

Judaism the ISMs
Judaism, Haredism and Scientism

Coronavirus and the haredim – opinion, By YITZ GREENBERG APRIL 22, 2020

....Our hearts go out to the members of the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel and worldwide. Haredim are found in disproportionate numbers among the sick and the dead of the coronavirus pandemic.

They are civilian casualties of the cruel, unrelenting war on all humanity being waged by the coronavirus. The fact that this war is not driven by antisemitism (as was the Holocaust), i.e. it is not directed at Jews specifically, makes it no less heinous, and the victims no less innocent.

Numerous people have angrily blamed haredim for the high losses in the community, arguing that their leaders initially rejected medical instructions. Various members of the ultra-Orthodox community have continued group religious experiences and Torah learning after health authorities called for social isolation. Those religious activities spread the disease much more in their midst.

However, before the Holocaust, many hassidic leaders told their followers not to go to Israel or America. During the catastrophe, many advised against flight (especially when done in cooperation with Zionists), and strongly opposed resistance.

The outcome was a much higher percentage of deaths among haredim (approaching 90% average). But nobody would think of condemning the victims for following bad advice and policies. **Bad judgment does not justify rejection or hatred of innocent victims. Haredim are flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone of the Jewish people. They deserve compassion and care at this time of their troubles.**

Proper understanding of the haredi situation includes acknowledging the legitimate factors that increased their vulnerability to the pandemic. Haredi families are larger and they typically live in smaller quarters, which leads to increased contagion. They live a rich, more intense religious communal life. But these experiences multiply unintentional transmission from one infected person to many others.

At the same time, respect for the truth - and commitment to prevent a recurrence - requires that we critique the flawed haredi theology that leads to greater losses in these communities.

#1 - First and foremost, they follow literally the biblical model in which God controls and does everything in history. They firmly believe that as long as humans please God by doing mitzvot, God will defeat their enemies and grant them victory. (See the Exodus from Egypt and the splitting of the Red Sea).

They are oblivious to the main rabbinic interpretation of the Bible's covenant idea - that God has self-limited. God has asked humans to take a more active role in history, with the results depending much more on the people of Israel's efforts. (See the Talmudic interpretation of Purim in which that Exodus/redemption would not have happened unless Esther and Mordechai executed their plans to defeat Haman).

When presented with the question "Should haredi schools be closed to prevent infection?" Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky replied, "God forbid. Learning Torah protects and saves [the Jewish people]." (Talmud Sotah 21A). He dismissed medical considerations because God controls every detail of history.

LEARNING TORAH would please the Lord Who would protect Jewry. This is the same theology that undergirds the haredi refusal to let their youth serve in the Israel Defense Forces. Not tanks and jet fighters but the exempted students learning Torah are the real defense force of the Jewish state.

This theology is refuted by the actual facts of real life. It has not led to catastrophe in the past because 90% of Israelis understand that Israel would be destroyed instantly by its enemies if it did not have an army. The 90% serve their time and give their lives, allowing haredim to be saved from the folly of their interpretation which makes the Torah unlivable for a whole society.

In the coronavirus case this policy - which totally fails in reality - was applied to the community. The consequences are devastating.

#2 - The second serious misinterpretation in haredi theology is to see sickness and natural catastrophes as Divine punishment for sins rather than as natural phenomena.

The Talmud disagrees: "The natural order operates objectively." It does not differentiate between righteous and wicked people. (See Talmud, Avodah Zara 54B). Rabbi Kanievsky was quoted as saying that the virus is a punishment for lashon hara (harmful speech, gossip); that people should stop and repent and the plague would stop....

The flip side of punishment for sin is the haredi teaching that if you are doing a religious act, God will keep you safe. "Those who are agents doing a mitzvah will not be harmed." (See Talmud, Pesachim 8B).

Some haredim allowed themselves to be exposed to coronavirus because God would protect them. (Many Evangelical Christians around the world have done the same). **Given the natural laws and medical evidence of pandemic, this behavior is nothing but magical thinking. Magic claims that through certain words or actions (in this case: religious faith and behaviors) God is "compelled" to do what the practitioner wants.** The Torah treats magic as abhorrent. It constitutes a denial of God's freedom. The Bible insists that no Divine action can be compelled by human gifts, behaviors or tricks. Magical thinking also disrespects God's miraculous creation. It claims to override the objective and dependable system of natural processes and laws.

