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FELLOWSHIP, RECOGNITION, AND/OR DEATH

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By temperament I am the least postmodern of people, and sometimes doubt if I have even satisfied the prerequisite of once having been modern. By this I do not mean to feign obliviousness to the manifold phenomena associated with modernism and its aftermath: secularization and the subsequent loss of faith in secularism as an absolute; the dogmas of rationalism whose breakdown has made so difficult the recovery of reasonableness; the turning away from God and the desperation of the last man; the arrogant dismissal of textual reasoning as a value, followed by the discovery that the text with which one wishes belatedly to interact interpretatively has become intractably ambiguous, locked in a hermeneutically charmed circle, accessible only with the aid of laborious methods of inquiry, the ultimate purpose of which is far from evident. In my own religious life, however, I seem to experience these phenomena as peripheral to the main business of Torah study, prayer, and interaction with my *mishpachah ha-lomedet* ("learning family"). The phenomena nonetheless are part of my intellectual horizon, and from time to time intrude, with varying forcefulness, upon my world, requiring my attention.

One such perplexity occurred to me as I read Robert Gibbs' careful analysis of the question, "Why reason?" According to Gibbs, the question "singles out a 'me' who is obliged to respond." At first blush, Gibbs seems to be taking it for granted that the "me" of whom he speaks is readily identifiable. Ordinarily I would not be inclined to stir up trouble. But whether I like it or not there are frequent situations in which my identity as a respondent is not clear. I am often questioned as a person playing a particular social role–as a professor of more than one academic discipline (or their intersection), as a faculty member at a certain institution, who speaks for specific committees, as an Orthodox rabbi, as a believing Jew, and so on. It is not always clear to me, and it is often unclear to my interlocutor, exactly who is being asked to respond. Moreover, I may decide to respond in one role, when the questioner expects me to respond in another role, either because I have misunderstood what the questioner wants, or because I disagree with the questioner's assessment of these roles, and choose to answer in my own way.

(According to another possible reading of Gibbs, the "me" who is obliged to respond is not a metaphysical given, but is picked out and defined by the questioner. Unfortunately, this doesn't solve the problem: The questioner's intention is not always transparent. Furthermore, there remain circumstances in which the respondent may correctly claim to grasp the purport of the question better than the questioner.)

At a practical level, one may respond that my difficulty need not impede the process of question and answer. That is because, as Gibbs goes on to observe, every why is only a prelude to another why. If the process is infinite, then where one starts is perhaps a matter of indifference. At the end of the day all is excavated; "we shall not cease from exploration." But this does not put my difficulty to rest. For in real life the process does not go on indefinitely. There comes a point at which fatigue, or the brevity of life, or tact, brings the string of questions to a cautious halt, and the tentative silence settles down to become permanent.

But the question about the stability of the "me" who is questioned transcends the interpersonal relationship. The process of reflection, my self-questioning, presupposes an unpredictability as to the answer, an

unpredictability that shapes the further questioning I put to myself, and the stage at which the process of self-questioning comes to a (temporary) halt.

And then there is another kind of indeterminate questioning that occurs in a variety of relationships. There are moments, for all of us, when the answer to "Why do you say this?" is that some other person(s) said it, or wrote it. The authority we bestow on the other may come from some epistemic quality–he or she knows better than we do. It may derive from consent–as when we acquiesce in political or administrative arrangements. It may be connected to our love or adoration of the other. Or there may be a confluence of several factors. The situation to which I am pointing is most radically exhibited in the relationship to God and/or to Torah. For the pious individual, there is, of course, a sense in which the ultimate source and justification of reasoning is divine revelation.

