premises given for all of these tikkunot (legal measures) is tikkun ha-olam. Two observations must be made about these mishnaot. The first is that all of these tikkunot are indeed intended to further social welfare. As opposed to the usual gezerot de-rabbanan (rabbinic decrees), which expand or augment the fulfillment of a mitzvah, these mishnaot, even the ones that deal with religious practices such as korbanot, are meant to enhance the quality of life in society. The second observation is that all of these tikkunot are internal to the Jewish community, and are not aimed towards Jewish-Gentile relations. For this second reason, some argue that the Mishnah’s principle of tikkun ha-olam cannot be the source for a program of inter action with the Gentile world. The phrase le-takken olam (to repair the world) appears one more time in the Talmudic-era literature. Aleinu, which is recited daily after each tefillah, and which was adapted from the first section of the mussaf prayer on Rosh ha-Shanah, includes the request for God to “takken olam be-malkhit Sha-dai — repair the world under the sovereignty of the All-Capable.” This source may appear to be a promising source of higayon for practicing tikkun ha-olam at first glance, as it seems to ascribe universal scope to the tikkun ha-olam mentioned in the Mishnah, but it falls short for three reasons. Firstly, it is debatable whether the text originally read “le-takken” altogether. It might have read “le-tikkun,” to prepare, which leaves us without reference to the Mishnah. Secondly, the tefillah does not prescribe active human involvement. Rather, we ask God to bring about this repair/
This aspect of Jewish identity is in society and promotes being. These pre-8:10, Ram are the are the Both analyses conclude that tik- tik is that of the Seven Noa- R. Lichtenstein invokes biblical tales and prohibitions against stealing and murder, as a potential basis for Jewish involvement with the welfare of general society. Each considers whether Rambam’s formulation, however militant, is the basis of a tikkun olam idea. Both analyses conclude that while the mitzvot certainly are binding for non-Jews there is no hiyyuv, as such, to demand or encourage compliance. However, both rabbis note that there are grounds for an extra-halachic practice of bringing non-Jews closer to a fulfillment of these commandments. They cite the Sefer Hasidim who writes that, “when one sees someone sinning, if one can correct him, one should, since God sent Jonah to Nineveh to return them to his path.”

Emerging from the discussion of the Noahide laws is the basis for a program of tikkun olam that fits our definition of “Jewish responsibility for the moral, spiritual, and material welfare of society at large.” The Noahide laws include staples of a just society. The requirement to establish courts and prohibitions against stealing and murdering are obviously pillars of social justice. But just as obvious is the philosophy underlying the Noahide commandments. Not taking God’s name in vain and the prohibition of idol worship have a clear religious connotation. More foundational than this is Rambam’s insistence that the Noahide laws must be accepted “because God commanded them in the Torah and informed us, by way of our master Moses, that the descendants of Noah were originally commanded regarding them.” Acceptance of these laws, for Rambam, must be accompanied by theological axioms, including a particularly Jewish view of monotheism and the divinity of the Torah.

They cannot be accepted on the basis of “logical inference.” This being the case, it follows that a program of tikkun olam based on Noahide prohibitions is not as close to Noahide Laws would include ideological reorientation of the non-Jewish world. It would not be interested in a dialogue that involves only the elements that are, a priori, the universal concerns of humanity (such as social justice, ethics, dignity, etc.). Rather, it would ultimately entail a conversion of non-Jewish society to a particularly Jewish universalism that centers on monothestic faith.

The public endorsement of religious ideals has not been the practice of American Jewry, or, for that matter, most of Jewry, throughout history. The question of whether to engage in such endorsement today is subject to dispute, with some in favor and some opposed.

R. Bleich, for his part, bemoans the community’s lack of engagement with these issues. In the past, he writes, “Jewish influence upon the dominant society was virtually nil,” preventing any Jewish input on public religious life. Today, we have the means to articulate our views and the invitation of a society that values our input, and yet we still remain virtually silent on religious issues. R. Bleich attributes this behavior to the influence of Western political and social theory on the Jewish community. Western society, in its attempt to formulate morality on secular premises, does not seek to impose beliefs or require moral activities of citizens within the bounds of the other world. However, finds man “bound by divinely imposed imperatives that oblige him to be concerned with the needs - and morals - of his fellow.” In the eyes of Halakhah, Cain’s primeval cry, “am I my brother’s keeper,” remains as futile an excuse as when it was first uttered. Therefore, argues R. Bleich, the Jewish community ought to formulate statements of public policy based in halakhic norms and consistent with the Noahide Code.

