

## Contemporary Fads and *Torah u-Madda*: A Response to Alan Brill

Yitzchak Blau

Response by Alan Brill

**Abstract:** This essay challenges Alan Brill's contentions that the prevalent *Torah u-Madda* ideology must be both updated to match contemporary intellectual trends and altered to match the reality of its community of adherents. The paper argues that Brill accepts current academic thinking much too readily, that Brill depicts much greater dissonance between previous generations and our current generation than actually exists, and that he errs in many of his generalizations about Orthodoxy. At the same time, it notes the contributions of Brill's work.

**Biography:** Rabbi Yitzchak Blau teaches at *Yeshivat Hamivtar* in Efrat, Israel. He has published articles on Jewish ethics, Zionism, Jewish education, twentieth century rabbinic figures, and other aspects of Jewish thought.



# Contemporary Fads and *Torah u-Madda*: A Response to Alan Brill\*

Yitzchak Blau

Alan Brill's "Judaism in Culture: Beyond the Bifurcation of *Torah* and *Madda*"<sup>1</sup> challenges popular assumptions in the *Torah u-Madda* camp. This, in itself, is a valuable endeavor on a number of grounds. On the most basic level, each community needs to occasionally recheck the soundness of its fundamental ideology and to perform an evaluative comparison of the multiple models available. Secondly, in communities blessed with a towering rabbinic presence such as R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, ר. י. ד. ס., or R. Aharon Lichtenstein, there exists a danger of followers mechanically parroting their leader without a real understanding of that leader's position and what it takes to bring it to fruition. Lastly, any evaluation of Judaism's interaction with *madda* needs to differentiate between the *madda* in question during different eras. Thus, Brill's essay, though I shall contend that its argument ultimately fails, serves as a helpful prod towards thinking about where *Torah u-Madda* currently stands.

Brill adds three important points to the ongoing *Torah u-Madda* discussion. He focuses our attention away from the intellectual elite to the common *Torah u-Madda* suburbanite. This latter group is not in reality, and may not be capable of even in theory, working to sharpen their understanding of Torah and humanity through study of Kierkegaard, Yeats

and Charles Taylor. Rather, they view a college degree as the gateway toward professional advancement. They study *madda* with an eye towards the best law and medical graduate schools and the plum jobs that follow. If so, much of the literature on *Torah u-Madda* with its intellectually elitist bias fails to directly address the majority of its practitioners.

*"Each community needs to occasionally recheck the soundness of its fundamental ideology."*

While Brill's point does have some bite, two responses ought to be made. Even if only a small percentage of the population proves capable of real intellectual integration, a trickle down effect enables that percentage to influence a much wider circle. Brill argues that the Rav drew heavily upon the work of Karl Barth (p. 17). No doubt, few Modern Orthodox Jews will ever open up *Church Dogmatics* or think about how Barth's thinking might illuminate aspects of Judaism. However, they do access such integration through the Rav's writings. A significantly wider circle will read *Halakhic Man* and *The Lonely Man of Faith* and benefit from our community's exposure to Barth even if they never even hear the mention of his name. This wider circle of readers includes many rabbis and educators,

so that these ideas will find even wider dissemination in the community. Secondly, the less intellectual crowd may still be benefiting from skills imparted by their college educations, such as clear and persuasive writing or the varied modes of thinking required by various intellectual disciplines. Even if their motivation is purely or mostly pragmatic, they can still grow from the endeavor.