To protect people's religiosity, haredi rabbinic leaders prohibit secular education and proscribe most Internet as well. As a result, haredi Jews are not equipped to participate in the science and medical fields that are the key areas to prevent and find cures for dangerous pandemics. The side effect of this well-intentioned but wrong way of protecting religious devotion is that the average haredi Jew lacked understanding of the serious threat of the coronavirus and the urgency of taking preventive actions. Unfortunately, the gedolim - the Torah greats - who make the rulings that guide behavior are just as uninformed as their followers....In the past century, the haredi gedolim, overall, were guided by the same defensive insular theological thinking and lack of secular information when they opposed Zionism. This resulted in a community with a more secular culture and exposed their community to the catastrophic Nazi assault.

They should have been turned out of office (as would happen in a democratic political system), or they should have turned in the direction of integrating modern thinking and Jewish religion. Instead, in the name of preserving the religion, they were granted unlimited authority....

COVID-19, Haredi Jewry, and 'Magical' Thinking

During quarantine, we judge the ultra-Orthodox for practicing what other Jews preach

BY SHAUL MAGID

APRIL 30, 2020

At an academic conference some years ago I heard the following joke told by philosopher Slavoj Zizek:

A student went to his philosophy professor's house for a visit. As he knocked on the front door, he noticed there was a horseshoe hanging above the door post. When the professor answered the door, the student said, "Dear professor, why do you have a horseshoe hanging above your door? Everything you taught us would say believing in this stuff in

nonsense.” The professor replied, “Oh yes, I certainly do not believe any of it. But they say it works even if you don’t believe.”

I thought of this joke as I read the many essays about Haredi, or ultra-Orthodox, Jews’ responses to the coronavirus. Many attempts have been made to try to understand, and often criticize, the Haredi community’s lack of expediency in closing yeshivot, enacting social distancing, and heeding medical advice. Many reasons have been given as to why this was so, some more convincing than others. Some attribute their actions to underlying beliefs in the protective character of Torah study, others to the strong focus on communal religious worship. Frequently, we find criticism, often from Modern Orthodox circles, that these beliefs are so embedded in the Haredi world that they have undermined their ability to heed science. Others claim that Haredim’s lack of scientific education made them unprepared to understand what was at stake.

A certain cynical attitude underlies some of these accusations, as if to suggest that Haredi Jews have somehow misinterpreted or misunderstood normative Judaism in ways that resulted in endangering their communities. But what I find more compelling as an explanation is an innate distrust of civil authorities’ ability to judge when a danger is so extreme that it would mandate ceasing from religious activities....

But what has been less examined is the extent to which this dire situation exposes certain fissures in modern iterations of Judaism more generally. It makes plain what we all knew, which was that many Jews who claim fidelity to normative Jewish law and practice, as rooted in the textual tradition, have also fully absorbed the Enlightenment idea that science, or scientific knowledge, represents the most accurate representation of reality—even, or especially, when it conflicts with religious beliefs. **It is certainly true that Haredi leaders misjudged this pandemic and their constituents have paid a high price. However, the Haredim were “negligent” in part because they actually took seriously religious beliefs that many traditional Jews claim to hold. In other words: They really believe it!**

The notion of covenantal reciprocity, that our actions are an answer to a divine command that will evoke divine mercy, runs down the spine of the entire tradition. It does not suggest mitzvot will always protect us as if they are some magical formula; we know this is not the case, as the sages somewhat cynically teach, “there are no rewards for mitzvot in this world.” But this equation is arguably the very operating system of Judaism. Other Jewish communities that pledge fidelity to the tradition are well aware of these rabbinic precepts and this idea. But in actuality, they do not really believe them, not when confronted with scientific counterevidence. And what exactly does that say about the “belief” of the modern Jew?

