

Watering the Weeds – Changing the system

by Rabbi Micha Berger

I

When a pharmaceutical company tests a new drug, they cannot simply look at its effects on an individual. After all, they cannot know how this particular patient would have fared without the drug and thus lack a basis for direct comparison with the results of how he fared with it. Instead, these tests are statistical. The researcher looks at two populations: one that uses the new drug and one that does not – the control group. If the population that uses the drug has fewer outbreaks or symptoms than the control group, then we know the drug works. For example, even if outbreaks occur during the test period in as little as 10% of the control population but only among 5% of those receiving the drug treatment, we conclude that the drug is helping the entire population – even those 90% who otherwise would not show the more measurable symptoms with or without the drug.

The goals of Torah observance can be viewed in a number of ways, but the basics are generally defined as follows. A life of observance is one of seeking closeness to the Almighty to emulate His Perfection. Torah ennobles and refines the person who observes it.

This means that the Torah actually makes a testable claim. Chazal call the Torah a “*sam hachaim*” – an elixir of life. Would our “drug test” protocol recommend following the Torah as we witness its results manifest among those who observe it currently, relative to those who do not?

As in the test of a new drug, we cannot really see the effect of following the Torah on an individual. We have no idea what anyone would be like had they not been exposed to a life of Torah and *mitzvos*, so we cannot say how much more refined they are now as a result of being blessed with such exposure. Instead, we could assess the effects of Torah observance using a parallel technique to that used in medicine, as summarized above. Here too, we can compare the two groups of people who on average are similar except regarding the one factor we are testing.

Unlike the pharmaceutical company’s test, there is a basic difficulty in measuring the symptoms. Without performing a systematic study, how do we get statistics on unethical behavior, unaltered by differences in the likelihood of people in each community reporting the events?

Realize that the claim being made about the Torah is an extreme one. The difference between living blindly and following the Truth is immense, and disparate ramifications should reflect this difference. For our claim to be true, we must see significant, tangible differences in ethical behavior in our communities compared to others that aspire for what they believe to be their higher callings, have similar incomes, etc. If our abuse and other crime statistics are not clearly superior to those of communities which are not Torah observant, – especially after we correct for

other socio-economic factors, examine other faith communities, and account for other variables – it would be experimental evidence that what the mainstay of our community is practicing does not fit the Torah’s self-description. In truth, the difficulty in obtaining statistics may be offset by how pronounced the claimed effect should be. The Torah is describing a uniqueness that should be self-evident and obvious at first glance, without requiring a systematic study.

How would we fare in such a test?

The year began with a friend lamenting about a then-recent National Public Radio story on sexual abuse among Chassidim (or perhaps “Ultra-Orthodox” in general; the reporter was inconsistent). The NPR’s story seemed to him to imply that abuse was more common among the Chassidim of Williamsburg than other communities. Since then, the New York Times published an article comparing the problem of pedophilic rabbis in the Orthodox community with the Catholic Church’s well-known pedophile problem. And at the time I write this, the news is discussing a rabbi who was recorded on the phone using his authority over a prospective convert to manipulate her into sexual encounters. With all of these incidents, not only does the quantity of criminals and seemingly high incidence of such crimes raise difficult questions, but the frequent lack of outrage and response from those who knew about the crimes is also a sign of a culture that lacks the ideal or even basic moral refinement.

This phenomenon is not limited to the realm of sexual deviance. In the months since my friend’s distress, one informant brought numerous *rabbanim* into the news with tales of fiscal malfeasance, including a *rav* who was browbeating and threatening potential organ “donors,” pocketing for himself the vast majority of the money from coerced organ sales. In an unrelated story, a Chassidic *rebbe* pleaded guilty to tax fraud as a means of supporting his *kollel*, and 102 of his Chassidim face sentencing. This same year also saw a scandal that implies someone was knowingly importing hundreds of *shaatnez* garments to make *tallisos* which were popular in various American communities, echoing a story from a few years ago when a man known in his community for giving *daf yomi* classes and *leining Torah* was found to have been selling *treif* chickens as if kosher, for years. And on the day-to-day level, can we claim that honesty in how we report our taxes and conduct our businesses is a hallmark of contemporary Orthodox culture?