Whether or not one agrees with this program of law and public endorsements ought to be considered seriously when pondering the public policies of the Jewish community. To posit that the Gentile public is outside the jurisdiction of the Halakhah is, as has hopefully been demonstrated, simply inaccurate. To argue that the attempt to apply halakhic norms in non-Jewish society oversteps the will of contemporary American Jewry becomes, in light of the arguments above, something of an irrelevancy. In practicing Halakhah, we attempt to fulfill God’s will, not our own. If, as American Jews, we find ourselves uncomfortable with bringing issues of God into public discourse, perhaps we should begin to wonder if such a constitutional Jewish community is amenable.

The Noahide Laws are, at the very least, a desirable extra-halachic enterprise, and, at the most, an absolute hiyyuv, momentarily unexpressed for pragmatic reasons. Obviously, political and social circumstances must be carefully considered, and damaging effects to both the Jewish and American communities must be taken in account. However, if, as will be presented below, we can turn to our patriarch Abraham for guidance in dealing ethically with the nations of the world, we certainly must also consider the campaign of kiruv, of enthusiastically bringing the people of the world closer to the Almighty.

Ethical Solidarity

The Noahide laws may be closely linked to definite halakhic obligations, but they still do not include Jewish involvement in society in terms of proactive ethical activity. The obligation to enforce these laws may result in a just society, but does it call for direct Jewish involvement in the suffering of non-Jews, with their poverty, or with the advancement of dignity for all mankind? These universal topics are dealt with by a second group within Orthodox literature on tikkun ha-olam. These thinkers, though not necessarily for the reasons above, have developed approaches to Jewish responsibility for greater society that limit religious involvement and amputate the conception of Jews as members of the human family. As Orthodox thinkers, they all seek a normative basis, or something like it, for these practices.

Most often cited in this context is the approach put forward by R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik in his essay on interfaith dialogues entitled Confrontation. There, R. Soloveitchik analyzes the first chapters of Bereshit and develops a theory of man as a “doubly confronted being.” On one level, the biblical Adam is summoned by God to a confrontation with the world around him, which he governs and protects, and another by his legionary using his intellect. On a second level, Adam is confronted by Eve in an attempt to build a human society. Adam and Eve recognize that they are similar, but also that there are elements of each other that the other cannot see or know. R Soloveitchik develops this structure into a model for Jewish relations with non-Jewish society. On the one hand, Jews must consider themselves “as human beings, sharing the destiny of Adam in his general encounter with nature.” This perspective engenders participation “in every civic, scientific, and political enterprise” in society and promotes being constructive and useful citizens. On the other hand, Jews must see themselves as members of a unique “covenantal community.” This aspect of Jewish identity is not, and cannot be, shared with the world. When it comes to the extremely personal matters of faith, the Jewish community must identify itself to non-Jewish society as a ger (stranger) living within it. The private relationship between God and His people is not up for public scrutiny or discussion. R. Soloveitchik was dealing with interfaith dialogue, but his comments are easily adapted to our topic. This version of “tikkun olam” has quite different implications than the one discussed above. In R. Soloveitchik’s view we, as Jews, are required to lend our strength in making the world a better place to live, in the universal sense of ethics, social justice, scientific progress, etc. In Confrontation, Jewish contribution to the religious character of society seems almost detrimental. Even though it is fairly clear from other places where R Soloveitchik has commented on these issues that he does consider certain theological ideas universal and fit for public discourse, these ideas fall quite short of the campaign that is called for by the Noahide Laws.

