

18Forty in Review: Birthday Edition

 18forty.org

By: Yehuda Fogel

One year ago today, 18Forty revealed itself to the world, in a flash of dark colors and provocative tweets. ‘*What is 18Forty, who is 18Forty, why 18Forty,*’ the people asked urgently, and we provided them with answers.

It has to do with the industrial revolution, change, and how our religious lives growchange and adapt with the flowing waves of time. As time speeds up and the information age drowns us in a flood of cheap dopamine hits and clicks, will religion fall to the wayside, or be crucial to making meaning in this new reality?

The 18Forty project – from one year ago until today – has been working from within this question, as we have approached the major challenges of today. We set out to create a context in which we can approach sensitive and human crossroads of religion and life in a way that is both honest and faithful, without the reductivism and apologetics that so often inform communal conversations. We have been guided by the timeless words of the great Jewish poet Rilke, who, in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, urged his young friend not to fear the questions or hide from them, but to “live the questions now:”

I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

This past year, we have learned to live the questions, by approaching some of the most fundamental questions of contemporary religious learning and life. We are more for it.

We have been joined on this journey by the thousands of listeners and learners of our intellectual community, who challenged us to go deeper, with greater wisdom and insight.

Each topic is a world in its own right. These are the wolds we have entered so far this year, guided by those more wise than us: Comedy, OTD, Talmud, Biblical Criticism, Intergenerational Divergence, Agunah Crisis, God, Mysticism, Science & Religion, Social Justice, and Jewish Peoplehood, in no particular order. We think of each topic as a beginning of conversation and thought, and hope to respect the depth and profundity of each topic by returning to them again with time.

We have spoken with academics, scientists, lawyers, rabbis from all different denominations, Roshei Yeshiva, dreamers, scholars, leaders, followers, journalists, writers and comedians and performers and bloggers, therapists and mystics, activists and teachers. We spoke to parents and children, people born in faith and people who left faith. These people helped us live the questions, and at each step we have been guided by the books and texts and ideas that shape our world.

People and texts are the two sources of wisdom that have lit our path . The former have graced us with conversation, bringing honesty, erudition, passion, and sincerity to our life. The latter have informed and illumined these conversations, bringing us in touch with the ways the ideas of today and ancient ideas are interacting. Religious life, and particularly Jewish life, is constituted in a delicate balance between these two, the 'lived' and the 'learned,' as we call it elsewhere.

Between the ideological hopes of our texts and the lived reality of humanity, between the top-down aspirations of heaven and the bottom-up hopes of earth, we live our religious lives betwixt and between. One challenge of a life informed by these wisdoms is in growing wiser from the contributions of each, from the books we read and the people we learn from, to grow with our feet on the ground and our head looking up to heaven.

As our founder and host, David Bashevkin put it in his opening words about 18Forty:

Today, we are once again faced with the choices and challenges society confronted in 1840 on an even greater level. While many of the benefits brought by these changes are self-evident, these rapidly accelerating changes are causing new societal and individual challenges. The levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns are rising at an alarming rate, especially among Millennials and Generation Z. Traditional familial and communal emotional support networks are being replaced by impersonal online communities. And the exponential rate of technological development makes the future feel unpredictable.

As a society, how will we construct meaning in today's age of limitless information? Some will see religion as an anachronistic artifact from a simpler and more naïve time. 18Forty hopes to confront some of those challenges and present a new vision for the value of religion in the modern age.

We have come a long way in this past year. Talking and thinking about the foundational and fundamental questions of Judaism has taught us a lot about the kinds of conversations that our listeners are desperate for, and we have been moved by the feedback we have gotten. To celebrate our one year anniversary, we are turning back to the best of our past, bringing you a reader of our favorite articles from this past year. These offer a window into who we are, and how far we have come. We are young and growing, and hope to grow alongside you. Let us know what you love, and hate, and what you want more of. We want to hear your voice, and learn together. Email us at info@18forty.org or connect through social media. We can't wait to hear from you and to live the questions together.

Leaving Religion: A Changing Conversation

 18forty.org/

Weekend Reader – June 5, 2020

Our communal conversation today around those who decide to leave religion is increasingly self-aware, and the modes and mediums in which this conversation happens are constantly in flux. Understanding the changes in this conversation deepens our understanding of what the landscape of this issue looks like today. This month, 18Forty is thinking about the OTD (Off The Derech) conversation. Read on for an intellectual history of this discourse, all part of [this month's content](#) on 18Forty.