Now it is certainly true that the rabbinic precept of a life-threatening situation (pikuah nefesh) nullifies all obligations, and Haredim know that as well as non-Haredi Jews. But when exactly the pandemic met the halachically mandated pikuah nefesh is a matter about which there can be some debate. Pikuah nefesh is not a halachic category easily deployed for an entire population, its effects are so far-reaching. In a state of pikuah nefesh, one can eat nonkosher food, desecrate the Sabbath, and eat on Yom Kippur. There is the famous story of Rabbi Israel Salanter (1809-1883), the founder of the modern Musar movement who made Kiddush in synagogue on Yom Kippur during a cholera epidemic (the story is recounted in Baruch Epstein, *Mekor Baruch* 2:11). There is some doubt as to whether he actually made Kiddush at his synagogue, but that he ate in public to encourage his constituents to do the same is widely acknowledged. But this reasoning is certainly not applicable to the current situation of quarantine.

For the Jew who professes belief in the tradition and also in secular science, the threat of the coronavirus has helped illuminate where his emphases lie. In a recent essay on this subject, “Corona Virus is a Wake-Up Call for ultra-Orthodox Jews,” the modern Orthodox rabbinic hero Irving “Yitz” Greenberg claims that the “theology [of the Haredim] are refuted by facts.” But how do “facts” refute theology? Or support it? He continues, “The second serious misinterpretation in Haredi theology is to see sickness and natural catastrophes as divine punishment for sins rather than as natural phenomena.” Of course, that “theology” is not exclusively “Haredi,” but flows through most of the canonical tradition, including our liturgy (e.g., “because of our sins, we were exiled”).

In addition, Greenberg attributes Haredi inaction to a belief in “magic.” He writes, “Magic claims that through certain words or action—in this case, religious faith/behaviors—God is ‘compelled’ to do what the practitioner wants. ... The Torah treats magic as abhorrent.” **This is true, but not quite what was at issue with the Haredim. When one says that Torah study protects the Jew, he is not saying that it “compels” God to protect them from harm. Rather, it suggests that doing God’s will serves as strengthening a covenantal bond between God and Israel that merits divine protection. This supposition can be found in thousands of canonical sources. There is nothing inherently mystical or magical about it. Greenberg accuses the Haredi community of engaging in what he calls “magic” by (literally) believing, and acting on, what the sages said about the protective nature of mitzvot.**

Consider that Jews often recite Psalms in times of distress or danger. Is it just to calm our nerves, or do we believe it can be, in some real way, efficacious? If the latter, is that “magic”? The fact that the modern Orthodox and other Jewish communities quickly ceased from the public study of Torah, closed schools, and sheltered in place was indeed smart, and correct. **But the fact that there was not much consideration, as far as I know, about rabbinic teaching and the efficacy of mitzvot also says something about the ways those communities navigate between tradition and modernity. It seems clear, when science trumps religious practice, we believe science. Nothing more to be said. The Haredim, on the other hand, actually believe these religious precepts and thus were slower to concede in this circumstance—with tragic results.**

But perhaps we discount the Haredi response too flippantly. What does all this say about our relationship to the tradition? If this was simply about modern Jewish communities heeding their belief in science over religion, nothing here would be that new or interesting. **But the story does not end here. The complexity of modernity and Judaism, and religion more generally, has another important layer. Modern traditional communities often pick and choose what to believe and what not to believe, what to take seriously and what to discount, sometimes in ways that are far closer to “magic” than the belief that Torah study protects one from harm.**

For example, when a noted Israeli Kabbalist named Ben Tov, who claimed to be able to see one’s soul-root by reading one’s mezuzah, visited New York in the early 2000s, dozens, even hundreds, of modern Orthodox Jews lined up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, mezuzahs in hand. And when a modern Orthodox couple I know had a fire in their home, the first thing they did afterward was to get their mezuzahs checked. They wanted to see whether nonkosher mezuzot could explain their misfortune.

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In addition, how many modern Orthodox Jews travel to receive a blessing from a Kabbalist while in Israel, or received a dollar from the Lubavitcher rebbe, which was then saved as a charm (segulah)? I recall many of my friends in Israel, religious and secular, who had a bottle of water blessed by the famous Israeli Kabbalist Yitzhak Kaduri (1898-2006) tucked away in their refrigerator with the label “do not drink.” How many make the trek to the grave of the first-century sage Yonatan ben Uziel, in Amuka in the Galilee, to pray for a soul mate? Or stuff notes in the cracks in the Kotel? While there is certainly nothing wrong with such behavior, it is a kind of “it can’t hurt” Judaism, or maybe a folk Judaism. Maybe these Jews don’t really believe it will be efficacious but, like Zizek’s “professor,” maybe they think it works even if you don’t believe.