R. Aharon Lichtenstein develops this notion further. In presenting the parameters for Jewish philanthropy in non-Jewish society, he posits that we may consider the basis for our gemilut hasadim (acts of kindness) to the Gentile world in two ways. One echoes R. Soloveitchik’s formulation: “[Jewish commitment to gemilut hasadim] may be construed as a reflection of a Jew’s dual identity, comprising both universal and particularistic components.” The alternative derivation of this hessed is as a mesorah (tradition) from our patriarch Abraham who commanded “his children and his household after him that they keep the way of Hashem, doing charity and justice.” R. Lichtenstein invokes biblical tales and midrashim in which our forebears reacted with sensitivity and kindness to Gentile plight. He cites Abraham’s hakhamat orhim (welcoming of guests), Rebecca’s hospitality to Eliezer, and Moses’s defense of the daughters of Yitro, among others. This is without even mentioning the endless calls for social justice found throughout the words of the prophets. Given this history of caring and kind deeds, an indifference to Gentile suffering is “shamefully deplorable.” Rather, argues R. Lichtenstein, our “polestar in relating to Gentile suffering is found in the Rambam:

The Sages commanded us to visit the
sick of Gentile (lit. idolaters), and to bury their dead with the dead of Israel, and to provide for their poor together with the poor of Israel because of “the ways of peace” [darkhei shalom]. Behold it is written “God is good to all, and his mercy is upon all of his creations,” and it is also written “It’s [the Torah’s] ways are pleasant ways and all of its paths are peace.”

R. Jonathan Sacks notes that this statement of Rambam codifies a requirement of ve-lakalakhta be-derakhav, of following in God’s ways. Just as He is merciful to all, so should we be.52

If the Noahide Laws suggest an overtly theological program of tikkun olam, the approaches listed here do the opposite. If Jewish responsibility for the welfare of general society is based in ethical solidarity with humanity, or in our universal recognition of human suffering, then the practical application of tikkun olam takes on R. Solomon Olami’s structure. We must humble ourselves to soothe the ills of humanity insofar as the issues we approach are relevant to all mankind. At the same time, our theological contributions are mitigated. There is no need to accept a divine law in order to enter the human family; that right is granted by birth. These arguments ring with intuitional contributions are mitigated. There is no compromise in the Halakhah to do so, and not allow the movement of ideals to occur in the opposite direction.

The founding principle of the Jewish people is the desire to live an ethical religious life. Our ancestors were devoted to bringing to the world a way of life that it had never known – a life of defending the orphan and widow, and of cleaving to the Almighty. We, their descendants, remain confident that the vision of the avot and imahot will one day be fulfilled. To take up their legacy of ethical and theological edification is certainly, if not an absolute hitgagadot, a natural fulfillment of the ethos of Yahuadot. However, if this undertaking comes at the expense of cheating the observing of Halakah, at the expense of marginalizing our own deep and personal relationship with God, then it ends up as a self-defeating tragedy. The factors affecting our decisions when relating to the non-Jewish world are many and complex. We must be extremely cautious, and turn to the Ribbono Shel Olam for His assistance in navigating these interactions.

Adam Friedmann is a junior at YC majoring in Philosophy, and is an associate editor for Kol Hamesver.