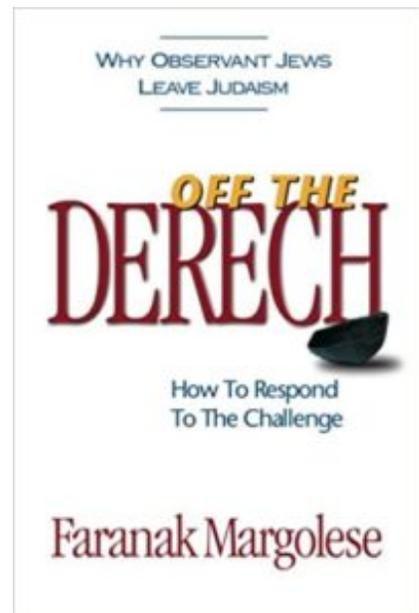
In order to appreciate the ways this conversation has changed, we have to look back to the November 1999 issue of *The Jewish Observer*. This remarkable issue is titled “Children on the Fringe...And Beyond,” and it is entirely devoted to discussion about the children on the fringes of Orthodoxy. The issue includes moving accounts from parents, rabbis, educators, and therapists. For a particularly poignant sampling, in “Hereby Resolved...”: A Father’s Kabbalos’, one father [states his heartfelt hopes simply](#):

I will remember that I am your Tatty (father) and that I love you. I will remember that you are a child. I will find ways to show you that you are loved. I will say “I love you” more often and I will express it in other ways as well, perhaps with touch, tone of voice, smile, look on my face, and by giving of my time. I will not degrade you, laugh at you, ridicule you in any way. I will say “I am sorry” when I’m wrong. I will criticize less and focus more often on the positives in you. I will look for the big picture, keep my eyes on the prize, the prize of a loving, caring, joyful relationship with you...

In another article in this issue, Rabbi Ahron Kaufman sharply reminds readers that a life of religious movement, personal engagement, and questioning should not only be for those that leave:

To be satisfied with one’s Judaism simply as a lifestyle inherited from one’s parents is not being “FFB.” Rather it is “FOB,” a Fact of Birth. But this is not Judaism. *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* does not want genetically-produced robots.

The issue notably includes perspectives from esteemed psychologists, Dr. David Pelcovitz and Dr. Norman Blumenthal; a conversation with Rav Shmuel Kaminetzky; and educator-activists, such as Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz — an important early voice in this conversation. However, it is important to note whose perspective did not yet make it to the conversation: those ‘on the fringe’ themselves. This point frames a crucial change in the conversation about those leaving the fold. Over time, this conversation has shifted from largely being about those that leave — from the perspective of their parents/teachers/rabbis/therapists — to a conversation from those that have left, and occasionally with those that have left. In the early days of this communal conversation, the focus was largely on understanding and responding to what was perceived to be a crisis. From this issue of the Jewish Observer, to Faranak Margolese’s 2005 book *Off the Derech: How to Respond to the Challenge*, the voices of those that departed Orthodoxy were largely absent from the conversation.



With the growing popularity of the internet, these voices found a home: in web forums, blogs, and Facebook. In blogs such as the popular Unpious and Facebook groups like Off the Derech and OTD Meetup, quiet voices found expression and community. Struggling with religion — which for many was once the quiet, lonely experience of an individual — was given the tools of communal connection, and voices from the margin gained prominence. As these individuals were given connection and community, the world began to listen. In 2005, the era of OTD literature gained significant visibility, led by the publication of Hella Winston’s *Unchosen: The Hidden Lives of Hasidic Rebels*. Originally a dissertation focusing on interviews with Hassidic women, *Unchosen* became a lightning rod for focus on those that leave and those that stay. Controversial in some circles, beloved in others, *Unchosen* put the once-silent voices front and center.

Following this landmark book, memoirs of the once-Orthodox became a genre of their own. Shalom Auslander’s *Foreskin’s Lament* and Reva Mann’s *The Rabbi’s Daughter* set the stage, followed by Deborah Feldman’s high-profile *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of my Hasidic Roots* and Shulem Deen’s *All Who Go Do Not Return: A Memoir*. These books gave readers an inner look at the complicated world of decisions that go into leaving, and found popularity in both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. This popularity is complicated, as writing about such painfully intimate material for both insiders and outsiders must be. Shulem Deen acknowledges the cultural voyeurism that feeds this popularity, and notes in a 2014 Tablet article:

People are usually very interested in what goes on inside insular communities because of their fascination with what seems mysterious and different,” he said. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it, although I don’t always like it. To some degree, there’s a dehumanizing element involved for the writer, and I find it a little discomfiting at times to be lumped into that realm of otherness.