But what if you really do believe?

My point is that while the Haredim may be exemplars of what scholar of religion Bruce Lincoln calls religious maximalism, other traditional Jews may be exemplars of religious minimalism. Such minimalism, however, is not consistent: It includes an “it can’t hurt,” unbelief, what we can perhaps call “Zizek’s horseshoe.” If we have an ailment, we go to a doctor—and then, sometimes, we may get a blessing from a Kabbalist. The former is necessary and the latter is a kind of “just-in-case-ism.”

For the Haredi Jew, however, both may be necessary, perhaps equally. Many modern traditional Jews study talmudic passages that support the Haredi position, but when the secular world—in this case, science—intervenes, those views quickly give way. Why? **Well, in part because they know that those teachings should not be taken literally. But then how do we determine what we should take literally, and what we shouldn't?**

This may be an apt time to examine our religious minimalism. Many of us profess fidelity to a tradition that teaches us things we simply do not believe, but we are not quite ready to admit that. When William James asked a schoolboy in Cambridge, Massachusetts, if he knew what religion was, the boy responded, “Sure, believing in something you know isn't true.” When science intervenes in our religious orbit, we reflexively choose science without thinking much about what that choice represents. When facing COVID-19, of course, this was the right choice, but shouldn't it also tell us something about our belief? Was the Cambridge schoolboy correct?

I think Peter Berger's thesis in his *The Sacred Canopy* can be illuminating on this point. On secularization and the problem of plausibility, Berger writes:

Put differently, secularization has resulted in a wide-spread collapse of the plausibility of traditional religious definitions of reality ... In other words, the phenomenon called “pluralism” is a social structural correlate of the secularization of consciousness ... different strata of modern society have been affected by secularization differently in terms of their closeness to or distance from these processes.

For many of us, our religious lives exist under the canopy of the secular, a view of reality that has to some extent undermined the plausibility of religion as the frame of how we define the world. As Krister Stendahl, Harvard Divinity School professor and bishop of Stockholm, used to tell us, “Religion is a very dangerous thing.” Especially if you believe it. And so, when things are at stake, we choose science and disparage anyone who refuses, or is slow, to follow suit.

Ambiguity, doubt, or skepticism, lies at the very core of the modern religious experience more generally and the modern Jewish experience in particular...

There are few contemporary traditionalists who understood the depth of ambiguity and skepticism in Judaism better than Joseph Soloveitchik, the pioneering figure of modern Orthodoxy. Yet while his Judaism remains influential, the internal engine of ambiguity, doubt, and skepticism that lies at its core seems to have largely disappeared. A friend and one-time student of Soloveitchik, Fred Sommers, once told me that he said to Soloveitchik in the mid-1940s, “I am having doubts about the existence of God,” to which Soloveitchik, putting his arm around his young student, responded, “Fred, intellectually it's about 50-50 ... But we have to believe.” Fred left Orthodoxy in the 1950s to become a renowned analytic philosopher. Soloveitchik largely avoided succumbing to the pull of the irrationalities that had in his time already become quite normative, even in his community. There is a story that a student once came up to him and said, “Rabbi Soloveitchik, I would like you to give me a blessing,” to which the Rav responded, “Why, are you an apple?”

The Haredim, or at least some of them, live in a different spiritual orbit. They take the sages at their word. They get blessings because they believe they work. They study Torah because they believe it works. When they argue in Israel that Torah study protects Israel and thus they should be exempt from army service, we look askance. We are cynical. We don't believe that some of them, at least, really believe that. And is there any way that we can really prove them wrong?

Many of us look at Haredim as quaint, naïve, uninformed, in a previous era we might have called them “uncivilized.” But uninformed about what exactly? That Torah study will not protect them as the sages teach? That mitzvot yield reward or, as the Torah teaches, “produce fruit in its season?” Traditional Jews recite that twice daily in the liturgy of the Shema. Are Haredim guilty of “magic” because they believe these things? Hardly. They may be guilty of religious maximalism and a failure to be adequately discerning in such matters. But that is different.

