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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## CREATIVITY AND AVODAT HASHEM

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Based on [a lecture by Rav Michael Rosensweig](#). Rav Rosensweig's later written version was published as "Personal Initiative and Creativity in Avodat Hashem" in **The Torah U-Madda Journal Vol. 1**.

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In the beginning, God performed the utterly inimitable creation *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. Yet man is required to emulate all of His ways – "lehidamot lo kemah she'efshar", "to be similar to him to the extent possible".

Creativity and submission clash constantly in Jewish thought. "One should not rely on miracles", but Ramban claims that each moment of existence is a hidden miracle. Prayer and Kabbalah are means of "affecting" the Divine, but both are aspects of *avodat Hashem* (service of G-d). And finally, "No one is free except those who have accepted upon themselves the yoke of heaven." From that paradox, the necessary synthesis emerges. Human beings must create, but only for the greater glory of G-d. And we must realize that we can at best rediscover Divine truths or develop our own *tzulem Elokim* (Divine image); we can but transform the *yesh* G-d brought into being.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik teaches in **Lonely Man of Faith** that human beings have a religious obligation to create in both the physical and metaphysical realms, to build the world physically, spiritually, and even aesthetically. And while the rigid Halakhic system limits human autonomy greatly, unmoderated inflexibility leads to the ritualism Yeshayahu denounced and the legalism so often criticized today. Judaism must provide a way for human beings to achieve a personal relationship with G-d.

Gershom Scholem writes that every religion creates mysticism in reaction to increasing formalization, surviving undivided if the formal structure allows accommodation. Kabbalah, however, is neither accessible nor attractive to all. And extra-halakhic religious systems hold the danger of subjectivism, which Rav Soloveitchik teaches in *Halakhic Mind* is actually self-worship.

Torah provides several non-mystical outlets for human creativity within the halakhic system. *Sefer Hachinukh*, for example, believes circumcision to be an act of self-perfection, and possibly the mitzvah of "zeb keli v'an'veihu", of beautifying mitzvot, allows human beings to redefine *cheftzot shel mitzvah*, mitzvah-objects. Rambam in his Commentary on the Mishnah explains that God gave the Jews many mitzvot so that each would find one to excel in and be particularly inspired by. The permission of *tefillas n'dovoh*, voluntary prayer, provides similar opportunities to personalize religion. Finally, most *rishonim* encourage the search for *ta'amei hamitzvot*, rationales for commandments. *Sefer Hachinukh* among others believes that each commandment has multiple reasons, enabling each Jew to personalize their *kavannah* while performing it.

The *Yerushalmi* extends the tension between creativity and submission to the realm of *talmud Torah*. "Kol mah she'atid talmid vatic lechadesh k'var ne'emar l'moshe misina", "Everything a veteran student will originate in the future was already said to Moshe at Sinai". The tradition is both vast and rigid. But it also contains ample evidence of individual contribution. "Chayav adam lomar davar b'shem omro", one must identify the Torah one has learned with the one who taught it. The dialectic method pioneered by the *Ba'alei haTosafot* revolutionized Talmudic studies in the Middle Ages, as did the *pilpulists* in the fifteenth century and Brisk in the nineteenth. Various scholars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries claimed that Eliyahu haNavi had revealed himself to them, giving their works a legitimate source outside the received tradition.

David Singer and Moshe Socol recently argued in **Modern Judaism** that the Rav's description of his grandfather as a revolutionary resulted from the influence of modernity on his thought, that *chidush* is actually antithetical to halakhah. Their position was considered and rejected by the *Tanna* Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, who once asked his students "Mah chidush ne'emar bayom?", "What of originality was said today?" They replied in surprise "v'halo talmidekha anu?", "Are we not your students?" How can we say anything that you have not already heard? And he told them: "There cannot be a House of Study without *chidush*". The *Yerushalmi* itself believes that a veteran student

can be *mechadesh*. Yet the concepts of *mesorah* and *y'ridas hadoros* (continuous decline of the generations dating from the Sinaitic Revelation) would seem to exclude any sort of development or progression.

Judaism solves the creativity-submission conflict by incorporating *chidushim* into the Mesorah. A *talmid vatiek* can be *mechadesh*, but the *chidush* is valid only insofar as it can be included within the Sinaitic revelation, only to the extent that it is rediscovery.