As this genre grew in popularity, thought pieces about this burgeoning movement came to major media outlets like *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*, often by writers that had already left Orthodoxy. Many of these memoirists offer strong critiques on the communities they left, as well as the occasionally powerful elegy to these communities. Considering these memoirs in light of the broader cultural and religious history of memoir writing also highlights the place they occupy in the broader tradition of confessional writing. However, while marked by some distinctive characteristics and trends, these memoirs are not homogeneous, nor is the experience of those that left. It is often too easy to downplay the complexities of this phenomenon and these people by looking only to the rigid social scriptures of Satmer and Skver. Taffy Brodesser Ackner, writing for *The New York Times*, advocates taking a deeper look:

It’s hard to talk about O.T.D.ers as a group, because like the rest of us, like ultra-Orthodox people, too, they are individuals. No two people who practice religion do it exactly the same way, despite how much it seems to the secular world that they rally around sameness; and no one who leaves it leaves the same way, either. In the region of New York City, New Jersey, and the Hudson Valley that Footsteps serves, 546,000 ultra-Orthodox Jews live in one of about five different sects. With a few exceptions, like the Skver sect in New Square, N.Y., which has actual boundaries and operates its own schools, the ultra-Orthodox live not in cloistered neighborhoods, but among secular America in Crown Heights, Flatbush and Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and beyond. Perhaps it’s easiest to think of them as living in a different dimension — occupying the same space but speaking a different language (Yiddish, for the most part), attending different schools, seeing their own doctors, handling judicial issues among themselves and eating their own food from their own markets.

The complicated dynamic of the decision to stay or leave are not monopolized by any one group or sect. The challenges and opportunities of religious life affect both Skver and Scarsdale. Talia Lavin, writing about her departure from Modern Orthodoxy in *The New Yorker*, says:

My own life in the years since leaving my faith has involved a complex process of reinvention. Even though I did not experience the educational and economic challenges others have faced, the transition was wrenching, and involved an erasure and redrawing of my moral calculus and place in the world. Outside the bounds of my old identity, I felt modernity rushing in. A world without religion was chaotic, like a kitchen without separate dishes for dairy and meat, or a suit that mixed wool and linen. Leaving the path offered its own pleasures: shrimp and pork and other satisfactions of the flesh. But every Friday night I could hear, in my head, the songs of the Sabbath meals I wasn't attending, and the food I ate on fast days burned in my gut.

Along the way, I found others who, like me, had left the faith, some of them through a Facebook group called "Off the Derech." They knew the songs; they knew the dense scent of sacred palm fronds and myrtle and citron; they faced the Talmudic quandaries of navigating relationships with those still observant. They knew the joys of leaving, and its price. "When you're doing this with other people, it's easier, and that's what's beautiful about the O.T.D. community," Mayer's friend Levin said. "You have other people like you."

Religious life, and the decision to leave, is complicated, and should be treated as such.

The intense interest in these books contributed to the current surge in cinematic portrayals of the religious, as well as religiously rebelling. *One of Us*, and now *Unorthodox*, have started broad conversations on media portrayals of the ultra-Orthodox, as well as on communal norms in ultra-Orthodox communities. Many of the people that were once 'children-at-risk' or OTD have become powerfully articulate voices on the issues that they faced in the community that they once occupied. In issues of education reform, sexual abuse, and addiction, the voices of those that left have powerfully influenced the lives of those that stayed.

Given the depth and complexity of those that stay, and those that leave, religious terminology is of particular importance in this issue. OTD, kids at risk, "the departed", *kofrim*: each term has its own accompanying set of imagery and associations. As this issue comes to age, it may be time to move from the language of OTD — which presumes one path for all, a religious binary that far from accurately portrays the complicated spectrum of religious life — to a more honest and rich term: *chozer b'sheilah*, return to questioning. Popular in



The photography of Benjamin Reich, who was born into a Chassidic family in Bnei Brak, contends with the complicated dynamics involved with leaving religious life.

Israel, this term is a clever wordplay on *chozer b'teshuvah*, one that returns to the faith, and is more understanding of the complexities of the lived religious experience. This term recasts the decision to leave as one of essential religious movement, which is valuable no matter the direction. Understanding the questions of those that leave allows each community to be a more engaged, growing community. Entrances and exits both speak volumes. Different directions, as long as there is movement.