Many modern Jews live as if we have resolved the paradox of religion and modernity, we have found the great synthesis, the secret formula that enables us to be both religious and modern. But this is a ruse. That paradox is never solved, and cannot be solved. We are often forced to choose, and when forced to choose we mostly choose science. **Why? Because we believe in it more than we believe in tradition. Here is where we part from the Haredim. They also believe in science to some degree, they seek medical treatment when necessary, but they believe in tradition more. And so when science dictates behavior that curtails tradition, they are slower to respond.**

...The Haredim are believers in ways that we are not. In this case, it killed many of them. But whether we, or they, are living in closer fidelity to tradition remains to be seen. We believe less, and here that helped us to survive. But as much as it is worth chastising their maximalist belief, it is worth contemplating our lack of it.

COVID-19 and Modern Orthodoxy: Is Acceptance of Science a Religious Failing? Yitzchak Blau

Shaul Magid's recent essay in Tablet, "COVID-19, Haredi Jewry and 'Magical' Thinking" generated a good deal of internet discussion, not a surprise as the essay touches on important questions regarding Modern Orthodoxy, the Haredi world, and their different ideologies. Magid argues that criticism of the Haredi response to the pandemic has been blown out of proportion and that their behavior, in fact, reveals a fidelity to traditional ideas lacking in Modern Orthodox circles.

Magid rejects Rabbi Yitz Greenberg's dual censure of the Haredi community in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic. Greenberg writes that Haredi theology errs in seeing "sickness and natural catastrophes as divine punishment for sins rather than as natural phenomena." **Magid's critique hits home. Even if Jewish tradition includes multiple models of response to catastrophe, we cannot deny the prominence of the idea that traces suffering to sin. Secondly, Greenberg faults the Haredim for magical thinking believing that their actions can control and manipulate God. Again, Magid's critique strikes its target. Believing that God rewards and punishes for human behavior does not entail removing divine choice about how to respond. This tenet can be sharply distinguished from the morally indifferent concept of magic.**

Magid's essay criticizes Modern Orthodoxy's religious weakness in accepting the scientific view of the universe in contrast to Haredim who "really believe." For Magid, viewing mitzva performance as more protective than establishing a police force reflects authentic Judaism. Perhaps keeping batei midrash open really battles Coronavirus more powerfully than social distancing. This portrayal of Judaism radically oversimplifies matters. **Our tradition has always included a wide range of approaches to human suffering and the workings of divine providence. Any simple equation between suffering and sin must also confront Sefer Iyov and the many Talmudic models that outline other possibilities. God faults Iyov's friends for attributing his travails to sinfulness. Talmudic teachings about "afflictions of love" (Berakhot 5a), "there is suffering without sin" (Shabbat 55b), and "reward for the commandments is not found in this world" (Kiddushin 40b) all contradict a simplistic application of reward and punishment based solely on religious behavior.**

Furthermore, Judaism respects the natural order and the need to consider human initiative within that order. One is not allowed to rely on a miracle (Yerushalmi Shekalim 6:3, Shabbat 32a), and even though "those on the path to perform a mitzva are not susceptible to harm," that rule ceases to operate when danger is likely (Pesachim 8b). The Torah assumes the need for an army and a police force in a Jewish state.

Moreover, our tradition includes the idea of a growing minimization of the miraculous and divine intervention over the course of history (Berakhot 20a). A comparison of Tanakh and the Talmud Bavli reveals that, in the latter, prophecy has ceased and divine intervention has become less frequent and less obvious than in biblical times. This reduction in the clarity of providence becomes even more dramatic in the modern era. As R. Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz stated, we cannot treat contemporary heretics with the harshness that rabbinical authorities did in Talmudic times because those laws apply only "when His providence is manifest, miracles are common, and heavenly voices are heard" (Hazon Ish, Yoreh Deah 2:16).

Keeping yeshivot open in opposition to Ministry of Health guidelines does not reflect a more authentic Jewish approach since Judaism mandates that health concerns are of supreme importance. Haredi groups that were slow to realize this were religiously incorrect. It is admittedly true that, on the whole, Modern Orthodox Jews struggle with belief more than Haredim do. Exposure to the intellectual challenges of evolutionary biology, academic bible scholarship and postmodernism, confronting moral questions about women's issues or homosexuality, and the social difficulties of a secularized society take their toll. **That being said, and admitting to the existence of Orthopraxy, it is certainly false to assert as a grand generalization that Modern Orthodox Jews lack belief. Many of us pray with great seriousness, engage in Torah study not just as an intellectual exercise but as an act of devotion, and utilize a language that talks about God without hesitation. Our intellectual leaders, such as R. Jonathan Sacks, R. Shalom Carmy, and Dr. David Shatz write essays vindicating their faith commitments.**