I would not say these stories prove that problems in our community are worse than the norm in other communities. With so many children in our community, a smaller percentage of victims would still translate into more cases overall, and besides, what I have presented thus far is anecdotal. Nonetheless, whether we are worse off or equal to other communities does not change the fact that serious problems need addressing.

I am not denying the existence of many great people who do show those signs of holiness the Torah can produce in a person – from our great *rabbanim* to the numerous, less known and less publicly visible people who work for various charities and free-loan organizations and are involved in other major *chessed* projects. However, given the prevalence of these news headlines, indicative of “symptom outbreaks,” there is little indication that what we perceive as a community and a culture of Torah observance is actually embodying what our sages described as

the “*eitz hachaim*” – the tree of life. Surely we constitute a society with many special and holy people; yet we do not seem to demonstrate this as a whole nor achieve a level commensurate with the Torah’s lofty expectations.

The bottom line for our statistical test is that ethical lapses by Orthodox Jews compared to members of other religious communities is not fewer by an obvious margin. The very fact that there is room for discussion and a lack of obvious distinction already contradicts what we would expect of the difference between following a false faith and embracing the Truth.

This critical issue does not merely invoke pragmatic questions; it harbors the potential to cause a crisis of faith – for the victims certainly and for the rest of us. If we alone follow the Truth, why is it not self-evident in the ethics of our community? Can we be surprised that it leads many victims *r”l* of the improper behavior to conclude the Torah does not hold the truth? Or that we have “kids at risk” who perceive the gap between expectations and results as evidence of hypocrisy? The Torah describes an appealing ethical community that people would be inspired to join, not something we would have to promote and sell. And yet, despite all our efforts at *kiruv*, the intermarriage rate in the Diaspora is sixty times the rate of *baalei teshuvah* choosing to join Orthodoxy.

II

There are two ways to phrase this somewhat radical but compelling conclusion:

As I put it above, we could say the evidence indicates that what the majority of the Orthodox community practices is not actually Torah as it was intended. Otherwise, why is the more observable, criminal end of our “bell curve” of ethical behavior not dramatically different from those of our host communities? And why so often is it the very people who we see as excelling in those *mitzvos* at the forefront of Orthodoxy – studying and teaching Torah, *davening*, *Shabbos* and *kashrus* – committing heinous crimes?

Alternatively, it is possible to say that we do follow the Torah. However, the Torah is “only” a tool. Possessing the tool is no guarantee that one will actually utilize it as Hashem intended, and this is the reason for our community’s lack of spiritual health or ethical prowess.

It seems to me the two formulations differ on the breadth of what we mean by the term, “Torah.” In both explanations, we are trying to describe a community that observes *mitzvos* and studies Torah with *yir’as Shamayim*, *simchah shel mitzvah*, *hislahavus*, intent to reach *qedushah*, – awe of the One in heaven, joy of the mitzvah, passion, an aspiration for holiness – etc. You can refer to this basic level as observing the Torah but not fully utilizing it for the task of “walking before [Him] and being whole,” or you can refer to these preliminary criteria alone as not really observing the Torah since by definition it must be implemented in its full sense for true observance. The difference is terminology, not substance.

I realize some may find this a difficult idea to accept in either form, and thus I already labeled it “radical.” However, we must realize that the alternative is an inescapable crisis of faith. This

crisis is well-documented as common among abuse victims, many of whom relinquish fealty to the Torah, rejecting not just the parent, *rebbe*, or other assailant but the lifestyle and beliefs they stood for as well. For the rest of us, the question is just as real, if not necessarily as emotionally urgent.

If we really are following the Torah, why aren't our communities more free of scandal – and more outraged and responsive when scandal does occur?