The previous paragraph spoke of the intellectual benefits of exposure to a good university education. David Shatz points out another model of *Torah u-Madda*, admittedly less emphasized in Modern Orthodox literature, which questions “to what degree should theories and methods of secular disciplines be used to secure not intellectual ends, but vital practical ends in our daily lives.”<sup>2</sup> The figure of Adam I in R. Solovetichik’s *The Lonely Man of Faith* serves as a good basis for this model. As Shatz explains R. Soloveitchik’s position, medical, psychological and other forms of broader knowledge enable the religious Jew “to fulfill the biblical mandate of *mil’u et ha-arets ve-kinshuba*; to achieve dignity and majesty; to carry out their responsibilities to others and, further, by increasing the modalities for improving human welfare, to expand the range of these responsibilities; and, finally, to fulfill the mandate of *imitatio Dei*.”<sup>3</sup> This form of *Torah u-Madda* applies to a larger population, and we should develop its implications further as it should influence important decisions such as choice of career.<sup>4</sup>

Brill’s second contribution is his emphasis on the broader range of Jewish literature. Indeed, much of the spiritual insight we are looking for can be found in the *aggadah*, *midrash*, philosophical literature, *piyyutim*, mystical accounts and sermons produced by the best of our people. An exclusive focus on *gemara* may blind us to this treasure trove, but a broader sweep reminds us that we need not always turn to Augustine and Pascal for inspiration. Indeed, we look forward to Brill and others mining this literature and introducing the community to the spiritual gems found there. Brill’s third contribution, a demand that we rethink the *Torah u-Madda* question in each era based on the *madda* of that era, will be discussed toward the end of this essay.

*“Brill seems much too ready to accept current theories just because they are current.”*

Other aspects of Brill’s article prove much more problematic. He seems much too ready to accept current theories just because they are current. Although he explicitly rejects espousing regnant theories just because of their novelty, his terminology may reveal that he does just that. Among other similar expressions, Brill argues that “the literature on *Torah u-Madda* becomes outdated (p. 2),” cites “current thinking about the Maimonidean controversy (p. 6),” informs us that “contemporary social theory shows (p. 12),” accuses the Modern Orthodox writers of not caring if their

“material is out of date (p. 17),” demands that the “*Madda* should be up to date (p. 23),” complains that the “*gemara*, in Modern Orthodox discourse, is conveniently, but anachronistically in dialogue with Freud (p. 24),” and bemoans that writers on *Torah u-Madda* ignore the work of Peter Berger and Clifford Geertz, even though it finds “widespread acceptance in college educated circles (p. 4).” From this perspective, Brill apparently need not argue for the correctness of Berger and Geertz as one simply has to accept them after contemporary intellectuals have “paskened.”<sup>5</sup> Now, I certainly accept that much wisdom can be found in the halls of the universities but I am not willing to quickly endorse any theory currently in vogue in these halls. Such an approach means that we would have been communists in the thirties and logical positivists in the forties.

*“Should we assume that the Torah includes all necessary wisdom or should we also look elsewhere?”*

Moreover, I contend that Brill’s reliance on Berger and Geertz leads him astray. Both those thinkers emphasize that every religious position is also embedded in a particular culture. From this perspective it seems that the medieval debates on *Torah u-Madda* should have little to no bearing on contemporary manifestations of the debate. This explains Brill’s emphasis on being up to date. However, a reader perusing the medieval literature is

struck by the similarity to current debates regarding *Torah u-Madda*. Should we assume that the Torah includes all necessary wisdom or should we also look elsewhere? Is it too dangerous to read material that contradicts our tradition? These remain the central questions through the last thousand years of the debate. When Rambam states: “accept the truth from whoever utters it”<sup>6</sup> and Judah Alfakar counters that “[Torah and Greek wisdom] cannot live together on the earth and be like two sisters, for the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian ones. To this our Torah says: No, my son is the living one, and yours is the dead,”<sup>7</sup> the parallel to contemporary debates rings clearly. While the answers to these questions certainly change somewhat as per the *madda* being confronted, a good deal of overlap exists whether the *madda* in question is Aristotle and Averroes or Mill and Nietzsche.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, Brill’s reliance on ideology as embedded in a particular culture runs the risk of replacing ideology with sociology. In other words, he tells us to pay less attention to official ideology and more attention to what people are actually doing. Modern Orthodox Jews are not integrating Torah with William James but rather combining Torah with “Dougies, the NCAA playoffs and Blockbuster movies (p. 11).” Brill’s article implies that we need to revamp our ideology to match this reality. Perhaps the opposite is true. Rather than letting less committed laity set the agenda, we should try to

influence the reality to catch up with the ideology.<sup>9</sup> Otherwise, one runs the risk of holding that whatever is practiced is right by definition.<sup>10</sup>

