

# Judaism of the Future

Eliyahu Fink - Spring 2012 - <http://finkorswim.com>

A few weeks ago, the Spring issue of the Klal Perspectives Journal was released. I noted the excellent article written by Moishe Bane and recommended that everyone read it. (See: [Klal Perspectives Spring 2012: One Excellent Article Stands Out From the Rest](#))

I mentioned in passing that I had my own response to some of the issues that were discussed in the journal.

[Writers were asked to address three questions.](#) They are more fully developed on the Klal Perspectives site. These are the questions in general terms:

1. *How accurate is the perception that there is a crisis in the degree of religious fulfillment experienced by observant Jews?*
2. *What is the source of this alienation and what can be done to cure it?*
3. *Are there proven methods to inspire observant Jews experiencing a gap in religious enthusiasm.*

I begin with three short answers: 1. Fairly accurate. 2. Modernity and a fresh approach. 3. No.

In my personal experience, I have come across a lot of people that would somewhat fit into this broad category. All of them know others in the same situation as well. So I would say the numbers are higher than just the number of people I know of personally. Of those people, there is a general feeling of malaise about religion. Some are apathetic to their plight and others are anguished by it. The apathetic ones are resigned to a marginalized relationship with God and their religion. The ones in anguish wish they could turn back the clock to their yeshiva days when they felt something special or they dream of living up to the lofty goals of *dveykus* and spiritual nirvana.

I think there is a need to discuss this issue. It is a legitimate problem and is definitely causing discomfort among many orthodox Jews. Would I call it a crisis? I don't know. What is of greater concern is that the issue is framed as an issue of *perception*. The question implies that happy, fulfilled orthodox Jews are looking at others and are concerned that others are not feeling fulfilled. That is what perception means. I would prefer if the question focused on the actual people who are feeling burnt out of religion and not the assumptions or judgments of others. So I would rather adjust the question to: Is there a significant group of orthodox Jews who feel under-fulfilled by

their Judaism?

The answer to that question is undoubtedly, yes.

The more interesting question is the second question. Where does this spiritual melancholy come from?

It was hard to pinpoint a consensus among the journal writers on this point. Most of the writers attributed the problem to a flaw or misstep in *Avodas Hashem* (religious observance). As I remarked in a previous post, Moishe Bane pointed more toward phenomena outside Mitzvah observance that affect one's spiritual psyche. While I agree in form, I have a different twist on the substance. I think there is something that is being overlooked in these discussions and that is the historical context of orthodox Judaism's rise and its place in the modern world.

Taking a big step back and looking at orthodox Judaism from a bird's eye view gives one an interesting perspective of theology in orthodox Judaism. We have the canonized books of Tanach. The stories in Tanach are replete with miracles, Divine communications with people, complex heroes and villains, struggles with idol worship, violence and war, and stories of high drama. The lens with which these stories are viewed in orthodox Judaism is through the lens of *Chazal* and then through the eyes of the *Rishonim* who elucidate the teachings of *Chazal*.

Then we have the *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, various *midrashic* sources, and their numerous commentaries. The world of *Chazal* was also a fantastic world that talks of miracles brought about through acts of the saintly *Tannaim* and *Amoraim*, an awareness of angels and demons, a hybrid of folk medicine, real medicine, and faith healing, and many other ideas and expressions that were appropriate for Ancient Greece and the medieval era.

More recently, we have the writings of the *Arizal* and his students. Somewhat related, we have the works of the *baalei mussar* and the *Chassidus* which paralleled it. These teachings focus on a transcendental version of Judaism. Their focus on perfection of character and mind, hearkens the typology of a superJew. The person who is complete control of his life, thoughts, and actions. All of it with cosmic proportions. One misstep and worlds are affected. The ultimate goal of these works is to elevate the Jew from man to [almost] angel. But the payoffs are lofty. *Ruach HaKodesh*, understanding dreams, granting blessings that come true, and practical mystic powers are part and parcel of this genre.