III

In truth, Chazal already explained our problem. The Talmud already tells us that embracing the Torah alone is not sufficient for it to serve as a “*sam hachaim*” – elixir of life:

R' Yehoshua ben Levi said: What is meant by, “And this is the Torah which Moses placed.” If one merits, it becomes for him an elixir of life; if one does not merit, it becomes for him an elixir of death. And this idea is what Rava said: If you work with it, it is for him an elixir of life; if you do not work with it, it is for him an elixir of death. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachameini said: Rabbi Yonasan found an implication [of the verses]. It says, “The appointments of G-d are straight, they gladden the heart,” (Tehillim 19:9) and it says, “The word of G-d is trying,” (Tehillim 18:31). If one merits, it makes him happy; if one does not merit, he is tried. Reish Laqish said: From the essence of the [second] verse we learn this – if he is worthy, he is tried for [and found deserving of] life; if he is not worthy, he is tried for death. (Yuma 72b)

Rava's statement coincides exactly with our second formulation of the problem. The Torah is a *sam hachaim*, a medicine for spiritual ills, if and only if we work with it. The Torah is a tool, but without a conscious effort beyond *mitzvos* to use the tool fully to serve Hashem, we will not get the intended benefit from it. Thus, mere observance is not enough.

As this *gemara* implies, the problem is not simply that we are performing “*mitzvos anashim melumadah*,” – the commandments of men who learned by rote (Yeshaiiah 29:13) – without the necessary passion or intention. If it were simply an issue of insufficient motivation, then the dictum, “*shemitokh shelo lishmah, ba lishmah*,” – from within [doing a mitzvah] not for its own sake, one comes to do it for its own sake – would apply. The connection between action and emotion is cyclic. Usually we think of actions as expressions of emotion, but it is equally true that action causes and reinforces emotion. As the *Chinukh* puts it, “*ha'adam nif'al lefi pe'ulaso*,” – a person is made according to his deeds (mitzvah #99, c.f. #16, #40, #41, #96, #264, #299, #324). Thus, a community that follows the Torah, even from habit without depth of feeling, should still gradually develop people who do so *lishmah*, eventually making their *tzelem Elokim*, their image of G-d, manifest. What Rava describes here is not a lack of zeal or passion when lifting the tool of Torah, but an altogether failure to use Torah for the task for which it was given. We see this also in another *gemara*:

R. Chananiel bar Papa said: What is meant by, “Hear, for I will speak princely things,” (Mishlei 8:6)? Why are the words of the Torah compared to a prince? To tell you: just as a prince has power of life and death, so too the words of the Torah [have potential for] life or death. As Rava said: to those who go to the right side of it, it is a medicine of life; to those who go to its left, it is a deadly poison. (Shabbos 88b)

We again encounter Rava, who describes a difference between two types of connection with Torah and their disparate effects on the people involved. The Torah is only life-giving when the person chooses to use it to “go to the right.” Rava requires that before we engage in Torah, we must choose to work with the Torah, and the chosen work must be using it to “go to the right.”

In order to use this essential requirement pragmatically to improve our own lives, undoubtedly we first need to attain clarity about the meaning of “right.” That being said, we see that Chazal did answer our potential crisis of faith. Our sages knew that following Torah and *mitzvos* is insufficient to produce people who emulate Hashem’s ways, who are in His “Image” and serve Him. This is beyond the “*lo lishmah*” of a people who know the goal but do not always act on it. There is an implication here that we do not know in which direction to proceed.

Judaism’s claim is not that Torah and *mitzvos* by themselves produce moral people, or that following Torah with *mitzvos* is a complete definition of living according to the Truth. In other words, there is a preparation necessary for one to become ennobled by Torah, and if someone does not engage in this preparation, they are likely to abuse its teachings and experience spiritual poison.

IV

The Vilna Gaon, as quoted in *Even Sheleimah*, is specific as to what this preparation entails:

The relationship of Torah to the soul: A comparison to rain for the ground, it causes what was planted there to grow, whether a *sam hachaim* or a *sam hamaves*, a poison. Similarly, Torah causes what is in his heart to grow. If what is in his heart is good, his *yir’ah* will grow; if what is in his heart is a “root sprouting poison weed and wormwood” then the bitterness that is in his head will grow. As it is written, “the righteous will walk in it, and sinners will stumble in it” (Hoshea 14:10, as explained by Chazal), and as it is written, “To those who go to the right side of it, it is a medicine of life; to those who go to its left, it is a deadly poison,” (Shabbos 88b).