For more on this topic, visit 18forty.org/otd

Hope, History, and Humor: Jewish Comedy in Perspective

 18forty.org/reader/hope-history-and-humor-jewish-comedy-in-perspective

July 2 | Comedy

This month, 18Forty is thinking about comedy and its relevance to contemporary cultural and religious life, available [here](#). Comedy is about more than laughs; 18Forty founder David Bashevkin's introduction to this topic considers comedy's worth to one's personal life and journey. But what about Jewish humor? What drives Jews to joke, in spite of it all? This week's Weekend Reader offers you an expanded perspective on the relationship between Jewish hope and Jewish humor, all part of this month's content at 18Forty. Read on to better understand the hope, history, and humor of the Jewish people.

History says, don't hope

On this side of the grave.

But then, once in a lifetime

The longed-for tidal wave

Of justice can rise up,

And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change

On the far side of revenge.

Believe that further shore

Is reachable from here.

Believe in miracle

And cures and healing wells.

– **Seamus Heaney**

In a time and context in which Jewishness is almost synonymous with humor, it may be hard to believe that for a long time Jews weren't considered to be particularly funny. As Jeremy Dauber points out on the very first page of his [book on Jewish comedy](#):

A lot of outside observers considered them downright glum. The early twentieth century British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, for example, remarked that Jews were “singularly humorless”; his slightly early contemporary, the historian and critic Thomas Carlyle, asserted that the Jews showed not the slightest trace of humor at any period of their history, and the novelist George Eliot suggested that “the Literature of the Hebrew gives an idea of a people who went about their business and their pleasure as gravely as a society of beavers.”

Facing centuries of physical and economic persecution, Jews shouldn't be blamed for being a bit glum, but there are always polemical biases that may have influenced the views of these not-quite-objective outside observers. But it may not just be these distant Britons that thought of Jewish history as lacking humor. If someone were to stop you and ask for the most tragic moments in Jewish history, the challenge would be in winnowing out the options. *Akedat Yitzchak*, the Golden Calf, the Breaking of the *Luchot*, the *Cheit HaMeraglim*, destruction of the Temples...the list goes on and on. But what if someone were to ask you for the funniest moments in Jewish history? After 1920, we have the “15 Greatest Moments in Jewish Comedy History,” but what about the funniest moments in the entirety of Jewish history? The erudite may think of a particularly rib-shaking Talmudic quip, the more Purim-oriented readers may suggest the turnabouts of *Megilat Esther*, but where are the truly great comedic moments of Jewish history?

If the reader of this reader is at all like the writer of this reader, you may have had a hard time. Why might this be so challenging? Why is it so hard to think of any comedic moments in the whole of Jewish history? While this might be endemic to all historical consciousness, which privileges the morbid to the mundane, there may be a deeper issue at hand.

To answer this, we turn to a 20th century Jewish historian. In 1963, eminent Jewish historian Salo Baron wrote a paper titled “Newer Emphases in Jewish History,” in which he articulated a position that would fundamentally redraw the lines around the study of Jewish history. Reflecting on what would become known as the ‘anti-lachrymose view of Jewish history,’ Baron said:

All my life I have been struggling against the hitherto dominant “lachrymose conception of Jewish history” ... because I have felt that an overemphasis on Jewish sufferings distorted the total picture of the Jewish historic evolution.

Perhaps referring to earlier Jewish historians like Heinrich Graetz, Baron pushed back on a conception of Jewish history that viewed this history as a set of persecutions and expulsions. As a historian, Baron argued for a more balanced perspective, uncolored by the bias towards the negative. However, even with a more balanced perspective, the history of the Jewish diaspora is a remarkable account of countless pogroms, persecutions, and peregrinations. When thinking through our own history, it is too easy to focus only on the

traumatic travels through the diaspora, and on the Torah we created in those travels. In Baron's words: "suffering is part of the destiny, but so is joy as well as ultimate redemption."

Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, Baron's student who held the Salo Wittmayer Baron Chair at Columbia University, went further. In 1985, Yerushalmi wrote "Toward a History of Jewish Hope," in which he argued passionately for the need to study the history of Jewish hope. He quotes a fellow historian, who asks "Why is it that, although hope is one of the fundamental factors that have shaped history, it has almost never been the subject of direct historical investigation for its own sake?" Like Baron, Yerushalmi knew that Jewish history consists of joy and hope, along with suffering. Yerushalmi felt that the heights of hope and the depths of despair must be studied together:

Hope that comes too easily is a hope that cannot impress. This, therefore, is crucial: we cannot explore the history of Jewish hope without at the same time exploring the history of Jewish despair. Only when we become painfully aware of the historical depths of Jewish despair, only when we take it seriously, will we begin to realize that Jewish hope is not an historical "given" to be taken for granted, but an historical problem that we have not yet begun to recognize, let alone comprehend.

In the poem that opens this weekend reader, Irish poet Seamus Heaney writes: "hope and history rhyme." These are Heaney's most famous words, and they evoke a sense that perhaps in the end, history will all work out. But quote-happy readers often miss the context of the rest of his poem, in which Heaney acknowledges that "history says, don't hope." This is an acknowledgement that history does not lead one naturally towards hope. But "hope and history rhyme," even if it is only "once in a lifetime," as Heaney puts it. Some of us may have experienced such moments. The Jewish people, in the twentieth century, experienced both the ways history and hope can rhyme, as well as the many ways they so often don't.

We know that hope is not easily born. In the gap between history and hope, between what is and what could be, or should be, is where humor enters our conversation. How did this become a history of hope, from a conversation on Jewish humor? Because humor and hope are intimately bound together. To talk about Jewish humor, we have to talk about Jewish hope, to appreciate the deep ways we have created hope by creating humor. In the space between history and hope, when the two have not rhymed, humor has helped us find hope in our history.

Comedy lives in the space between hope and history, laughing at the incongruity. In his [introduction](#) to this month's content, 18Forty founder David Bashevkin points to the words of James K. Feibleman:

Comedy then, criticizes the finite for not being infinite. It witnesses the limitations of actuality, just as a tragedy witnesses the fragmentary exemplifications of the logical order. Tragedy affirms continuity by showing how it exists in every actual thing and event. Tragedy shows the worth of every actual, down to the most ephemeral, and so is always close to the permanent value of the worshipful. Comedy comes to the same affirmation, but inversely and by indirection, just as one might affirm beauty by criticizing the ugly. Comedy catches the principle of unity in every finite thing...

David comments:

Great comedians are commentators. They highlight a finite world in disarray and through comedy, a lens of meaning is superimposed onto our quotidian lives. Comedy seeks a life with meaning and when situations and circumstances seem bereft of sense, comedy provides one.

Looking at history — national and personal — looking at the finite facts of one's life, and laughing at the disarray, allows and engenders hope. Where does this leave us? Over the course of Jewish history, we have learned that God plans and man laughs. At God, for God, with God — we laugh. This same Seamus Heaney is said to have once said that “hope is a condition of your soul, not a response to the circumstances in which you find yourself.” But perhaps humor, like hope, is actually both. Perhaps humor, like hope, is a condition of the soul that allows one to respond to the circumstances in which one finds oneself. And so it goes — with humor, and hope, we travel through history.

For more on this topic, visit 18forty.org/comedy

Mysticism: An Introduction

 18forty.org/articles/wonder-post-wonder-topic-introduction

Mysticism

October 12, 2020

By 18Forty Staff

There are many doorways to mysticism. The great Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld once made the following observation: “These days, you meet some young people – they are so old, so old... And you meet some elderly people who are so young.” Some come to mysticism when they feel old enough, wise in their years, and others when they feel young enough. This month, 18Forty is thinking about mysticism, and the paths that lead there.

We live in a fragmented age – what has been called the age of anxiety, or sometimes the cynicism age. The question of poet John O’Donahue speaks to us all: “What have you done with your wildness?” What have we done with our sense of wonder, our sense of wildness? Many of us look at children with appreciation for the joy and abandon with which they live, the simple wonder they find in the world. But what has become of our own inner children?

Picasso once said that it was easy for him to paint like Rafael, the great painter, but it took him a lifetime to paint like a child. Looking at life, we can choose to look at the seen and unseen with the wonder of children, decidedly with our own eyes. This is one lens that mysticism provides to us – a new way of looking at the world, full of wonder.

Some people come to this lens and language seeking wonder, but others come to make sense of a world without wonder. Gershon Scholem, the groundbreaking scholar of mysticism and Kabbalah, would tell students that “to comprehend the Kabbala you have to study Kafka, particularly *The Trial*.” The world of Kafka is a world without redemption, or possibly the understanding that redemption lies within the impossibility of redemption. In Scholem’s words, “Here for once a world is expressed in which redemption cannot be anticipated – go and explain this to the goyim!” As a doorway into Jewish mysticism, Kafka is not the door of wonder, but the door present when wonder is lost.

