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Haredi Faith: Theology and the Draft Controversy

*Reliance on miracles is not a sustainable
political theology*



A STORY IS RELATED in the Talmud about Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, the wise and astute miracle worker, finding his daughter distressed at having confused a container of vinegar for one of oil when lighting the Shabbat candles. Hanina, unfazed, abates her worry by saying, “He who said to the oil that it should burn can instruct the vinegar to burn.” And so, says the Talmud, the candle “burned continuously the entire day, until they brought from it light for havdalah” (Ta’anit 25a).

The charm of the story is multilayered, a kind of personalized Hanukkah miracle (but on Shabbat) that doesn’t even require oil at all. On a deeper layer, it is not really a miracle story but a theological teaching: The difference between flammable and nonflammable substances is a

mere earthly illusion. What makes oil ignite is not its physical properties but God, the true cause of every effect.

The Talmud in its wisdom, however, relates this tale as a miracle, an anomalous divergence from the laws of nature that govern our everyday world. We do not attempt to light our Shabbat candles with vinegar because, as the Talmud teaches several pages earlier, we are “not to rely on miracles” (Ta’anit 20b). Rabbi Hanina is the exception that demonstrates the rule of nature to which we are beholden in our everyday lives.

In the following lines, I will argue that when it comes to matters of civic life, central elements within Israeli Haredi society—the society in which I live and where I proudly raise my children—have defined a faithful life on God’s earth in a radical and somewhat anomalous way that shifts the balance between the natural and the miraculous in strong favor of the latter. Given current challenges concerning Haredi participation in Israel, this definition requires urgent adjustment. The future of Israel, no less, hangs in the balance.



A relatively recent example of how this definition of faith shows up in Haredi thought is the work of Rabbi Aharon Shub, *mashgiach ruchani* (spiritual guide) at Yeshivat Beit Meir. In lessons he delivered to students (later published in his book *Shaarei Aliyah*), he was abundantly clear about what a life of faith entails: “All the practical actions we perform make no impact on the actual outcome... there is no correlation between the labor we input and the ultimate results, which are wrought entirely by the Creator.”

The phrase “no correlation” sounds extreme. Is there really no connection between the outcome and the human initiative and labor we invest in trying to reach it? Are we wrong to assume that

a real-estate developer will probably have a higher income than a schoolteacher? Are we misguided to expect that earning a degree from an elite medical school will probably enhance a person's earning potential? To do so runs against how we—everyone, Haredim included—live our lives. When we find ourselves in financial distress, we will be sure to work overtime, look for a side job, or reduce expenses. In a similar vein, a childless couple wishing to beget children will, in time, turn to in vitro fertilization (IVF) technology or other options of fertility treatment. We do not rely on miraculous unforeseen events to carry us out of difficult circumstances, and we know it would be folly to do so.

Yet I am convinced that Shub did not consider his teaching innovative or novel. He was merely reiterating a simple article of faith he had received from his own teachers. In his 1971 *Sichot Mussar*, the Haredi leader and head of the Mirrer Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Shmuelovitz asserted that “the extent of one's labor is immaterial, for each person will attain that which he was predestined to receive.” Citing Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, known as the Chafetz Chaim, he noted that a person who struggles for his livelihood is akin to somebody hurrying to work who pushes the train car from the inside to speed it on its way. The thought that there is a causal relationship between work and income is no less nonsensical.

Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, too, the first spiritual guide of Pon-evezh Yeshiva and a prominent rabbinic leader, expounded on the theme that “augmenting effort (*hishtadlut*) will never lead to greater achievement.” Somebody who gives credence to earthly endeavors denies the fullness of faith in God and is guilty (on some level) of heresy. The natural “ways of the world” that indicate otherwise are but a trial, a mirage that tricks us into disbelief and attributes to nature what is in fact God's will. While it is incumbent on us to make some minimal exertion, the capital-T Truth is that our efforts are wholly

inconsequential. In fact, those on a high enough level of devotion would rely on virtually no earthly effort, thereby allowing Divine providence its full expression. For Rabbi Zundel of Salant, buying a weekly lottery ticket sufficed.