Therefore, one must cleanse one’s heart every day, before study and after it, of impure attitudes and *middos*, with a fear of sin and with good deeds.

This [process] is euphemistically called “going to the bathroom.” It was about this that they hinted when they said, “Going to the bathroom is greater than all of it,” (Berakhos 8a) and, “Whoever spends a long time in the bathroom, it is lofty,” (Ibid 55a). Also, when they said, “Get up early and go, in the evening go” (Ibid 62a), they intend to say that in his youth and in his old age a man should not distance himself a great distance from his Creator so that he cannot be helped.

One must inspect which evil *middah* – characteristic – is strong within him, and after that, clean it out. Unlike like those men of desire who wallow in what they want, and the desire grows greater. It requires much slyness, to be “sly in *yir’ah*,” (Abaye, Ibid 17a) in opposition to, “the snake was sly,” (Bereishis 3:1). One who is lazy in weeding out an evil *middah* is not helped by all the legal fences and protections that he practices. For with any disease which is not cured from within... even the fence of the Torah, which protects and saves, will be useless because of his laziness (c.f. Rava, Sotah 21a; Bei’ur haGra Mishlei 24:31, 19:15, 25:4). (*Even Sheleima* 1:11)

The Gaon compares learning Torah to watering a garden. If you start with desirable plants, it will produce healthier, more beautiful plants. But if you water weeds, you will only produce more weeds. Learning Torah without attention to character refinement will simply produce more forceful personalities with bad *middos*. As such, the Vilna Gaon addresses our dilemma from the end of section III, shedding light on the underlying causes of our crippling lack of direction, which prevents us from using the Torah for the proper purpose. To gain holiness through the Torah, there is a prerequisite to consciously work on eliminating our destructive *middos*. We must have a program to “weed our gardens” before watering our souls with Torah. This is how we join Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s class of the meritorious, for whom the Torah is a *sam hachaim*.

Do we make this a conscious goal in our current lifestyles?

The Vilna Gaon’s student, Rav Chaim Volozhiner, offers his own metaphor for the relationship between *yir’as Shamayim* and Torah:

According to the vast arrangement of the silo of *yir’ah* that the person prepared for himself, it is through that arrangement that the grain of Torah will be able to enter and be protected within him, according to how much he strengthened his silo.

It is [like] a father who divides grain for his sons. He divides and gives each one a measure of grain to match what the son’s silo can hold, which he [the son] prepared beforehand. For even if the father wishes and his hand is open to give him more, the son cannot receive more since his silo is not big enough to hold more. So too the father cannot now give him more. And if the son did not prepare even a small silo, then also the father can not give him anything at all – for he has no guarded place where it will remain with him.

So too Hashem, may His name be blessed: His “Hand” is open, as it were, to constantly bestow every person according to his reward with much wisdom and extra understanding – when it will be preserved by them and will be tied onto the slate of their hearts. Everything [is given] according to the volume of one’s “silo.” And if a person does not prepare even a small silo, which is that he does not, heaven forbid, have within him any *yir’ah* whatsoever for Him, may He be blessed, so too He, may He be blessed, will not bestow any wisdom at all, since it will not be preserved by him. For his Torah would become disgusting, heaven forbid, as our Rabbis, whose

memories are a blessing, said. It is about this that the verse says, “the beginning of wisdom is *yir’as Hashem*,” (*Tehillim* 111). (*Nefesh haChaim* book IV, ch. 5)

The Vilna Gaon taught that without eliminating one’s poor *middos* first, Torah will reinforce those flaws rather than help refine the soul. Of our two descriptions of our communal problem, he is speaking in terms of the second one; the Torah is a tool for us to become the holy people Hashem created us to be, but the tool has to be used appropriately or else woefully limited.