Magid reports that Modern Orthodox Jews visit blessing-granting segula-dispensing rabbis along with their Haredi brethren. They check their mezuzot in response to calamity. He describes this as an inconsistency— accepting science while using horseshoes because “it can't hurt.” **How widespread are these practices in Modern Orthodox communities? A few anecdotal accounts do not establish a statistical reality.** However, even if Magid is correct, all it proves is that not all Modern Orthodox Jews adhere to a more austere and rationalistic form of belief, that many people do not have a worked out and consistent philosophy, or that nervous fear leads many to engage in practices that do not cohere with their worldview. **The fact that secularists also engage in such endeavors indicates the lure of such practices. It is not an argument against Modern Orthodoxy.**

Modern Orthodox Jews have not relinquished belief but it is true that our belief system differs greatly from much of Haredi ideology. The doctrine of hishtadlus and bitachon is fairly common Haredi fare, expounded in such classics as Mesilat Yesharim (chapter 21), Mikhtav me-Elihayu (vol. 1, p.177), Sihot Musar (no. 35, 69, and 70), and Hazon Ish (Kovetz Mikhtavim, p. 5). These texts portray the natural order as an illusion and suggest that our exertions do not, in fact, causally produce results. We still have to put in effort as some kind of punishment, tax, or test, but those efforts do not directly impact upon the world. Modern Orthodox Jews do not think of the world in this way and two points explain our differing worldview.

First, the hishtadlus approach is empirically incorrect as human efforts and ingenuity do usually produce results in a direct fashion. Those who try harder tend to do better, and those with an intelligent plan achieve more. Am Yisrael is famously warned against asserting that “our strength and the might of our hands” accomplished our goals (Devarim 8:16). Abravanel explains that this verse does not deny that our physical efforts enable our success; after all, “one cannot deny empirical evidence.” Instead, it reminds us to acknowledge that God created humanity with the power and intelligence to overcome obstacles.

Additionally, the Haredi approach is morally problematic because it potentially leads to a devaluing of human efforts to improve the lives of others although it certainly does not always do so. Haredim go to doctors, establish impressive hesed organizations, and they have been donating plasma during the current crisis. However, in two crucial contexts, this ideology has had significant negative impact. Haredi men stay in kollel for years while their parents and wives work extremely hard to support them. More significantly, Haredi men in Israel exempt themselves from enlisting in the IDF. The hishtadlus ideology helps explain the ethical failure of an entire community exempting itself from army service while usually showing no gratitude to those who do serve and protect the country. From the hishtadlus perspective, soldiers patrolling the Lebanese border do not ultimately provide protection.

The same ideology occasionally finds extreme expression in Haredi literature. R. Yisrael Eliyahu Weintraub, a close confidant of Rav Shach, fiercely objected to a project in which every yeshiva student would adopt a soldier in order to pray and learn on his behalf because the observant community should want no connection with secularists. He cites a second hand account from the Brisker Rav, R. Velvel Soloveichik, affirming that the soldiers do not provide protection. “All those saved come from the power of bnei Torah...and all those killed are on their ledger, and if not for their existence, no one would be killed at all” (Einei Yisrael, p. 434). Along the same lines, it is inconceivable that a

Modern Orthodox book would contain a story purporting to quote Rav Moshe Feinstein saying that finding a cancer cure is bittul Torah (R. Michel Shurkin, Meged Givot Olam 1:23).

We need not worry that the hishtadlus approach reflects the totality of the rabbinic tradition. Rambam powerfully affirms the reality of the natural order (Moreh Nevukhim 2:48), Rav Kook celebrates human initiative within the natural order while cautioning about the dangers of overemphasizing bitahon (Ein Aya Shabbat 2:192, 194), and R. Soloveitchik writes that “curing, healing the sick is a divine attribute reflecting an activity (רופא חולים) in which man ought to engage” (TRADITION, Spring 1978, p. 34).