1 Kohlet Set.
3 There are ample examples in the Jastrow entry.
4 The kabbalistic notion of tikkan olam is relevant to these discussions as it influenced strongly the views of the Conservative movements on the one hand and, hell-vil, by R. Kook on the other. However, going into detail would take this article too far off course. For an in-depth discussion see Gerald J. Bildstein, “Tikkun Olam,” Tikkan Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Thought and Law (Orthodox Forum Series), ed. by David Shatz, Chaim I. Waxman, and Nathan Jay Diament (Kirtatav Yisroel Tov, 1997), 48-50 vol. 54.
7 Ibid. 4.3.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid. 4.4.
10 Gittin 53a.
11 Penei Yehoshua (to Gittin 37b, s.v. mishnah) holds that all of the halakhot in the fourth prek are based on tikkun olam, though it is unclear how certain rulings are related.
12 See Gittin 53a.
13 The topic of relations with Gentile society is not brought up by the Rambam until the end of the fifth prek with the discussion of darkhei shalom (ways of peace). The relevance of these mishnahot to our topic will be discussed below, though it is noteworthy that most of the halakhot of darkhei shalom involve peaceable relationships between Jews, rather than between Jews and Gentiles.
14 See Jacob J. Schacter, “Tikkun Olam: Defining the Jewish Ethic,” in The Honor of Rabbi Dr.lookstein, ed. by Rafael Medoff (Hoboken, NJ and New York: KTAV Pub. House, 2009), 184 and Jack Bieler, “A Religious Context for Jewish Political Activity: Distinction between opinions.” R. Bieler concludes that the weight of halakhot are against Rambam and that therefore his views about other approaches listed here do the opposite. If Jewish responsibility for the welfare of the entire world is weighed in the scale of Jewish responsibility, then it is possible that his views about other approaches listed here do the opposite. If Jewish responsibility for the welfare of the entire world is weighed in the scale of Jewish responsibility, then it is possible that his views about other halakhic observance, as a central tenet of Jewish practice, comes important to gauge just how much
15 See Jacob J. Schacter, “Tikkun Olam,” in The Honor of Rabbi Dr. Lookstein, ed. by Rafael Medoff (Hoboken, NJ and New York: KTAV Pub. House, 2009), 184 and Jack Bieler, “A Religious Context for Jewish Political Activity: Distinction between opinions.” R. Bieler concludes that the weight of halakhot are against Rambam and that therefore his views about other halakhic observance, as a central tenet of Jewish practice, comes important to gauge just how much
16 See Jacob J. Schacter, “Tikkun Olam,” in The Honor of Rabbi Dr. Lookstein, ed. by Rafael Medoff (Hoboken, NJ and New York: KTAV Pub. House, 2009), 184 and Jack Bieler, “A Religious Context for Jewish Political Activity: Distinction between opinions.” R. Bieler concludes that the weight of halakhot are against Rambam and that therefore his views about other halakhic observance, as a central tenet of Jewish practice, comes important to gauge just how much
17 At least Western attitude towards Jews. The one may have reasoned that the lack of substantive normative backing for tikkun olam should exclude this enterprise from the epicenter of Jewish life.5 Time, resources, and spiritual will-power are precious commodities for individual and community alike. Considering this, it becomes important to gauge just how much one is capable of, and priority should be given to activities that are firmly rooted in Jewish practice (inter-communal hesed, teshuvah, talmud Torah, etc.). This by no means implies total retreat from non-Jewish society. It does, however, mean that pursuits of tikkun olam cannot come at the expense of other halakhic observance.

The discussion of centrality points towards one final, somewhat alarming, point. In incorporating tikkun olam, and not halakhic observance, as a central tenet of Jewish practice the Reform movement has, admittedly, attempted to take up the radical methodology of the prophets who valiantly fought for social justice, but has also practically disowned the corpus of laws found in the Humash. A focus on social justice allows Reform to remain at the forefront of progressive liberal values,7 but at the terrible cost of forfeiting much of Jewish heritage. Reform made this transformation knowingly; however, allowing social justice issues into the inner sanctum of Jewish life could, God forbid, produce the echoes of such an effect in the Orthodox community, even with the best of intentions. Torah values are not always at odds with secular ones; sometimes the two systems simply weight things differently. Imbuing the values of the social justice movement as an individual or community can throw these weights off balance. Halakah then becomes not a guiding light in the life but a nuisance to be given short shift in order to pursue those values that “really matter” to the modern person. Suddenly, where there was kashrut there is veganism, where there was teffillin there are oversensitive concerns for animal rights, where there were issurei arayot (forbidden sexual relations) there is uncomfortable, if not indefensible, leniency. As Jews, we are certainly summoned to take action in bettering the world around us, but we must use the values embedded and emphasized in the Halakah to do so, and not allow the movement of ideals to occur in the opposite direction.

The founding principle of the Jewish people is the desire to live an ethical religious life. Our ancestors were devoted to bringing to the world a way of life that it had never known – a life of defending the orphan and widow, and of cleaving to the Almighty. We, their descendants, remain confident that the vision of the avot and imahot will one day be fulfilled. To take up their legacy of ethical and theological edification is certainly, if not an absolute hitgagadot, a natural fulfillment of the ethos of Yahuadot. However, if this undertaking comes at the expense of cheating the observing of Halakah, at the expense of marginalizing our own deep and personal relationship with God, then it ends up as a self-defeating tragedy. The factors affecting our decisions when relating to the non-Jewish world are many and complex. We must be extremely cautious, and turn to the Ribbono Shel Olam for His assistance in navigating these interactions.

Adam Friedmann is a junior at YC majoring in Philosophy, and is an associate editor for Kol Hamesver.