Rav Chaim Volozhiner says, without first developing *yir’ah*, the positive *middah* of keeping the importance of G-d and the role He made us for in mind, we will not retain the Torah either, even on a basic level. His metaphor is akin to our first formulation – that without *yir’as Shamayim*, we cannot even embody the Torah we are trying to study, and thus only full implementation with developed *yir’ah* can even be termed true observance of Torah.

Refinement requires conscious effort in and of itself. Without first “weeding” and “building the silo,” we are left with nothing.

V

Sadly, I think these descriptions of the Gaon and Rav Chaim Volozhiner are borne out by our experience. We live in a culture where few seek to understand the ideal at any depth greater than what they absorbed in childhood/adolescent schooling. There are few attempts at a systematic study of *aggadita*; those parts of the Talmud are often outright skipped. Who spends time developing a means to tie those lessons to one’s observance of *mitzvos* and lifestyle? *Aggadita*’s role has been reduced to nice *vertlach* on the *parashah* or a thought of Chazal with no grand picture, no grounding, and no attempt to define a target to which one should aim their lives. Even worse, the goal in such rare and hollow encounters with *aggadita* is too often to reduce *medrash* to a fantastic tale for the purpose of keeping younger students’ attention.

I am therefore suggesting a need for change on two levels.

First, we must foster more active development of ideals, idealism, and spirituality.

Second, we must have programs designed to enable and facilitate becoming the kind of person those ideals describe.

The first step, defining our ideals, is the far easier of the two. It requires producing curricula for our schools and adult education programs that analyze Jewish Thought as explained by our sages, *gaonim*, *rishonim*, and *acharonim*, incorporating all the variety of opinion and disputes that we expect to work through when studying *halacha*. While we may feel temporarily satisfied by panacean solutions to life’s problems which synthetically tie everything into a nice bow, such misguided and naive cure-alls will not provide us with the strength to survive the vicissitudes of life. We must learn, as Iyov did, that often the question exists to be grappled with and not necessarily get answered.

We cannot speak of “weeding gardens” or “building a silo” without spending the time identifying the weeds and learning the needs and goals of “grain storage.” How can I develop myself to be the person Hashem created me to be without having a clear conception of who that person is? How am I supposed to relate to the Almighty, other people, and my own soul? Why am I here, and what is Hashem asking of me? Only upon addressing these essential questions can I even begin to think about becoming the person who can succeed at achieving the foundational goals envisioned by their answers. Once someone has the ingredients, they can find their priorities and values in life, each of us *al pi darko* – according to our own path, abilities, desires, and inclinations.

Then we need to learn how to live up to and internalize those ideals, to “weed our gardens” and build up our “silos.” This step is far more difficult. *Middos* are best learned by example. We repeatedly produce *middos* curricula for our schools but without a culture of refinement already in place, and without role models and peers, the knowledge will have minimal impact on the students’ responses and decisions. Knowing that *yir’as Shamayim*, fear and awe of the One in heaven, is of critical importance is not the same as actually feeling that awe and being driven to express it. *Middos* need very experiential programming, with examples that impress on an emotional level, not a curriculum of information to be conveyed. Even that must be done carefully, for we are not only trying to impress our youth with the importance of “*chessed* projects” to do acts of kindness. We are trying to produce *baalei chessed*, people with a passion for sharing, helping, and connecting to others.

Programming must simultaneously be provided by the synagogues for parents. Aside from needing to improve ourselves as adults for our own sake, we are also powerless to change the culture for the next generation without providing more role models in the current one. Not only offering classes, but practical exercises, systems for supporting each other in resolutions to change, and other hands-on tools must be explored. Fortunately, the Mussar Movement as well as the more recent Self-Help Movement of Western Society has each explored this territory before us.