Our rejection of the hishtadlus approach highlights a serious flaw in Magid’s account when he writes that facts cannot support or refute theology. Stephen Jay Gould’s Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life famously suggested that since religion is about values and science is about facts, they cannot conflict. Gould’s point has some validity but, as a sweeping solution, it fails. Science does not always remain value neutral nor can religion fully isolate itself from the facts of science and history. Theologians do not just pontificate in a monastery; they try to express a theology that coheres with human experience. Theology must account for the fact that the universe appears to function in a scientific fashion and that divine justice does not get meted out in our current existence in observable ways. Thus, Modern Orthodoxy, with all its many flaws, has good reason to adhere to its acceptance of the natural order. The critique of some Haredi resistance to social distancing in the name of religion rings true.

To be fair, many problematic and harmful ideas emerge in the name of science which tend to endorse determinism, fail to appreciate aspects of human experience which cannot be measured in laboratory exploration and precise measurement, and often exhibit a pathological hatred of religion. Nonetheless, accepting a scientific view of the universe does not require us to fall into the trap of scientism. I believe that such acceptance reflects religious authenticity.

ספר מסילת ישרים פרק כא

אמנם מה שיוכל לשמור את האדם ולהצילו מן המפסידים האלה הוא הבטחון, והוא שישליך יהבו על ה' לגמרי, כאשר ידע כי ודאי אי אפשר שיחסר לאדם מה שנקצב לו, וכמו שאז"ל במאמריהם (ביצה ט"ז): כל מזונותיו של אדם קצובים לו מראש השנה וגו', וכן אמרו (יומא ל"ח): אין אדם נוגע במוכן לחבירו אפילו כמלא נימא, וכבר היה אדם יכול להיות יושב ובטל והגזירה (גזירת קיצבת מזונות שקצבו לו מראש השנה) היתה מתקיימת, אם לא שקדם הקנס לכל בני אדם, (בראשית ג): בזעת אפך תאכל לחם, אשר על כן חייב אדם להשתדל איזה השתדלות לצורך פרנסתו, שכן גזר המלך העליון, והרי זה כמס שפורע כל המין האנושי אשר אין להמלט ממנו. על כן (הואיל וכך גזר המלך) אמרו (ספרי): יכול אפילו יושב ובטל (יראה סימן ברכה) תלמוד לומר: בכל משלח ידך אשר תעשה (שצריך אתה להשתדל ולעשות), אך לא שההשתדלות הוא המועיל, אלא שההשתדלות מוכרח, וכיון שהשתדל הרי יצא ידי חובתו, וכבר יש מקום לברכת שמים שתשרה עליו ואינו צריך לבלות ימיו בחריצות והשתדלות, הוא מה שכתב דוד המלך ע"ה (תהלים ע"ה): כי לא ממוצא וממערב ולא וגו', כי אלהים שופט וגו' ושלמה המלך ע"ה אמר (משלי כ"ג): "אל תיגע להעשיר מבינתך חדל". אלא הדרך האמיתי הוא דרכם של החסידים הראשונים עושים תורתן עיקר ומלאכתן טפלה, וזה וזה נתקיים בידם, כי כיון שעשה אדם קצת מלאכה משם והלאה אין לו אלא לבטוח בקונו ולא להצטער על שום דבר עולמי, אז תשאר דעתו פנויה ולבו מוכן לחסידות האמיתי ולעבודה התמימה.

שמות פרק טז

(ד) ויאמר יקוק אל משה הנני ממטיר לכם לחם מן השמים ויצא העם ולקטו דבר יום ביומו למען אנסנו הילך בתורתי אם לא:

מכילתא

לא נתנה תורה לדרוש אלא לאוכלי המן הא כיצד היה יושב ודורש ולא היה יודע מהיכן אוכל ושותה ומהיכן היה לובש ומתכסה הא לא נתנה תורה לדרוש אלא לאוכלי המן

הלכות תעניות פרק א

ודבר זה מדרכי התשובה הוא. שבזמן שתבוא צרה ויזעקו עליה ויריעו ידעו הכל שבגלל מעשיהם הרעים הורע להן ככתוב עונותיכם הטו וגו'. וזה הוא שיגרום להסיר הצרה מעליהם.