All too frequently, Brill tosses out strong assertions without any effort to demonstrate their truth. He cites approvingly Geertz's maxim that "a legal code does not determine conduct (p. 3)." What does this mean? Does the *Shulchan Arukh* have no impact on how Jews live their lives? Such a position is patently absurd. It must mean that their conduct is not solely determined by the legal code. Yet this point may be trivial unless we can figure out just how much of the average observant Jew's life is guided by the code. Until one clarifies this point, we do not know whether to accept Brill's assertion and whether or not it says something banal or something important.

*"Rather than letting less committed laity set the agenda, we should try to influence the reality to catch up with the ideology."*

Brill states that the Hirschian school has created a Judaism that supports middle class values, but rabbinic texts do not support those values (p. 13). Again, I have no idea whether or not to accept this argument, as Brill does not bother to explain what he means. Does Brill mean that contemporary Modern Orthodox Jews are interested in physical pleasure and creature comforts to a degree not supported by texts in the rabbinic tradition? This

might be true, but our tradition includes a wide range of opinions on issues of physical enjoyment and asceticism and he at least needs to make a start of explicating his argument.

In fairness, Brill does mention, toward the end of his essay, several examples of the clash between earlier authorities and modern sensibilities. Yet his claims there are unconvincing. He contends that we fail to follow Rambam's view on the role of intellect in life, Ramban's views on asceticism and visiting doctors, and the Vilna Ga'on's rejection of petitionary prayer (p. 24).<sup>11</sup> Here, he stacks the deck unfairly by citing minority positions as the traditional consensus and then pitting that consensus against our current thinking. Ramban may have viewed visiting doctors as a *bi-de'avad*, but that is not the normative position of halakhic decisors.<sup>12</sup> Regarding the example from Rambam, R. Meir Halevi Abulafia and others sharply point out that Rambam's granting more value to understanding than performance represents a deviation from the mainstream Torah position.<sup>13</sup> And despite the thinking of the Vilna Ga'on and some qabbalists, the simple reading of *Tanakh* and *Hazal* is in favor of making requests of God in prayer.<sup>14</sup> Thus, none of the examples truly show an estrangement between moderns and our tradition.

In the same section, Brill concludes with a remarkable assertion: "We have to admit that we are constructing and there is no given of Torah (p. 24)." Nothing in Brill's article forces us to admit that

“there is no given of Torah” and we should not admit anything remotely resembling such a claim. *Yabadut* (Judaism) may incorporate great leeway, but it also includes a closed set of sacred scripture, authoritative traditions, dogmatic beliefs<sup>15</sup> and a defined halakhic process. This has not prevented diversity and debate, but it had drawn boundaries within which that debate takes place.

*“Viewing Rambam as a model in no way entails blindly following his position on every issue and ignoring all other authorities and arguments.”*

According to Brill, there exists a “Modern Orthodox strategy of limiting Judaism to only *halakhab*” which “precludes appeals to the canon of Jewish spirituality (p. 14).” It is difficult to make any sense of this claim. While Haredi yeshivas tend to put all their emphasis on study of *gemara*, Yeshiva University and *hesder* yeshivas offer classes on *Tanakh* and Jewish thought as well. The curriculum at most Modern Orthodox yeshiva high schools includes a much wider range of subjects than at their right-wing counterparts. Indeed, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, who bears the brunt of Brill’s criticism, cites this as a significant advantage of our community’s approach.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the above, Brill tells us that Rambam would consider much of Modern Orthodox theology about God to be idolatry (p. 24). Surely, such a