1 Kohlet Set.
3 There are ample examples in the Jastrow entry.
4 The kabbalistic notion of tikkan olam is relevant to these discussions as it influenced strongly the views of the Conservative movements on the one hand and, hell-vil, by R. Kook on the other. However, going into detail would take this article too far off course. For an in-depth discussion see Gerald J. Bildstein, “Tikkun Olam,” Tikkan Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Thought and Law (Orthodox Forum Series), ed. by David Shatz, Chaim I. Waxman, and Nathan Jay Diament (Kirtatav Yisroel Tov, 1997), 48-50 vol. 54. See also Gilbert S. Rosenthal, “Tikkan ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept,” Journal of Religion 85, 2 (2005): 223-233.
6 Gittin 4.2. 
Teshuvah: Inspiration and Action

BY: Davida Kollmar


When a reader first picks up a book, the first thing he or she sees is the title. Sometimes, the title of a book can be vague. It may be some phrase that sounds appealing and draws the reader’s attention, but does not give any information on what the book is about. Other titles can be much more illuminating. Not only do they attract the reader, but they also give a hint as to the book’s main message and purpose. The title of Dr. Erica Brown’s new book, Return: Daily Inspiration for the Days of Awe, belongs to the second category; it is a precise summary of the book’s content and goals. The “Daily Inspiration” refers to the book’s ten main chapters, each of which is meant to be read one of the ten days between Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. “Return” refers to the central message of the book, that of teshuvah, which is also manifested in the theme of each chapter. Based on the writings of Rabbi Jonah of Gerona, Brown describes teshuvah as a sanctuary, a “space… [to return] to our essential selves.” It is a place where people are able to remove themselves from sin, to muster the power to overcome internal conflict and transform themselves, and to become “one with forces that usually rage within” them. She emphasizes that the teshuvah process is an internal, emotional one, although it is manifested in changed outer behavior. Brown takes issue with the common English translation of teshuvah as repentance, because it does not necessitate changing future behavior. Instead, she advocates defining teshuvah as recovery, which includes the steps necessary to rebuild the relationship with God back to where it could have been. Because of this definition, the book often reads as a self-help book, which could draw in some readers who are looking for inspiration to undergo the teshuvah process themselves. The later chapters carry through this message of teshuvah as a recovery process; indeed, in a way, the chapters in the book are like a ten-step program for returning to the essential selves Brown describes.

Each chapter focuses on a specific theme related to teshuvah. These themes are mostly character traits, such as humility and discipline, or mental states, such as faith and joy, which are meant to be worked on for that day. Each chapter goes a step closer in bringing a person to the recovery state of teshuvah. Beyond that, however, they do not specifically connect with each other. Within the ten main chapters Brown only references previous ones occasionally. As such, the chapters are largely independent units, and so the ordering of the chapters is somewhat arbitrary. Some chapters seem to be placed based on the specific calendar day on which they are meant to be read. One such example is the chapter on discipline, which focuses specifically on food and is meant to be read on the fast day of Tsom Gedalyah. However, other chapters are not related to a specific day, but seem to be organized by whether they fit better with and should therefore be closer to Rosh ha-Shanah or Yom Kippur.

Each chapter concludes with excerpts from three works: Rambam’s Hilkhot Teshuvah, R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto’s Mesilat Yesharim, and R. Abraham Isaac ha-Cohen Kook’s Orot Teshuvah. For each source, the excerpts are organized so that the order they appear in after the chapters is the same as the order in which they appear in the original. For example, each excerpt from Hilkhot Teshuvah comes from a different one of the ten perakim, and for the most part the excerpt from each perakim is to be read on its corresponding day of the aseret yemei teshuvah. While the other texts do not have the same one-to-one ratio, earlier parts of the sources are read before the later parts. The excerpts seem to be chosen based on their relevance to the central theme of the perakim in the Rambam. Following the excerpts are questions meant to spark thought about the texts being read and their connection to the rest of the chapter, highlighting the points in the chapter which Brown wants to bring out in the sources. However, because of the ordering of the excerpts, it seems at times that the texts are not directly relevant to the questions being asked, so that while both the texts and the questions are valuable on their own, the connection between the two is often a stretch.