In thinking about the mundane and the mystical, G.K. Chesterton, a true master of words, said this:

Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, “Do it again”; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do it again” to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy...

God, with the eternal appetite of infancy... This is the life of wonder. Whichever way you come to mysticism, join us in appreciating the wisdom that the world of mysticism has to offer. Whether you look with wonder or without, we hope to provide a window into the mystical. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard gives us hope as we seek wonder and wisdom in a complicated world when he says: “So, like a forgotten fire, a childhood can always flare up again within us.” And so may it.

Wonder Post-Wonder

Never once in my life did I ask God for success or wisdom or power or fame. I asked for wonder, and He gave it to me. (Abraham Joshua Heschel)

In the late 15th century, Japanese shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1436-1490), 8th shogun of the Ashikaga shogunate, sent a damaged bowl for repairs. When the bowl was returned, it was mended but ugly and stapled, motivating local craftsmen to try their hand at more elegant styles of repairing broken objects. And so *kintsugi* was born. *Kintsugi*, literally “golden joinery,” is the Japanese art of repairing broken ceramics with a resin developed to look like solid gold (and often using real gold).

Through *kintsugi*, cracks and breakages do not spell the end of a pot or bowl, rather they set the way for a deeper adornment. As the Jewish bard Leonard Cohen murmured in his epic song “Anthem”:

Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything (there is a crack in everything)
That’s how the light gets in

The *kintsugi* method treats this literally, as cracks birth golden rivers streaming through the broken ceramic. Brokenness is no longer hidden or thrown away; instead, the possibilities and power hidden in the cracks shine in full relief. This is a matter of design – *kintsugi* is related to the broader Japanese value of *wabi sabi*, a world view that emphasizes the impermanence and imperfection that comprise the state of reality. Adorning the very imperfections of this world with gold is a subtle yet powerful choice to live with greater beauty, in spite of it all.

In the twentieth century, our world cracked. Like a simple clay pot, fallen and in pieces, the world shattered. Systems of truth and power, ethics, art, and culture could not stop the atrocities of the 20th century. For many, this was the age of the death of men, with the death toll rising ever higher and higher. Others insisted the world lost even more than the catastrophic loss of life. In the words of Elie Wiesel, “In Auschwitz died, not only man, but also the idea of man.”

An innocence was lost in the 20th century. Facing the catastrophe, humanity now knew uncomfortable truths about what both man and God could do. The act of faith, and particularly the wonder of mysticism, are in many ways built upon a foundation of the kind of innocence now lost.

Where can a people go, a person go, a world go, after the death of innocence? Enter second innocence. Second innocence, or second naivete, is a position that affirms innocence in the face of all the challenges to innocence. Second innocence is the affirmation of innocence, of truth, of beauty, in the aftermath of a broken world. This is the decision to live a life of wonder, even though one knows all the ways that the world may not be filled with wonder.

Why does modernity need mysticism? It is no small coincidence that some of the greatest breakthroughs in the history of Jewish mysticism have occurred in the immediate aftermath of catastrophe. In the wake of the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, suffering the consequences of the inquisition, the Arizal and a group of his friends, teachers, and students in Safed led an intellectual revolution that profoundly shaped the future of Jewish thought.

In the aftershock of catastrophe, perhaps mysticism is most needed. The mystical impulse is not easily defined, as there are many qualities and aspects to mysticism. Even Jewish mysticism has been practiced and studied in many different matrices. But we can turn to the wealth of words and ideas within the many mystical texts of the Jewish people to find wisdom and wonder in the modern era. We can look to our mystical thinkers to better appreciate the unseen aspects in a world in which everything is seen, everything is visible.

Rabbi Louis Jacobs invoked the words of English poet Elizabeth Barret Browning when exploring the mystical impulse. Her words offer a window into what we might hope to see:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware
More and more from the first similitude.

In the past century – and in the past year – we have seen the world aflame. Perhaps it is time to look with wonder at the fire. It is not for nothing that as the world has aged, the mystical tradition has opened up. Texts and philosophies that were once secret, obscure, and

impenetrable – esoterica studied only by the most righteous – have been opened up to contemporary readers. Perhaps the rarefied thought of Jewish mysticism has opened up in the modern era – from 1840 until today – specifically to address the needs of our disenchanted world. In a world lacking adornment, in which every crack is seen, we can turn to mysticism to remember that there is something more, under the surface of ourselves, our world, and our religion.