I could go on with citations, but the message and persistence of the idea is clear (as is its uncomfortable proximity to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination). The result of this approach, common to rabbinic thinkers of Haredi society, is a constant negotiation between faith and earthly living. Faith in God and the significance of one's actions in the secular space of earthly living are inversely proportional. Those of little faith live under the illusion that acts matter, while the faithful realize that they are exactly that: acts that disguise the reality of God's choreography. Trust in God encroaches on trust in human endeavor in the physical realm, and absolute trust entirely negates it. To quip, the material becomes immaterial.

This “negation” approach—faith as the negation of human works—is a new one. Certainly, it is based on sources that indicate the futility of human action. Ecclesiastes, with its list of earthly vanities, is one source that comes to mind. A second is the midrashic critique against Joseph's attempts to escape Egyptian incarceration by his human efforts. A third is Luzzato's statement whereby work is the human tax incurred for Adam's sin; absent his (original) sin in the Garden, there would be no need for human efforts. Yet the faith model of 20th-century Haredi Judaism has made two novel and fundamental expansions of this smattering of sources.

First, it has made this mindset ubiquitous, intrinsic to how the Haredi Jews see themselves and the world. As I will show, sources such as Ecclesiastes are exceptions; they make important points against a backdrop of a general rule accepting human endeavor as a given. In today's Haredi society, the opposite is the case, swapping the exception for the rule—that human endeavor is futile and

meaningless. Second, it is extreme. Though some sources indicate a tension between faith and human action, precious few will deny any correlation between human endeavor and results. Such approaches would lead us down a deterministic alley that raises troubling questions over the nature of prayer and the veracity of human accountability. Given such a framework, human justice and the commandment to pursue it become an elaborate, even paradoxical, fiction.



The entire biblical narrative of the Jewish people and their relationship with God is a tale of deep human involvement in earthly affairs. From the forefathers to the Children of Israel who settled the land, all tended their flocks, worked the land, fought wars, engaged in statecraft, and made alliances with other groups and nations. Faith, of course, is a central part of the Jewish mission, yet it does not curtail or negate earthly works. It rather pervades them. Shabbat, by way of illustration, does not stand in tension with the six days of labor. It redirects them, infusing them with holiness as part of a sacred cycle of work and rest.

In this vein, the Talmud (Nida 70b) mentions three matters that Rabbi Yehoshua taught the elders of Alexandria. All three matters relate to human achievement in various areas of earthly conduct. One of them runs as follows:

“What should a person do to become wealthy?” He said to them: “He should increase his business and conduct his dealings in good faith.” They said to him: “Many have done so, and it did not avail them.” [He answered them:] “Rather, they should pray before the One to whom wealth belongs, as it is stated: ‘Mine is the silver, and Mine the gold.’” (Chaggai 2:8)

The other two areas Rabbi Yehoshua addressed, wisdom and children, follow the same pattern. In all of them, we must engage in worldly activity and add a prayer to Him who bestows the earthly pleasures of wealth, wisdom, and children through earthly means. After each statement, the Talmud asks and answers what Rabbi Yehoshua meant to teach us: “One without the other is not sufficient.” We need them both.

Rabbi Yehoshua’s clear message is that the path to wealth is paved with stones of work and commerce. Indeed, the connection between effort and results is a simple and self-evident assumption about God’s world. Shmuel called himself “vinegar son of wine” because his father would check up on the family’s property twice a day, while he would check only once (Hullin 105a). Shmuel’s plain assumption is that his father’s extra vigilance was praiseworthy and would yield better results. Moreover, the concept of *haadafa*, making “extra money” in excess of basic income, is a familiar concept in the halakhic system (see, for instance, Ketubot 66a). That no Talmudic commentary questions the theological foundation of this concept — that one can make more money by working harder or longer — shows how foreign today’s Haredi ethos is to that of the Talmud itself. Rabbi Avraham Gombiner, in his commentary to Magen Avraham 248, permits a person to leave the Land of Israel for the purpose of amassing wealth even beyond his basic requirements. Apparently, human action is causally efficacious, and the Talmud recognizes it as such.