This solution does not, however, account for the concept of “*eilu v'eilu divrei Elokim Chayim*”, “These and those are the words of the living G-d”. The Talmud applies this concept to directly contradictory opinions. Such opinions cannot be contained within an ordinary tradition.

But the *Mesorah* is no ordinary tradition. The Mishnah tells us that every word heard at Sinai divided into seventy voices, that multi-dimensionality was built into the *Mesorah* at its start. When Moshe Rabbeinu went up to the heavens, he saw the Heavenly Court developing forty-nine reasons for both permission and prohibition on ritual issues, and he was told “*nims'ru lechakhmei yisrael vebahakbra'ab k'mosam*”, “They have been given to the sages of Israel, and the decision is theirs”. Maharal believes that all opinions arrived at by legitimate methods on halakhic issues have significance, albeit those accepted *lehalakhab* have more; each issue has “aspects of *tum'ab* and aspects of *taharab*”. And Ritva believes in multiple truth, that somehow mutually exclusive opinions on halakhic issues can be true simultaneously.

The justification for this fragmentation of tradition is Judaism's acceptance and validation of the uniqueness of every human being. The Mishnah tells us that because of that uniqueness, “*chayav kol Adam lomar: bishvili nivra baalam*”, “Every human being must say: ‘The world was created for me’”. And Tanchuma points out that individuality is more than skin deep: “Just as their visages differ from each others', so do their minds”.

If initiative is permitted, then it is obligatory; *imitatio dei* cannot be disregarded in *talmud Torah*, the most spiritual activity of all. The passion of the *Beit Hamedrash*, “*milchamta shel Torah*”, derives from the religious nature of the intellectual battle in Torah. But again the emotion and the creativity must be within the system: “*afilu av umno v'rabi v'talmid bish'as limud na'asim oyvim v'eynam zaxim misham ad shena'asim ohavim*”, “Even a father and son or Rav and student become enemies during study, but do not leave (their studies) until they become friends”. The words of Torah are “ever-multiplying” yet “fixed as driven nails”.

*Chidushim* are valid only insofar as they possess both characteristics.

Perhaps the most poignant testimony to the value of human initiative in Torah comes from the Vilna Gaon, who turned down a dream-*maggid's* offer to teach him the entire Torah effortlessly. But throughout Jewish history scholars have defended man's right and need to earn the Torah and make it his own. Geonic opponents of codification argued that its costs outweighed its benefits, that preventing misinterpretation was not as important as making sure people learned the original sources. The Maharal's brother protested the Shulchan Arukh on Tanchuma's grounds; as people's minds differ from one another, each can extract something unique and valuable from halakhic texts. The Maharal in **Netivot Olam** railed against those who pasken from *sifrei psak* (handbooks of halakhah) without checking the original sources. “*Ein l'dayan ela mah she'eynav ro'os*”, “A judge cannot take into account anything other than what his eyes see”; *psak* given from secondary sources is a case of the blind leading the blind.

The abuses feared by opponents of codification have never been more evident than in our era, in which reliance on summaries and English “how-to” books, and to a lesser degree on the Mishnah Berurah, have made the *Magen Avraham* and even the *Taz* obsolete. Sadly, never has the need for such reliance been more widespread. Yet specific historical eras encourage sensitivity to certain issues, and we must believe that our generation has something unique to contribute. If this seems presumptuous of us, if we are accused of ignoring the concept of *y'ridas hadoros*, our response must be an abiding faith in the progression of ideas and the unfolding of *mesorah*.

Even those less experienced and less talented are valuable links in the chain of *mesorah*. Individual responses are important in both *lomdus* and *hashkofob*, and the inevitable subjectivity created by the order and amount of the *posek's* exposure to sources plays a legitimate role in *psak*. But one must constantly challenge his or her own objectivity to avoid subjectivism and self-worship.

Not all ideas about and in Torah are worthwhile. *Tosafot* denounces “*charifus shel bevel*”, “worthless sharpness”, as does Maharal “*palpulo shel bevel*”. Capacity to be *mechadesh* requires a minimum level of knowledge, method, and the parameters of conceptual plausibility in halakhah and *machshovoh*, plus exposure to real and textual *rebbeim*. But given those conditions, every Jew has the right to view themselves as a potential contributor to and transmitter of the *Mesorah*. We have the obligation to pursue truth with passion yet with the utmost respect for our predecessors in the eternally unfolding *Mesorah*.

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