



# Shivim Panim

with

RABBA YAFFA EPSTEIN  
& RABBI DAVID WOLPE

*One of the hallmarks of SAPIR is its connection between theory and practice. We ask our authors not simply to make arguments but also to offer policy prescriptions. With this issue, we are debuting a new ongoing feature that we hope will be another bridge between ideas and reality: Shivim Panim (referencing the 70 faces of the Torah), in which two leading Jewish thinkers apply Jewish wisdom to ethical dilemmas faced in Jewish communal life. The dilemmas are real, as are the people who pose them. We invite you to send your own queries to us at [info@sapirjournal.org](mailto:info@sapirjournal.org).*



**Rabba Yaffa Epstein** serves as the director of the Wexner Heritage Program, at the Wexner Foundation. Beginning in Fall 2022, she will serve as the senior scholar and educator in residence at the Jewish Education Project.

**Rabbi David Wolpe** is the Max Webb Senior Rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and the author, most recently, of *David: The Divided Heart*. He is a senior adviser at Maimonides Fund.



*What do we gain—and what do we lose—by paying students to learn Torah? There is an ancient discomfort with this question. But the rabbis also understood, as do we, that behavioral conditioning and providing sustenance is an effective way of moving people toward proper behavior. The search for how to live a meaningful life is a uniquely human pursuit and a worthy yet challenging one. Within a society that offers many paths to constructing meaning, perhaps offering purposeful incentives can aid a person in the exploration of Torah study, enabling him to pursue a lifetime of inspired learning? With the assumption that a goal of Jewish education is to move people toward a love of learning, is it reasonable to entice the student along the way with a treat, a modest stipend, that recognizes that the entryway to Torah is not always straight and linear?*

RABBI BEN BERGER

Vice President, Jewish Education and Experience, Hillel International



**Rabba Epstein:** Torah is the great gift of the Jewish people. It simultaneously provides connection to our collective past, guidelines for building a meaningful life in our present, and a road map for creating a just, moral, and thriving future. It unifies the Jewish people across time and space, political differences, denominational splits, and class distinctions.

Our questioner is struggling with an age-old quandary: What should the relationship be between the sacredness of Torah and the utility of money?

The Mishna in Tractate Avot 4:5 enjoins us to not make the Torah a crown for self-aggrandizement, or a tool with which to dig. This is understood to mean that we should not use the Torah to make a living. Maimonides wrote an extended comment on this Mishna, in which he repeatedly emphasized how problematic it is to use the Torah for self-advancement or profit. He then codifies this position in his legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*.

Rabbi Yosef Karo, the prominent halakhic authority, comments that while the law should indeed follow Maimonides, the world that we are living in does not allow for this position. Instead, we must pay great sages and promising students for their hours of study. While this may cause some desecration to the Torah, the risk of not doing so is too great, for people will not be able to learn, and the Torah will be forgotten by the Jewish people.

There is a strong voice in the Jewish community today that feels similarly to Rabbi Yosef Karo. In order to preserve our precious Torah, we must incentivize Jewish educational experiences through money, whether through paid learning programs on campuses or by offering financial incentives to attend Jewish learning events and programs. If Torah is to survive, this argument goes, the Jewish community needs as many on-ramps as possible to welcome and invite those who feel outside of classic Jewish learning communities.

Let me be clear. Of course, we want more people learning Torah, and of course, we want Jewish learning spaces to be warm, welcoming, and inclusive. And certainly, if someone is pursuing an intensive fellowship in any field, including the fields of Jewish learning, the rabbinate, or Jewish education, we need to compensate him in order to free up his time so he can focus on his learning.

Yet we also need to exercise caution. Are financial incentives the only way to entice people into meaningful Jewish learning experiences? Any business person will tell you that people pay for what they value and value what they pay for. Getting something for free devalues its meaning. How much more so if you're being paid to take it!

Look at the trends of SoulCycle, Peloton, and CrossFit. All of

these activities could be done alone and for free, but people elect to pay to do them because they offer added value—community, meaning, and purpose. People are clear about the value that these activities add to their lives.

Why should learning Torah be different? By paying people to learn, we may increase participant numbers and fill seats. But we are also sending a message that learning Torah is not something to be pursued for its own sake. In fact, we should be teaching the opposite—that the rewards of Torah study speak for themselves. Deep, rich Torah study has the capacity to connect us to a thriving, innovative global conversation, to find answers to the real questions we are struggling with, and to bring more meaning to our lives. If we allow these rewards to be the reason that people attend our classes, and join our synagogues, my guess is that they will keep coming back.



**Rabbi Wolpe:** I don't oppose paying people to study Torah. It would have to be time-limited. But we also live in a world where we expect people to do things for money. We also sometimes incentivize or disincentivize them to do what is good for them with money: We offer benefits, discounts, and tax exemptions to encourage some behaviors. And we levy fines or raise taxes (on goods like cigarettes) to discourage others.

In the cheders (schools) of Eastern Europe, it used to be the common practice to smear the letters of books with honey when a child first began learning, to reinforce the idea that studying Torah was sweet and rewarding. The money principle is the adult version of this practice, and it is worth trying as an inducement. Moreover, although we do not like to think of it this way, what is a scholarship to a school or paid employment as a rabbi but a monetary reward for Torah study (in addition to many other things)?