sweeping and significant claim should be backed up by more than a footnote referring to two chapters in *Moreh Nevukhim*. When the reader actually looks up the chapters and discovers that they refer to the doctrine of negative attributes, that reader can only conclude that Brill’s statement is rather misleading. For thousands of years, Jews have referred to God as benevolent, wise, powerful and the like, despite Rambam’s position on positive attributes. This leaves us with two options. First, we can reconcile our terminology with Rambam’s position by understanding those statements as referring either to Divine actions or, despite appearances, to negative attributes (God is not ignorant or weak etc.). Alternatively, we can conclude that Rambam’s position on this issue has been rejected. Either way, this has nothing to do with Modern Orthodoxy, as implied by Brill. Viewing Rambam as a model in no way entails blindly following his position on every issue and ignoring all other authorities and arguments.

In the citation that follows, sources cited in the accompanying footnote simply fail to clarify or justify Brill’s assertions. “Rather than pointing to the rejection of culture by an autonomous Judaism, current thinking about the Maimonidean controversy finds the opponents of the Maimonideans debating power, *paideia*, theology, laity, *qabbalah*, Church relations and regional autonomy (p. 6).” Let us leave aside the fact that the list of what the controversy was really about is so

long and varied as to render the sentence almost meaningless. A footnote listing “current scholarship on the Maimonidean controversy” includes articles by Ram Ben Shalom and Dov Schwartz. Ben Shalom’s article contends that Rashba softened his tone against the philosophers out of fear that the Church would become involved. Schwartz’s article showed that one medieval rationalist attributed the talmudic admonition against studying “Greek wisdom” to a fear limited to a particular historical time. Neither article does anything to support Brill’s point about the inaccuracy of the Modern Orthodox conception of the Maimonidean controversy.

Brill’s criticism of R. Lichtenstein also misses the mark. He accuses the latter of using culture in the nineteenth-century way of Newman and Arnold, even though we now realize that culture is much broader than the canons of Western literature, incorporating “the entire functioning of a society.” Here, Brill gets too caught up in the terminology question. One can easily admit that culture has a broader meaning but only be interested in the narrower meaning. No doubt, culture can also refer to watching sitcoms and taking expensive vacations, but R. Lichtenstein legitimately contends that this is not the culture we want to focus our energies on. We value the narrower culture spoken about by the Victorians. If Brill insists on terminological precision, we can specifically refer to this as “high culture,” but that will not change the fact that it is a

roughly defined body of material we think quite worthwhile.

*“One can easily admit that culture has a broader meaning but only be interested in the narrower meaning.”*

Brill also writes that R. Lichtenstein’s approach leads to a Modern Orthodoxy that knows more about Christianity than Jewish thought (p. 22). I have already challenged his assertion that Modern Orthodoxy stands for a narrowing of the Torah curriculum and agreed with his contention that we should look in the broader range of Jewish literature for spiritual insight. However, we can still affirm that gentile writers did certain things more effectively. *Kinot* and *selihot* can be quite moving, but our poetry does not match that of Auden and Yeats. We have no novelists like Dostoevsky, no playwrights like Ibsen, and no modern defenders of religion like Lewis and Chesterton. R. Lichtenstein’s position does not depend on denying any place for Jewish writings on spirituality. It only assumes that non-Jewish writers have conveyed certain ideas more profoundly and successfully and we suffer from ignoring their works. There is no need to be ashamed of this, for rabbinic writing can retain its authority even without a monopoly on theological sophistication, psychological depth and clarity of expression. I also find it ironic that Brill faults this focus on Christian literature. Our worldview is

much closer to Christianity than to the postmodern thinking of Foucault and Derrida adopted by Brill, and we should be much happier to see our students reading Alvin Plantinga than Paul de Man.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, Brill never fully articulates to what degree he accepts post-modernist, historicist and relativist assumptions. Does he think we are so culturally removed from the medievals as to render their writings incoherent or irrelevant to us? Alternatively, do we employ their works for our own purposes even knowing that we distort the authors' intentions (assuming Brill allows us to speak of authorial intent)? Does he lapse into the radical skepticism that undercuts its own questions? Is his critique of R. Lichtenstein hopelessly trapped in the categories of the early twenty - first century? Will a writer on *Torah u-Madda* some fifty years from now complain that Brill is stuck in outmoded categories just as he complains about R. Lichtenstein?