Weekend Reader – Why Discuss Risky Topics?

Introduction to Biblical Criticism

 18forty.org/articles/why-discuss-risky-topics-introduction-to-biblical-criticism

After millennia of study, in many ways the Bible still remains a question mark to us, a mark of the unknown. As much as we have learned about this mysterious Book over the millennia, we may have equally learned just how little we understand. In the name of this great Book, religions have started and wars fought, acts of great love and hate committed. These acts often use the Bible as creed and cry, and one could suggest that such acts often rely on an understanding of the Book as an exclamation point, not a question mark. Humble readers of this great Book can appreciate the work as a kind of Divine question mark, a lesson to humanity about the limits of understanding. Great works inspire questions and thought, and no book has inspired more than the Bible.

This isn't an apologetic stance towards Biblical criticism, as much as it is a plea for openness towards a position of questioning. We acknowledge that we don't know everything about the Bible, and perhaps we aren't supposed to.

This month, 18Forty is thinking about Biblical criticism. In this week's weekend reader, we seek to answer the following questions: Why should a person of faith think, or read, about Biblical criticism? Why engage with such potentially dangerous material? To answer these questions, we will consider the power and possibilities of engagement with religious questions and doubts.

Loving the Questions Themselves

What do we hope to gain in discussing topics like this? One part of why we discuss topics like these is in the hopes of cultivating an attitude of openness towards the unknown, an awareness of that which we don't know or understand. And just as importantly, we discuss topics like these because we must. Because the questions exist, we will discuss them. Instead of dwelling in the fearful shadow of the question or the comfortable shade of the answer, we may instead learn to live in comfortable tension with the questions. In his timeless ode to vulnerability and sensitivity, *Letters to a Younger Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), the great German-language poet, urges us towards such a position:

You are so young, so much before all beginning, and I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to **have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.** Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. **And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.** Perhaps you do carry within you the possibility of creating and forming, as an especially blessed and pure way of living; train yourself for that but take whatever comes, with great trust, and as long as it comes out of your will, out of some need of your innermost self, then take it upon yourself, and don't hate anything.

We might read Rilke's powerful words with a slight gloss; where he tells us to love the questions themselves, but not search for the answers, we hope to love the questions themselves *and* search for the answers. We might try to "live the questions now," while still seeking the answers with faith and curiosity.

And perhaps we might seek more – not only our answers, but our questions as well. We all have questions that drive our search – our existential project – and it is too easy to become numb to these questions. These may not be questions about Biblical criticism or faith, but deeply individual questions of personal meaning and fulfillment. Awareness and love for the questions themselves can birth a lived answer, in the resolution of the question through the choices one makes in life. Our lives can constitute the answer to the questions we are desperately trying to formulate, and yet articulation of the questions of our life can inform us about our own values and identity. If we don't know our own questions, how might we ever learn to live with them?

This openness is native to the religious sensibility; Rav Kook opines ([Shemonah Kevotzim 1, 267](#)) that the difference between fear of Heaven that is connected to the light of Torah and fear of Heaven that isn't connected to the light of Torah is whether the "fear of sin becomes the fear of thought":

The deficiency in the quality of fear of heaven that isn't connected to the light of Torah is that fear of sin becomes fear of thought. A person becomes too fearful of thought, and enters the mud of ignorance, which takes the light of her soul, damages her strength, and obscures her spirit.

Fear of Heaven becoming fear of thought – a frightening, yet so very human, occurrence. By opening ourselves up to challenging questions, with faith and honesty, we can strive to have a fear of Heaven free from the shackles of fear of thought.

What To Do With Doubts

A conversation about engaging with religious questions must deal with the question of doubts: What if this leads people to doubt? To begin the conversation around Biblical criticism, it is worth considering a broader taxonomy of religious doubt.

Upcoming guest on 18Forty, Rabbi Gil Student, outlines various types of doubt in a *Torah Musings* article entitled “Religious Doubt in Jewish Life.” One type of doubt is what he deems **permissive doubt**, the subconscious doubt present in the motivation to sin:

In explaining the necessity of the concept of repentance, Rav Albo magnifies the nature of any sin (Sefer Ha-Ikkarim 4:26). How can anyone violate a command of the Almighty? The Talmud (Sotah 3a) declares that no person sins unless overcome by a spirit of folly (ru'ach shetus). While this could mean a temporary insanity or sensual distraction, Rav Albo understands the phrase intellectually. A person can only sin if he believes that God does not exist, does not punish sinners or did not give the commandments. In other words, sin entails what I call **permissive doubt**, even heresy, that enables you to transgress.