Throughout the last 2000 years, various codes of halacha have been codified as well. The primary sources used today are the *Shulchan Aruch* and the *Mishnah Brurah* on

*Orach Chaim*. The status of halacha has been cemented for several hundred years. To be lenient, based on a *rishon* or *gaon* not quoted in the *Shulchan Aruch* is considered unacceptable. Removing statutes that were based on mistakes or assumptions that have been shown to be incorrect is not really permissible. Historical social norms that helped establish *halacha* are not considered when analyzing *halacha* today.

I believe this is a fair overview of the basic corpus of Torah that is studied today by orthodox Jews. I also believe that the descriptions of those general bases of knowledge are accurate and I do not mean them in a disrespectful or cynical way. At all.

But herein lies the problem, I think.

The kind of life a Jew expects his religion to provide for him is completely unrealistic in modern terms. We are not going to debate or discuss the veracity or meaning of the fantastic claims made in each of these genres of Torah study. But we are going to assume that this is the world the average orthodox Jew associates with his religion. Years of studying about open miracles, direct communication with God, demons, angels, mystical universes affected by man's acts, practical kabbalistic feats, and the like, has an effect on the one doing the studying. Its effect is that the person associates the religion with these things.

We hear about stories of great Jewish leaders who made incredible things happen. Whether it is Choni HaMa'agel (drawing a circle and demanding rain - and it worked), Reb Yochanan (turning people into bags of bones with his eyes), Rashi (born after his father tossed a diamond to the sea), Reb Yehuda HaChassid (the wall that moved to save his life), the Baal Shem Tov (flying around Europe), The Arizal (locating ancient graves by "sense"), my great-great-grandfather Reb Elya Lopian (meeting Eliyahu HaNavi), or the Chazon Ish (knowing how to do brain surgery) all these stories reinforce the idea that Jews can do supernatural things if we could just get to that level.

Orthodox Jews are generally smart, well educated (at least in comparison with the majority of the rest of the world), come from good, balanced homes, and are generally part of the middle to upper class of society. In my experience, most people who believe the type of legends, stories, and anecdotes that are taught in yeshivos are less advanced in every other way.

Allow me to explain. In ancient times *everybody* believed the kinds of things that are described in the Talmud. In medieval times *everyone* believed in the kinds of things the *rishonim* speak of. In early modern times *almost everybody* believed in the same kinds of things we find in *mussar seforim* and *chassidus*. The folk cures and superstitions that have crept into *halacha* were *common for the people of their time*. Today, the only people who still

believe such things are looked at as backward or relics of the past.

I am not using this analysis to judge whether these things are true or whether they are essential to our religion. I am only making the following point: Many of the very basic assumptions of orthodox Jews were prevalent in the rest of the world, each in their time, but they have been discarded by smart, successful, happy people in the non-orthodox Jewish world. They *used to believe* in similar ideas and stories, but they *no longer* believe in them.

In other words, it used to be *normal* to believe in these fantastic abilities and tales. *Everyone did it.* This was their way of life. It could be explained by pointing to all the unanswered questions that are prevalent in their understanding of the universe. They had no better explanation for various phenomena. Rather they had to believe in the supernatural on a regular basis. God was responsible for everything because they had no other explanation. But now, it is only religious fanatics, naive people, those who live in undeveloped countries and other indigenous groups that still have maintain these kinds of fundamentalist beliefs because for the most part, they are either wrong or unnecessary.

At this point, the orthodox Jew, is confronted with two basic options. Either the beliefs of orthodox Judaism that go against modern sensibilities are true and the beliefs that everyone who was not an orthodox Jew, which were nearly identical in substance and identical in form, were not true in the first place, so it is still reasonable to believe and this is an example of the people of the world "not getting it". Or, orthodox Jews and everyone else believed in the same kinds of things a long time ago, the fact that society as a whole has moved on is indicative that the beliefs are flawed and perhaps many of them are untrue.

Again, I am only pointing to the options, and not to the validity of either position. I am merely stating what I believe are the reasonable options available to a modern Jew when considering traditional orthodox Jewish beliefs in our modern times.