As Rabba Epstein notes, our sages taught us that the Torah should not be a spade to shovel with—in other words, it should not be used

for other purposes. But there is another principle here: *mitoch shelo lishma, bah lishma* (Sanhedrin 105b): Even though one may start studying Torah or performing mitzvot for an irrelevant or unworthy reason, in the end the true reason—doing it for its own sake—will assert itself. We reward children in the hope they will eventually come to realize the intrinsic value of goodness, or study, or sharing. So I say: Get your coupon for Torah study—limited time only!



*Should we support new initiatives that seek to disrupt the classic model of the synagogue? These new models take rituals and learning out of synagogues, making Jewish life more accessible, as when JCCs hire rabbis to serve their members and the broader community, or when young people create Jewish community through educational or social cohorts, but not at the local shul. How much should we take into consideration the possible damage to synagogue life from supporting compelling Jewish communal, religious, and learning institutions that are performing some of the roles that used to be solely in the synagogue domain?*

LAURA LAUDER



**Rabbi Wolpe:** As a synagogue rabbi, I might be expected to have a special sensitivity to this question. And indeed, I do. The erosion of synagogue life is at the heart of the dilemma of Jewish continuity.

There are many things synagogues do not do well. As the product

of a shul, a day school, and a Jewish summer camp, I think the third was the most effective in my own Jewish development. But the synagogue remains home base. First, let's remember the depth of the synagogue's place in Jewish tradition. It is the modern instantiation of the Temple, and Jewish law obligates every community to build a synagogue (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 150:1).

While new models of communal life will arise, such as Moishe House (where Jewish young professionals live together and create programs for their peers) or retreat centers, the question remains: Which model will be continuously available throughout the life of a Jew? What happens when you outgrow the organization or the time for the retreat ends? A synagogue is for all ages, at all times. No other institution in Jewish life has that comprehensive commitment.

If other institutions assume the roles of the synagogue, the entire financial model of synagogues becomes imperiled. Synagogues don't charge people to attend services, except for High Holidays. Over time we have seen High Holiday services spring up for people who either go to Shabbat services at synagogues for free or who don't go at all. So synagogues are increasingly unable to survive financially.

The problem is one of multiple instances of *hasagat g'vul*, transgressing someone else's boundary. Especially after Covid and with the explosion in remote services, synagogue memberships have plummeted. Finances are precarious. Many shuls have closed. The situation went from difficult to dire.

One solution is to fund more partnerships. If other organizations wish to assume functions traditionally done by synagogues, let them do it in some sort of conjunction with local synagogues. This could be a win-win for both parties.

Robert Frost defined home as "the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." The shul has been the home to Jewish people for thousands of years. In Israel we see the mosaics of ancient synagogues; across Europe we see the landscape of the abandoned synagogues of destroyed communities. New organizations

have their role to play, but the shul is the backbone of Judaism. Once the synagogues are gone, it will not be easy to bring them back. Health care is more reliable than resurrection.



**Rabba Epstein:** When it comes to business, Jewish law allows competition between two residents of a city, or even within a neighborhood (Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 156:5). Even if you know you will take customers away from your fellow, you are allowed to pursue your own success. That said, you are *not* allowed to put your fellow completely out of business (Chatam Sofer CM 61).

Today we are seeing an increase in people seeking Jewish experiences outside of the synagogue—b’nai mitzvahs at summer camp, independent rabbis who perform lifecycle events, innovative prayer experiences, and much more. Are these cases of healthy competition, or are they, as Rabbi Wolpe states, a clear case of *hasagat g’vul* and a trend that will put our synagogues out of business?

It is understandable that this phenomenon may feel threatening to synagogues, which are, as Rabbi Wolpe says, home base for the Jewish community. What will happen if people continue to look outside synagogues for new experiences?

But perhaps there is an opportunity here to look at these “disruptions” a bit differently.

The Talmud in Baba Batra 21a records a discussion between Rava and Rav Dimi about a case of two teachers who live in the same neighborhood. The first, who is employed, teaches only a few subjects; the second, who is not yet employed, could teach more. Should you fire the first and hire the second? Rava says no, because without competition, the second teacher will become too comfortable and neglect his responsibility. Rav Dimi disagreed, arguing for firing the first teacher since “jealousy among teachers increases wisdom.” Both of them will work harder, because they now know they are in competition with each other! A competitive spirit can

actually raise all ships, and how much more desirable is this when our core mission is engaging Jews in Torah.

The fear of new ideas and models is rooted in a scarcity mindset, a sense that there are not enough resources or people to go around, so we can’t afford to take risks. I would argue, however, that finding new and creative ways for Jews to connect to their tradition will bring more people into the mainstream community rather than distancing them, eventually expanding the pie altogether. Indeed, many synagogues are also becoming entrepreneurial themselves, seeking new ways to reshape and revamp programming from within, often inspired by what is happening outside their doors.

Judaism has always held this dichotomy of the old and the new. The job of rabbis and educators is to honor both of these pulls, grounding themselves in tradition and the wisdom of Jewish text while continuing to bring new modalities, voices, and perspectives into our millennia-old Jewish conversations.

The Jewish community must support innovation in Jewish practice, education, and experiences. Whether that innovation is found within synagogues’ walls or outside them, the whole community benefits from healthy competition, from change, and from new ways of thinking about and engaging with Jewish tradition. We can trust our rabbis and educators to rise to the occasion and bring out the best in themselves and those they serve. \*