Rabbi Isaac Arama therefore advises us “not to abandon diligence and effort...for behold, when a person has done everything he can, it is impossible for the majority not to earn good reward for their labor.” *Sefer Ha-Ikarim*, the classic 15th-century text, states that “diligence and industry is advantageous and necessary in all human matters” and recommends that people engage in all manners of human endeavor. And the great 13th- and 14th-century biblical commentator Rabbeinu

Bachya warns his readers to “never neglect the matter of earning an income” and urges them to be occupied with worldly matters. More recently, the renowned 19th-century work *Peleh Yo’ez* states that outcome will forever be based on “a person’s industry and diligence.”

In other words, it is up to us to engage the world fully, while ensuring we do so in partnership with God. This is the attitude of Rabbi Nissim of Gerona, who comments in his homilies that the verse “For it is He who gives you strength to make wealth” (Deuteronomy 8:18) must be read simply and literally: We create wealth by means of our own labor, yet it is God who gives us the capacity to do so. “It does not state that Hashem, your God, gives you the wealth [...] but rather that although you create the wealth by your own power, remember that it is God who grants you the power” (*Derashot Ha-Ran* 10). Faith and human industry are not at odds with each other but complementary. Human industry is what we do. Faith—the infusion of the Divine into our world—defines how we do it.

As noted, there are sources that indicate the contrary, but they remain few and far between. Why did the Haredi ideology take such a radical turn, elevating rabbinically marginal ideas that negate the value of human endeavor as a denial of Divine will? What changed in the 20th century?



Haredi Judaism is distinguished by a unique strategy to combat the threats modernity has long posed to religious life. The rival strategy, that of Modern Orthodoxy, is, in a nutshell, education. Modern Orthodoxy, in name and ideology, accepts modernity as a fact of reality and strives to integrate what is good and positive in modern life into religiosity, rejecting what is negative and dangerous. Such acceptance and engagement come with inherent, undeniable risks.

Unwilling to take such risks, Haredi Judaism adopts a simpler and inelastic strategy: withdrawal. By isolating itself from modernity, Haredi society attempts to keep the claws of liberalism—its individualistic values, caustic culture, and scientific pretensions—away from the delicate fabric of religious life.

Set against the irresistible forces of Enlightenment, emancipation, and secular movements that have sucked in Jewish youth—among them, Zionism—the strategy proved to be an abysmal failure in Eastern Europe. At the outset of World War II, the Orthodox remnant had dwindled to a remarkable low. In Israel, however, owing partially to significant support on the part of the Jewish state, it has met with unprecedented success in building what has become its enclave society. This isolationism is not merely a technical description of Haredi society. It defines a mindset, an internal motion, an identity that determines its every interaction with the broader polity. It is, itself, a faith.

Is isolationism a viable philosophy for religious life? The answer depends on how one views the world. If earthly reality is replete with value and meaning, goodness and Godliness, then the very concept of a segregated Haredi space becomes religiously and morally untenable. There can be no withdrawal from the world, modern or otherwise, if the earthly reality, in all its richness, is where God's commandments are meant to be practiced. If the Tree of Life is implanted within the garden of *derech erez* (the way of the earth), then the only way to eat its fruit is to live within the spheres of the earthly. But if this is not the case—if the Tree of Life grows outside of the world, leaving the secular space devoid of meaning and bereft of significance—then isolationism becomes a valid and realistic option. As Rabbi Yaakov emphasized in Pirkei Avot 4:16, the entire world becomes merely a vestibule for reaching the World to Come—and who in his right mind invests attention and resources in vestibules?