The fundamentalist answers that one text is the truth. For such a reader, the justification does not address the questioner..." So asserts Gibbs, and moves on. The reality is more complicated. To begin with, as we have just noted, Gibbs' fundamentalist's appeal to the text can itself become the interface at which a new question is presented. It is possible to treat propositions about divine discourse as no more and no less than a set of facts about the world, but that opens up the question of why divine discourse has the authority it has. Moreover–and this point has been much discussed–the appeal to the text cannot evade responsibility for the way the text is interpreted. This is particularly so when the validity of many crucial interpretations is regarded as a contingent matter (as when disputed interpretations are all revered as "the words of the living God"[1]), when the genres of revelation include narrative and poetic forms whose message must needs be indirect by its very nature, and when a significant part of the revered corpus consists of rabbinic enactment rather than directly revealed statements. As R. Meir Simha of Dvinsk observed over a century ago, that God commands one to obey the rabbinically interpreted

[1] Cf. b. 'Erubin 13b, b. Gittin 6b, b. Yevamot 14a.

system entails that conforming to a particular injunction taught by rabbinic Judaism is obedience to God's will, but does not entail that God willed that particular injunction.[2]

It is of course possible to shift the locus of revelation from the original text to some body of expanded and interpreted material. All traditional Jews, myself included, are committed, tacitly or overtly, to the general conviction that divine assistance (*siyya'ta d'Shemaya*) is present in the historical unfolding of Torah discourse. This does not, however, translate into equal commitment to the sempiternal truth of each detail.

Lastly, there is the very fact that the individual committed to the authority of the religious text, like the one who has received a truth from another human being, has not invented an answer from the depths of his or her heart, as it were, but has adopted an answer in the wake of an encounter with the other. Inevitably the individual will not always exist in a simple relationship with the truth that he or she proclaims. Quite apart from the vicissitudes that affect my relationship with myself, the taking up of a response from another implicates me in a relationship with the other, and to a relationship with the message that the other has entrusted to me. There are times when one identifies completely both with the other and with the content of his (or His) answer, but there are moments when the Word appeals neither to my intellect nor to my inclinations, when it lays undigested on the tongue. Between passive obedience and total harmony, one may pass through intermediate stages of worshipful striving to understand and to appropriate. These complications must be added to the nuances of commitment and integration adumbrated in the previous paragraph.

Peter Ochs surveys at length some threads he deems instructive for the future of Textual Reasoning. My opening remarks link up with his review of the debate, initiated by Shaul Magid and Jacob Meskin, ignited by last year's "Lieberman moment." Most of the attention was devoted to Lieberman's putative views on feminism and Orthodoxy. I don't recall whether the TR list analyzed the other Jewish issue on which Lieberman

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[2] Meshekh Hokhma to Deut.17.

was grilled by Imus-in-the-Morning–Judaism's opposition to intermarriage. Based on the information we have, I think we would be safe to assume that Lieberman (the "historical" Lieberman) is comfortable in both egalitarian and non-egalitarian *minyanim*, that he does not recite *She-lo asani isha* in private (as he told Imus) but would probably go along with it if he were leading prayers in a Shul where the *minhag* was to recite the controversial *berakha*. Based on what we know of sociology, plus Lieberman's later clarification, it would probably be safe to assume that his broadcast abrogation of the intermarriage prohibition was intended, not as one man's Judaism, but as an evasive response to a politically loaded question. It was not unlike the response tendered by the rabbis of the Napoleonic Sanhedrin to the French emperor's annoyance with Jewish separatism. (Under the sovereignty of *vox populi*, a candidate for office may well feel, in Mr. Imus's presence, like a Jewish notable facing the imperial will of Napoleon.)

In any event, Shaul Magid did not find Senator Lieberman's flexibility on feminism in the Synagogue satisfactory. If the accepted halakhic practice in Orthodox Synagogues is morally objectionable, as he holds (on grounds that he assumes that Lieberman would agree with) and in the absence of adequate justification for suspending the moral objection, an easy-going backslapping tolerance of the practice cannot be admired. As a matter of principle, and here I am in harmony with Magid, Lieberman's *modus vivendi* is not exempt from questioning. I would not speculate on the content of the historical Lieberman's response (it would surely be less abstruse than anything I could cook up on his behalf), but for it to be complete, if not necessarily convincing, it would have to take into account the considerations raised above.