The end of each chapter also includes a “Life Homework” section, and its presence makes it clear that Brown’s book is not just meant to be read, but to also be experienced. This section explains how to apply the messages of the book to daily life, giving tasks based on both the larger theme of the chapter and the smaller, more practical sub-points. Some of these assignments are taken from actual activities performed by Brown’s family to internalize some of the messages of the Days of Awe. For example, she mentions a family practice of writing down some specific areas which each individual wants to work on in the next year, and, each year, comparing the new list to lists created in previous years. By giving examples which have already been put into practice, Brown shows that her suggestions are practical and not merely nice ideas; the reader will see it and think, “If her family could do it, so can I.” Brown’s background in leadership training is demonstrated in these assignments, as she is able to pinpoint precisely what to think about and which actions to take in order to achieve the goal of self-improvement.

Brown’s mastery also comes through in from the wide range of sources she cites throughout the book. She quotes both secular and religious sources, often on the same page. For example, in one paragraph she quotes both R. Kook and the novelist Michael Lavigne. Brown also juxtaposes classic Judaic texts with modern ones, such as when she quotes Eikhah Rabbah followed by Halakhic Man. This seamless blend of a variety of sources makes Brown well-versed and this well-roundedness gives more legitimacy to what she is saying. It also makes the book more appealing to readers, since it is able to satisfy both those who want more recent, contemporary sources, and those who are focused on the need to prove ideas from more traditional Jewish texts.

The book is very short, a mere 165 pages. When divided over the ten days of the aseret yemei teshuvah, this amounts to less than twenty minutes of reading a day. The manageable size should help encourage people to read the book, because it will not seem overwhelming to the casual reader. Also, the topics discussed by Brown are general, wide-ranging concepts. The small size is therefore beneficial because it compels Brown to be specific in her analysis and to give concrete ideas. On the other hand, the connections between different ideas within an essay can sometimes be unclear, since there is not enough space to develop them more fully without compromising on explaining the ideas themselves.
Three Events, One Medium: A Selection of Posters from the Yeshiva University Museum

BY: Rachel Weber

In an election season, visual media like lawn signs and Facebook advertisements inundate us with messages about various candidates, issues, and political parties. But even before suburban lawns and the internet, another form of visual media, posters, displayed similar messages. Florence B. Helzel writes that the purpose of posters was “to stimulate public opinions and to motivate involvement in specific causes.” While this does not seem particularly innovative, she claims that posters were specifically important before “the recent revolutionary technological advances in mass communication,” which weakened the effect of a poster. Visual media can be used for two main purposes: to encourage action or to dispense information. The three posters shown here, which span the years 1917-1944, cover both of these categories. They are very different from one another, both in how they look and in their purpose, but they provide a snapshot of different issues that were important to the Jews of New York during those years.

The first poster in chronological order (Jewish Relief Campaign, 2008.046), from 1917, was meant to encourage American Jews to give donations to the Jewish Relief Campaign. This poster was made by Burke, Johnstone Studios and printed by Sackett & Wilhelms Corp. in Brooklyn in the heart of World War I. Although the war began in Europe in 1914, the United States did not enter until the spring of 1917, when the war continued to drag on violently. This poster calls for American Jews to donate as a way to help their fellow Jews in Europe. It portrays the American Jewish community as a woman holding a bountiful tray of food, while European Jews are destitute and begging for help. Very little is known about the Jewish Relief Campaign – it is assumed to have been run by the Jewish Relief Committee, one of the groups that later helped found the American Joint Distribution Committee. This poster is visually striking, drawing a sharp contrast between the wealth of American Jewry and those in trouble overseas.

The next poster (Pauline Dolitsky, 1919.079), from 1918, is meant to relay a completely different message. This poster announces the appointment of Pauline Dolitsky as president of the Women’s League of Yeshiva University. As World War I was ending, Yeshiva University was taking care of internal politics. Of course, it was not yet known as Yeshiva University; Yeshiva College was only founded in 1928. In 1918, the institution existed only as Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan, a rabbinical seminary on the Lower East Side. Dr. Bernard Revel was appointed as the first president only three years earlier, in 1915, and it was under his leadership that MTA and the graduate school of Jewish Studies, later to be named for him, were established. Although they were made around the same time, this poster is very different from the one made by the Jewish Relief Campaign. Firstly, its only purpose is to be informational, as a way to let people know about a decision that was made by this women’s group. Secondly, the style is more ornate and the poster provides much more background information. This poster was not meant for any person walking down the street. It was meant to share information with those who were already interested in hearing about the subject. On the other hand, its lavish detail is meant to impress upon the viewer the importance of the information being provided. While most of us do not ever think about the presidents of women’s leagues in the early 1900s, this poster gives us a glimpse of a very specific piece of history.