The Haredi faith model rose to prominence together with its isolationist strategy. When taken to mean that human industry in worldly affairs is futile, “vanity of vanities,” Haredi faith itself dictates a segregationist model that channels all investment and resources into the realm of the spirit. It provides the primary foundation for a society that sees itself as ontologically distinct from non-Haredi Jews and delineates a division of labor that has passed the test of many decades. *We*, the Haredim, focus on Torah study, religious devotion, faith communities, Hasidic courts, personal growth, religious education, and so on. These are matters of the spirit—things that really matter. *They*, the secular—the Haredi-secular dichotomy tends to leave out the complexity of the religious Zionist space—focus on all the rest. Moreover, all are welcome to join. When a Haredi yeshiva student invited his secular (Channel 12) interviewer to join him in the Torah study hall, the latter replied that there are other pressing issues, such as army service, that he must tend to. “Don’t worry,” retorted the yeshiva boy. “God will take care of that.” Precisely. Or, in the words of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai—perhaps the greatest protagonist of isolationism among the Talmudic sages—“others will do the work on your behalf” (Berachot 35b).

Times, however, are changing. The unanimous Supreme Court decision from June 25, whereby all Haredi males of conscription age must enlist in the IDF, sends a sharp message—not from the court, but from Israel. In contrast with other court interventions in Israel’s delicate social issues, this time there was no backlash from the Israeli political Right. After months at war, thousands of dead and wounded and many more families who have borne the harsh burden of having fathers away for months on end, even those who sympathize with Haredi communities see the status quo as unsustainable and indefensible. Changes are already afoot, with careful movement toward greater participation in the Israeli workforce, education and higher-education

apparatus, and, of course, military service. With this, a reformulation of the Haredi faith doctrine is essential. Continuing to preach a doctrine that negates the world even as we begin a deep reengagement with our earthly reality is a recipe for disaster, akin to a space shuttle returning to earth while leaving its fuel in space.



Three points are noteworthy in this context.

First, an essential aspect of a person's endeavors is the satisfaction he experiences from his achievements. The Psalmist writes of the joy of eating the fruit of our own labors (128:2), and the sages go so far as to state that "one who eats the fruit of his labors is greater even than [one who is] God-fearing" (Berachot 8a). Natural joy in what we do is essential to a good and healthy life. Devaluing earthly activities can work for a person (or group) totally immersed in a world of Torah study and religious devotion. He will draw his fulfillment from his achievements in the study hall. However, as more and more Haredi individuals join the workforce and engage in the productive earthly labors, it is essential that they internalize the value of their works and take satisfaction in the fruit. The Psalmist turns heavenward to declare, "May Hashem rejoice in His works" (104:31), and the same is true of us: Our work must be a source of pride and gratification rather than one of shame and frustration.

Second, among the benefits of Haredi entry into broader Israel is the opportunity to translate all that is good and pure within Haredi Judaism into the proverbial cultural language and thereby join the discourse over the national character of Israel. This newly invigorated conversation and its inevitably broad-minded outcomes will not happen if Haredim go through the gates of Israel's workforce, army, and academy

with their heads hung low. Entering the arena as one does a spiritually lethal zone—one rabbinic colleague categorized leaving Kollel as facing a firing squad—will deny us the capacity to raise and elevate it. This issue is doubly relevant in an era of Jewish sovereignty, when our earthly actions are, unlike in days of old, consequential not only for the private Jewish sphere but even the public sphere of the State of Israel—authorities, institutions, public spaces, municipalities, and so on. The entry of Haredi Judaism into these spaces ought to bring them Divine blessing—a blessing that cannot shine if their very engagement is perceived as a curse.