A historical example illustrates one possible first step I offer up in order to foster dialogue and further analysis of these issues. When the immigrant generations reached the United States, *Shabbos* observance declined drastically. Some synagogues formed around groups of *shomerei Shabbos* who wished to have fellow observers as their fellow members. Some included in their membership agreement an acknowledgement that if the rabbi and board found a member did not try to observe *Shabbos*, this person’s membership was forfeit. We are trying to reinforce ethics. Why not include a similar clause in our synagogue memberships, requiring that all members stand up to certain standards of fiscal ethics and overall honesty? If nothing else, it serves as a strong statement that will define the congregation’s culture. Aside from this minor suggestion, we certainly need to elaborate on the problematic lack of ethics in our culture and its root causes with deeper analysis and discussion so we may arrive at suitable and promising solutions to properly address these communal ailments.

With such work and changes, our worship of Hashem can be enhanced in at least three ways:

First, at the moment when temptation strikes, we will possess the tools to make the right decision. Without working on one's *middos*, the observance of the “duties of the limbs” will always remain imperfect.

Second, there are also the “duties of the heart,” as Rabbeinu Bachya named his text. Refining one's ethics, i.e. controlling one's temper, curbing desires for sex, power, control over others, and other destructive urges, is itself among the 613 *mitzvos*. This is embodied in, “And you will do the good and the honest in the eyes of G-d,” (Devarim 6:18), and “You shall be holy, for I am holy,” (Vayiqra 19:2), “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” (ibid v. 18), and “You shall love Hashem your G-d with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources,” (Devarim 6:5).

Lastly, working to become a refined and holy person is the entire goal of the Torah. Hashem introduces His covenant with Abraham by telling him to “walk yourself before Me and be whole,” (Bereishis 17:1). Thus, perfecting one's ability to relate to Hashem and to other people is the goal of the entire observance, not merely a means to fulfill other *mitzvos* and doing *mitzvos* themselves. This goal is to make manifest the Image of the Divine within each of us.

“*Derekh erez* comes before Torah,” (Vayiqra Rabba 9:3). Twenty six generations passed from the creation of ethics with Adam until the giving of the Torah to teach us this lesson. We cannot master the material of Torah without first engaging in its prerequisite.

Megillas Esther tells us, “*laYhudim haysa orah vesimchah vesason viyqar*,” – for the Jews there was light, happiness, joy and preciousness. Rabbi Yehudah (Megillah 13b) explains that *orah* – light – refers to Torah, *simchah* – happiness – is Yom Tov, *sason* – joy – is *bris milah*, and *yeqar* – preciousness – is *tefillin*.

So why could not the *megillah* simply say, “for the Jews there was Torah, holidays, *milah* and *tefillin*.” Why did it encode the words?

In the first Temple we had Torah, but it was not a light to us. We observed the laws of Yom Tov but found no happiness in it. We kept *milah* and wore *tefillin* but with no joy or sense of preciousness. With Purim there was a new acceptance of the Torah, one which based observance upon its underlying *yir'as Shamayim*. And with that came redemption.

Until we learn enough *derekh erez* to be able to identify the weeds in our souls, and until we have enough *yir'as Shamayim* to hold or even truly observe our Torah – and then actually do work to move that knowledge the single *ammah*, or cubit, from our heads to our hearts – we do not actually hold the *sam hachaim*, the elixir of life, that following Hashem's Truth could and should be.

Rabbi Micha Berger is a father and husband, and sees in those roles much of the expression of his Judaism, and his Mussar work. He was a student of Rav Dovid Lifshitz, the *Suvalker Rav*, at Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan (a YU affiliate). From this contact, Rabbi

Berger took away a dream to infuse his Jewish practice with the blend of love, Mussar and Jewish thought that marked Rav Dovid's Torah practice. To that end, he established the AishDas Society, a community of Orthodox Jews that uses Jewish Thought and Mussar and other tools to create a synthesis of the "aish," the fire of inspiration and faith, with the "das" of halachic observance, to create a Judaism that both fully is and yet is greater than either of the parts. Rabbi Berger also teaches Mussar and Middos work to non-Orthodox audiences. Professionally, he is a computer programmer in the financial industry.

The author would like to thank Reb William Markis for the polish he added to this essay, and for helping him reach clarity on a few of the points made.

It would be an oxymoron for a piece about the need to pay more attention to our middos not to include haqaras hatov for a proofreader who IMHO did far more for me than just proofreading.