The last poster (Frankenthaler, 2001.029) combines aspects of the first two. A campaign poster for George Frankenthaler, it dates from 1944, at the end of World War II. Similar to the first poster, it endorses an action; instead of requesting for votes in a current campaign.

As a result, it is sometimes unclear how Brown gets from one idea to another. Within the essay itself, the ideas seem to flow, but occasionally the reader finishes a chapter and wonders how the end of the discussion connects to the beginning. Each chapter opens with a quote from the “al het” section of viduy (confession), which introduces an essay about the theme of the day. The essays begin with a few pages of close analysis of a source or set of sources such as Tanakh or rabbinic writings, which is used as a springboard for the rest of the discussion. From here, Brown will bring in other sources related to the topic at hand, but frequently ideas connect directly only to the theme and the sources immediately before them, but not to the rest of the sources in the chapter. For example, the chapter on discipline begins by relating the story of Gedalyah ben Ahikam, whose assassination is the impetus for the fast which bears his name. From there, Brown begins to examine fasting in general, which transforms into a discussion on self-discipline, which then further morphs into a discussion about the challenges of eating properly. This chapter then changes topic again to talk about the manna, then willpower, then habits, then R. Dessler on nekidat ha-behi-rab. It then concludes with a short paragraph on self-control. While the ideas flow within the essay, it is easy for the reader to finish the chapter and wonder why R. Dessler’s thesis relates to the assassination of Gedalyah, and the emphasis on food throughout the whole chapter can seem somewhat forced.

Brown’s book is successful in providing many theoretical ideas about the teshuvah process, and suggesting realistic ways to implement them in real life. Readers who are interested in self-improvement books, or who are searching for inspiration for the aseret yemei teshuvah, will find this work to be invaluable. Readers who are not interested in either of these things may not enjoy those aspects of the book as much, yet they may still appreciate the book’s wide range of sources as a facilitator for further study.

Davida Kollmar is a senior at SCW majoring in Physics, and is a staff writer for Kol Hamevasser.

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid. pp. 8-9.
4 Ibid. p. 126.
5 Ibid. p. 6.
6 Ibid. p. 140.
7 Ibid. p. 47. R. Dessler’s thesis is that a given person is faced with multiple challenges every day, but the ones with which (s)he struggles are the ones which are on his/her level, not those (s)he has already mastered or is not yet able to combat.
8 Brown. chapter 3.
looking back to study the images of previous campaigns has never been more important. Eileen Battat, in the introduction to her book *Witnesses to History*, explains the significance of this study: “The poster provides a link with the past and makes possible the witnessing of specific events. It serves as the barometer of a society that we can know only through secondhand experience.” Only by paying attention to the details can we really understand how our present differs from, but is also still related to, our past.

Rachel Weber is a senior at SCW majoring in Jewish Studies, and is a staff writer for Kol Hamevaser.

2 Ibid.
5 Helzel, 13.
Kol Hamevaser & Worship & Spirituality

featuring the themes...

with guest speakers...

Dr. Scott Goldberg - Director, YU Institute for University-School Partnership
Rabbi Shalom Carmy - Editor, Tradition; Chair of Bible and Jewish Philosophy, Yeshiva College
Mrs. Deena Rabinovich - Director, Legacy Heritage Scholars/Jewish Educators Project at SCW
Rabbi Maccabee Avishur - Associate Director for Teaching and Learning, YU Institute for University-School Partnership

night activities

Kol Hamevaser: Screening of 1973 NBC Interview of Abraham Joshua Heschel
Al Pi Darko: TBA

SHABBATON

on beren campus...

FOR THE LENINIST GENERAL LINE, FOR THE PARTY AND THE COMINTERN
Moscow, 1930s
Collection of Yeshiva University Museum
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ludwig Jesselson

Armistice Day Poster
Artist: Sidney Riesenberg
U.S.A., 1918
Collection of Yeshiva University Museum
Gift of the Jesselson Family

VOTE FOR SLATE NO. 18
Russia, 1918
Collection of Yeshiva University Museum
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ludwig Jesselson

Stay Tuned for the Upcoming Issue of Kol Hamevaser on DECEMBER