אבל אם לא יזעקו ולא יריעו אלא יאמרו דבר זה ממנהג העולם אירע לנו וצרה זו נקרה נקרית. הרי זו דרך אכזריות וגורמת להם להדבק במעשיהם הרעים. ותוסיף הצרה צרות אחרות. הוא שכתוב בתורה והלכתם עמי בקרי והלכתי גם אני עמכם בחמת קרי. כלומר כשאביא עליכם צרה כדי שתשובו אם תאמרו שהיא קרי אוסיף לכם חמת אותו קרי.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning

Science is the search for explanation. Religion is the search for meaning. Meaning is not accidental to the human condition because we are the meaning-seeking animal. To believe on the basis of science that the universe has no meaning is to confuse

two disciplines of thought: explanation and interpretation. The search for meaning, though it begins with science, must go beyond it. Science does not yield meanings, nor does it prove the absence of meanings. The meaning of a system lies outside the system. Therefore the meaning of the universe lies outside the universe. The belief in a God who transcends the universe was the discovery of Abrahamic monotheism, which transformed the human condition, endowing it with meaning and thereby rescuing it from tragedy in the name of hope. For if God created the physical universe, then God is free, and if God made us in his image, we are free. If we are free, then history is not a matter of eternal recurrences. Because we can change ourselves, we can change the world. That is the religious basis of hope. There are cultures that do not share these beliefs. They are, ultimately, tragic cultures, for whatever shape they give the powers they name, those powers are fundamentally indifferent to human fate. They may be natural forces. They may be human institutions: the empire, the state, the political system, or the economy. They may be human collectivities: the tribe, the nation, the race. But all end in tragedy because none attaches ultimate significance to the individual as individual. All end by sacrificing the individual, which is why, in the end, such cultures die. There is only one thing capable of defeating tragedy, which is the belief in God who in love sets his image on the human person, thus endowing each of us with non-negotiable, unconditional dignity.

We cannot prove that life is meaningful and that God exists. But neither can we prove that love is better than hate, altruism than selfishness, forgiveness than the desire for revenge. We cannot prove that the hope is truer to experience than the tragic sense of life. Almost none of the truths by which we live are provable, and the desire to prove them is based on a monumental confusion between explanation and interpretation. Explanations can be proved, interpretations cannot. Science deals in explanation. Meaning is always a matter of interpretation. It belongs to the same territory as ethics, aesthetics and metaphysics. In none of these three disciplines can anything of consequence be proved, but that does not make them insignificant. To the contrary, they represent three of the greatest repositories of human wisdom.

There is absolutely nothing in science – not in cosmology or evolutionary biology or neuroscience – to suggest that the universe is bereft of meaning, nor could there be, since the search for meaning has nothing to do with science and everything to do with religion.

רמב"ם הלכות דעות ד:כ

כָּל הַמְּנַהֵיג עֲצָמוּ בְּדַרְכֵי אֱלֹהֵי שְׁהוּרֵינוּ אֲנִי עָרַב לוֹ שְׂאִינוּ בָּא לַיְדֵי חַלִּי כֹּל יָמָיו עַד שְׂיִזְקִין הַרְבֵּה וְיָמוּת וְאֵינוּ צָרִיךְ לְרוֹפֵא. וְיִהְיֶה גּוֹפּוֹ שְׁלֵם וְעוֹמֵד עַל בְּרִיו כֹּל יָמָיו. אֲלֵא אִם כֵּן הָיָה גּוֹפּוֹ רַע מִתַּחֲלַת בְּרִיתוֹ. אוֹ אִם הָיָה רְגִיל בְּמְנַהֵג מִן הַמְּנַהֲגוֹת הַרְעִים מִתַּחֲלַת מוֹלְדָתוֹ. אוֹ אִם תָּבוֹא מִפֶּת דָּבָר אוֹ מִפֶּת בְּצַרְתָּ לְעוֹלָם:

אברבנאל דברים פרק ח

והנה משה רבינו ע"ה לא רצה להכחיש הקדמתם מענין כחם אבל אמר וזכרת כי הוא הנותן לך כח לעשות חיל. לפי שאיך יכחיש כחם בעבודת האדמה והשתדלותם במקניהם וקנינם והסבות האמצעיות לא נוכל להכחישם כי הנה אמת החוש אבל אמר אמת הוא שאתם סבה לדבר אבל אינכם כי אם סבת אמצעיות לא סבות ראשונות כי עם היות שכחכם ועוצם ידיכם עשה לכם החיל הזה ומי נתן לכם אותו כח ועוצם יד