Rav Albo does not seem to be attributing complex intellectual calculations to the casual sinner. Rather, he is describing the subconscious intellectual process of sin. If we truly believe and remain conscious of God's command and providence, we will never sin. Our ability to submerge this recognition, to focus our thoughts on our own desires rather than the overwhelming presence of God, requires a diminished faith. We do not fully believe or we would stop ourselves from following our desires.

Gil notes and comments on the three types of faith identified by Rabbi Normal Lamm in his fundamental work on the topic, *Faith and Doubt*:

Spurious doubt “does not issue from a question that expresses an authentic concern for truth” (p. 9 of the 2006 edition). A genuine doubt has to be honest, has to be humble, has to be critical of not just its object of concern but of itself. A doubt for the sake of doubt attempts to avoid truth, not seek it. In this hyper-cynical age, we must be wary of spurious doubt that masquerades cynicism as intellectualism.

Methodological doubt plays a role in acquiring knowledge. Rav Sa’adia Gaon (Emunos Ve-Dei’os, introduction, sec. 3) sees doubt as a natural starting point. Knowledge exists externally so a person must remove his doubts through study in order to arrive at truth. While not a positive phenomenon, methodological doubt serves an important role. “Certainty can be attained, but only by means of doubts that are conquered, and doubt therefore has instrumental significance” (R. Lamm, p. 11). Methodological doubt is part of a learning process, not an element of your faith. It is an abstract method of examining a problem. You believe while still trying to work out the details.

Substantive doubt is a state of questioning. It is a faith that includes doubt. “In methodological doubt, I possess and direct the question; in substantive doubt, the questions possesses and directs me” (R. Lamm, p. 11). While R. Sa’adia Gaon does not discuss this kind of doubt, R. Lamm suggests that it, too, can have value in a life of faith. It is a starting point that encourages deepening your faith. Substantive doubt, when part of a struggle, is an element of faith itself. “I begin by believing despite doubt; I end by believing all the more firmly because of doubt” (p. 15). “Doubt, so conceived, becomes not an impediment, but a goad to reinvestigate and deepen cognitive faith assertions” (ibid.).

When facing a contentious topic, such as Biblical criticism, the voice of spurious doubt might question the worth of the endeavor. The voice of methodological doubt may inspire growth in knowledge, as one wonders about the background of Biblical criticism, the responses, and the key figures. The voice of substantive doubt poses the greatest threat – the voice that moves towards rethinking the entire religious project, the providence of the Bible, and one’s own life. This voice can be generative as well, and can expand the confines of one’s available religious reality. In Gil’s words:

Methodological doubt is part of the acquisition of knowledge. Substantive doubt is part of living a life of faith. Substantive doubt feels the pull and push of emotions, the frustrations of life in all of its complexities. When a child dies tragically, substantive doubts asks why. If that is the end of the conversation, substantive doubt damages faith. If it is part of the healing or at least coping process, and it merges into a stronger faith, substantive doubt has enhanced religious life. Rabbi Lamm’s insight is the validation of substantive doubt when it strengthens faith.

Here too we might go further – perhaps substantive doubt can be worthwhile independent of its relationship with faith. Perhaps part of having a perspective of faith demands an ability to engage in doubts, to enter doubts, and to find the possibilities afforded therein. Living a life of curious faith creates opportunities to rethink postulates once simple to us and reaffirm our

own faith and humility in the face of the unknown. When facing new perspectives and sets of questions, we are faced with challenges and opportunities. Rav Kook spoke best to this responsibility offered by the new, when he said “the old, renew, and the new, sanctify.” What would it mean to sanctify the new? How might the tools of Biblical criticism be sanctified? Perhaps the very act of opening up to the question, moving towards a stance of questioning faith – a faith strong enough to endure questions – constitutes the first step.

Discussing these topics demands humility, curiosity, and faith. With the right perspective, we hope to grow as humans from our engagement with life’s heaviest questions. We might murmur the desperate prayer of Nina Simone as we do:

| I’m just a soul whose intentions are good
| Oh Lord, please don’t let me be misunderstood