To me, this is the underlying, unexpressed issue that lies beneath the surface and causes the most internal angst and frustration with regard to spiritual success. The goals are impossible to achieve. None of my friends from yeshiva have *ruach hakodesh*. None of my *rebbeim* from yeshiva perform miracles. The universe of our heroes simply does not exist anymore. None of us has experienced or witnessed the kinds of things that are such an integral part of our lore.

Yet, the majority of what we learn today was borne out of that universe. The kind of relationship *they* had with the Almighty is not able to be reproduced in a modern society. Whereas, every nook and cranny of life was a connection to something

Greater, due to a lack of sophistication or flawed understanding of science or a general mood of superstition, the world in which they lived was a world where God was found in everything at all times. It was so easy. In those days, it was stupid to *not* see God in everything. But in our modern times, where we have answers to many questions, we have reasonable explanations for many things that were mysterious in the past, where we know that superstition is bunk, all that seems so distant, so impossible, and so different from our world.

This causes one of two things to happen. For some people, the ideals become too lofty. "Oy, I'll never find the supernatural in my life." If all your life you've been striving for something that simply does not happen anymore, the frustration is going to be overwhelming. The result is apathy toward religion.

But for others, the skeptics among us, it can cause people to throw out the baby with the bathwater. It all goes down the drain. "If Chazal were wrong about some things, maybe they were wrong about everything." If our religion has similar characteristics to ancient pagan cults, to other religions, and to medieval folklore, which parts are "real"? These people will by and large either leave orthodoxy, become orthoprax, or live in the agony of what they believe to be two mutually exclusive truths.

If I were asked to point at what I believed to be causing spiritual malaise among Klal Yisrael, I would point to this. The idea that our religion has so many characteristics that are similar to clearly false beliefs and that the world of our religious heroes is a world that for the most part, no longer exists.

So what is the cure?

It's not simple nor is it something that I see happening anytime soon. But I think that R' Soleveitchik was on the right path in this regard. A new, modern understanding of Judaism and our culture needs to be cultivated. We cannot base our theology on ancient Greek methodologies, or Muslim and Christian approaches from the Middle Ages. If we are confident that we have the truth, and I believe we do, we must believe that it can be reconciled with modernity with absolute fealty to the words of Chazal which are binding and the halacha that flows from those words. I am not advocating that we abandon halachic Judaism, *chas v'shalom*. I am advocating for a new approach to Torah that uses modern ideas *much in the same way Chazal used ideas from their time* and all the great Jewish thinkers over the last 2000 years up until recently.

It can start with our education system and approach to the non-orthodox and to the non-Jews in our world. We have transplanted a model from a time of blood libels, of pogroms, and of Jew hatred, that led to the Holocaust in Europe and are trying to implement it in a free, safe, and friendly United States of America. It's just more of

the same. We can't expect those models to work anymore. It's a brave new world. It's a *different* world. And just as we can't expect that style of *chinuch* (education) to work on these shores, we can't expect that what inspired and fascinated a water carrier or a farmer in Europe circa 1730 would inspire and fascinate an accountant or an attorney today.

On an individual level, I strongly recommend that people trying to find their place in orthodox Judaism by finding the things that they like. Exploit them. Enjoy them. Focus on what makes you feel good religiously and what inspires you. All the while, maintaining strict adherence to *halacha* and conforming to the standards of one's community. But don't expect the kinds of returns that our great-great-grandparents had. It was a different world with different challenges. What you should expect is that you can have a *2012 type of relationship with God and Judaism*. Set that kind of realistic goal and a lot of disappointment and apathy can be avoided.

I really believe that this is not only possible, but necessary. I think we can do it and that we must do it. Each era of Judaism had its challenges and configured a form of orthodox, *halachic* Judaism to meet those challenges all while remaining strictly adherent to the *daled amos shel halacha*. We can do the same for the future of our Judaism. We can move past the model of early modern history based on the romanticization of European pre-war shtetl life and forge our own beautiful, successful, passionate orthodox Judaism of the future.

To answer the third question, this method is not proved to work. It is a suggestion that I am confident has some merit. I hope that we can make the adjustments that we need to ensure that our children and grandchildren feel a similar, yet different passion, as our parents and grandparents did before us. I think we can.