Third, the growth and rise to prominence of the Haredi sector ensures that Israeli public policy will be heavily influenced by Haredi attitudes. How does a Haredi individual define the goals of the Jewish state? What ought the country be proud of? How shall we realize the scriptural injunction “You shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6)? The answers to these questions involve deciding between the theological approaches to earthly reality: Does it contain inherent value or not? To be more specific, should the State of Israel invest in medical research, technological development, innovative food engineering, and solving the great questions and challenges facing humanity in our times? Should we take pride in important inventions, Nobel prizes, distinctions in the field of science, research, and other critical fields of the secular world? In line with the Haredi faith doctrine described above, the answer of Rabbi Chaim Greinman, *zt”l*, is a definitive no:

We are used to thinking that the advancement of medicine adds life, and that someone who contracted a certain disease today would be treated, which is not the case had he contracted it yesterday, and if it were not for traffic hazards many people would be living with us today, and some accident victims remain alive because they were

treated in a timely fashion. However, all thoughts are founded on heresy concerning Divine supervision, for in truth, the one who is destined to die never remains alive, and the one whose days are not over does not perish. [...] The truth is the precise opposite: so-and-so was condemned to die, and therefore fell ill with a disease that has no remedy. [...] Those who make a statistical accounting of how many died in a given month and how many perished in road accidents are engaging in inadvertent heresy and mislead readers into relating everything to chance, as if all things are random and happenstance. (*Michtavei Hitorerut* 6a)

In a state run by Rabbi Greinman, there is zero value in medical research, technological advancement, and the development of other areas of the world. Intuitively, we believe there to be a correlation between the development of IVF and the relative paucity of childless couples; in Rabbi Greinman's reality, medical matters are of no consequence. "Superficially, it looks like people make a difference. The truth, however, is that everything is an absolute lie, and there is nothing but God," wrote Rabbi Zeev Getzel in *Ashira*. The future of Israel as a country that invests in infrastructure, promotes a robust economy and strong army, and supports research and development in cutting-edge fields, in contrast to one that denies the value of such activities and subsists on minimal investment, depends on these rabbinic assertions being appreciated for what they are: well-meaning conceptions of faith that are incompatible with the responsibilities of our time and place. They are fitted to a non-earthly reality in which we dwelled, for several decades, allowing the Torah world to rebuild and grow strong. Today, we are called to move back to the earthly abode where God intends us to live, partnering with Him in mending the world and healing its fractures. The time is ripe; great matters beckon.



Faith is a dynamic quality. It ebbs and flows, never remaining the same for too long. This axiomatic statement is true of humans as individuals. You don't have to be a soldier to know that there are no atheists in foxholes, and you don't have to be an atheist to know that foxholes are helpful tools for reminding us of the human vulnerabilities we are inclined to forget. But it is also true of humanity in history. Faith in the age of penicillin and birth control is different in kind from faith before the scientific revolution, just as faith in the age of prophecy is incomparable to faith in the absence of prophecy. The Talmudic sages teach that the One God has multiple faces (Mechilta, Exodus 20:2), and the same is true of our faith: It has many expressions.

As Haredi society faces a profound turning point in its relationship with Israel, the deepest shift will be a matter of faith. The strength to make the shift, in mind and in deed, draws on the impressive structure that our fathers bequeath us.

In a wonderful twist, the tale of Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa we opened with concludes with the miraculous flame being used for lighting the havdalah candle. Why is this significant? The Talmud teaches that the reason why we recite a blessing over a candle after Shabbat terminates is that this was when Adam, by Divine inspiration, discovered fire (Pesachim 54a). Throughout Shabbat, we rest from human labor, foremost of which entails fire: “You shall not kindle a fire in all your abodes on the Sabbath day” (Exodus 35:3). On Shabbat, we bask in Divine light alone—an experience that empowers us, at Shabbat's termination, to kindle our own light. In a similar vein, the miraculous Shabbat candle of Hanina was itself the source for the havdalah light. And so, too, for us. For decades, Haredi society has lived by a Shabbat light and its attendant faith mindset. As we make

havdalah and move into the realms of deed, we kindle a new light
from the power of the old flame. *