In passing, it puzzles me that not much was said, among our own people, about Lieberman's verbal concession on intermarriage. From the viewpoint of humanistic, egalitarian, liberal values, as these ideas have been understood for the past two centuries, and continue to be understood today, the highest personal spiritual fulfillment is that attained by romantic love. Our world is one in which enlightened people regard discriminating on the basis of religious differences as reactionary. It is also

a world in which all-conquering romantic love, or even ordinary happy marital stability, are hard to come by, especially among the enlightened, so that it would seem churlish to rule out marriages that promise compatibility, simply because the partners grew up with differing sectarian legacies. To stigmatize such marriages, to deny them the support and encouragement of organized religion, seems to be a far more offensive blow at enlightened culture than not caring enough, one way or the other, about the moral implications of Synagogue arrangements. (Knowing that my question tracks Hannah Arendt's argument in her notorious "Reflections on Little Rock," does not, I think, affect its pertinence.[3]) Perhaps there is little debate about this because the issue, from a halakhic perspective, is open and shut. Is it possible that the reason is different, that we can afford to discuss *mehitza* because everyone fundamentally grasps the other side's position, so that one can move on to look for new insights, while the question of intermarriage may expose an abyss whose depth we hesitate to plumb?

Earlier I listed, among the factors that bring the process of interrogation to a halt, such commonplace considerations as fatigue, lack of time or concern for personal privacy. The historical Lieberman, hailed before the TR inquisition, might excuse himself on the grounds of the former, and insisting on the latter during his national campaign might have spared him the questioning of Mr. Imus. This might be as true for a scholarly and philosophically avid Lieberman as for an active politician. Auden wrote that "orthodoxy is reticence;" however that might be, the hush of reticence is as much a part of authentic communication as the boom of discourse. Overall, I think, the participants in TR discussions have behaved well in this respect (even in the tense exchanges growing out of the "situation" in Israel). Nonetheless, the question of how far and intrusively to press one's questioning deserves more explicit consideration than we have given it.

Famed as the virtuoso rainmaker whose insistent prayers forced open the heavens, Honi ha-Meaggel (the Circle-Drawer) slept for seventy years,

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[3] Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," *Dissent* 6:1 (1959), 45-56.

and awoke into a world where nobody knew him. His last prayer was to leave that world, and Rava commented: "Either fellowship or death."[4] At the beginning of his *Covenantal Rights*, David Novak offers a Habermasian gloss on the story: "one of the early Rabbis despaired when he found himself in a community where he could no longer engage in discourse because his own voice was no longer recognized there."[5] The full story invites a more complex judgment. When Honi reappeared, he was not snubbed or silenced in the Bet Midrash. His intellectual resemblance to himself was duly noted and welcomed. The problem was not that he wasn't recognized as a valuable individual, but that he wasn't recognized as the old Honi. Pseudo-Rashi comments: "They did not give him the respect he had enjoyed before."

Was this a fate worse than death? For the Honi of the Talmud it apparently was. Yet one can imagine an alternative outcome in which Honi does not have to die. Could he not have swallowed his pride and worked on anonymously, or rebuilt a new identity, as so many 20th century refugees did? Could he not have provided his generation-spanning insights to the world of his grandchildren, even as he wryly and ruefully brooded, in solitude, on the chronological warp that nourished his old-new wisdom?

Perhaps the gift of reticence was withheld from Honi. Like a romantic innocent he may have been unable to undertake an intellectual discourse in the course of which any essential component of his identity was veiled. Perhaps this will to familiarity was part of the secret of his efficacious prayer, the petition transparent and frank before God like a treeless plain. In a community where he knew everyone, and everyone knew him, he might thus flourish in the Bet Midrash. But for the unknown ambassador of a distant era, who needed to overcome, or sidestep or bridge the strangeness between himself and his new colleagues, even in a society as

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[4] B. Ta'anit 23a.

[5] David Novak, *Covenantal Rights: A Study in Jewish Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4.

homogeneous (relative to our own) as that of Hasmonean Judea, such presumption was fatal. If he could not maneuver within the mask, if he could not learn to tolerate an art of questioning that stopped short of the ultimate "who are you?" he could no longer continue to live.