*“Our worldview is much closer to Christianity than to the postmodern thinking of Foucault and Derrida.”*

Despite the criticism, Brill does helpfully goad us towards giving a fresh look to *Torah u-Madda* as manifest in our generation. We have reason to think that “the hermeneutic of suspicion” cannot be integrated into a Torah worldview as productively as the intellectual life of Victorian culture.<sup>18</sup> On the

other hand, if the Torah-only camp currently finds itself rather weak in producing Jewish thought with intellectual scope or psychological depth, this provides greater reason to look for help outside the canons of our tradition. Along similar lines, R. Lichtenstein returned to the topic of *Torah u'Madda* some three decades after his original essay on the topic and wrote that he now sees both greater danger and greater needs for *madda* than he did before.<sup>19</sup>

As I stated, Brill raises important questions and makes some worthwhile points. In addition, he does us the favor of provoking adherents of *Torah u-Madda* into thinking about multiple models for understanding their endeavor. Nonetheless, this reader did not find his call for a radical paradigm shift or his bold but bald assertions to be convincing. R. Lichtenstein and his finest students have produced significant essays employing his conception of *Torah u-Madda*. Although most Modern Orthodox professionals have not achieved the pinnacle of integration, they have been positively affected by the writings and teachings of those more successful and they have formed a community more intellectually sophisticated than the competition from the right and more resistant of prevailing societal and intellectual trends than those on the left. The former have reduced Jewish thought to monolithic simplicity, while the latter appear all too eager to identify Judaism with the current fad, be it relativism, post-modernism or a constant posture of

cynical debunking. Judged within this context, we have good reason to stick with our current approach, despite its many warts. Brill has not given us sufficient reason to abandon the prevailing model.

---

## NOTES

\* I thank David Shatz for his very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

<sup>1</sup> Brill's article appeared in the *Edah Journal* 4:1 (2004). All page references to Brill's article will appear in the body of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> David Shatz, "Practical Endeavor and the Torah u-Madda Debate," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 3 (1991-1992), pp. 98-149. The citation is found on p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> Shatz, "Practical Endeavor," p. 112.

<sup>4</sup> R. Lichtenstein, who clearly emphasizes the more intellectual aspect of *Torah u-Madda*, makes brief reference to this model as well. See his "Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict," in *Judaism's Encounter With Other Cultures*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Northvale NJ, 1997), pp. 222-225.

<sup>5</sup> According to Nancy K. Frankenberry and Hans H. Penner, uncritical acceptance of Geertz is a widespread academic malady. See their "Geertz's Longlasting Moods, Motivations and Metaphysical Concepts," in *Language, Truth and Religious Belief: Studies in Twentieth Century Theory and Method in Religion*, ed. N. Frankenberry and H. Penner (Atlanta, 1999), pp. 218-245.

<sup>6</sup> See Rambam's introduction to *Shemoneh Peraqim*.

<sup>7</sup> Cited and translated in "Maimonidean Controversy," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 11, p. 749

<sup>8</sup> For a similar discussion in a general philosophical context, see Leo Strauss's forceful rejection of historicism in his *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1965), pp. 9-34.

<sup>9</sup> David Shatz pointed out to me that influencing the masses is not so easily done. I agree that we need to include a definition of *Torah u-Madda* that expresses what we want the less intellectual crowd to learn from their university studies. At the same time, we must challenge all types of *Torah u-Madda* adherents to show good judgment and selectivity in their openness to broader culture. For example, an inordinate amount of television watching contradicts any authentic *Torah u-Madda*. The fact that many will find it difficult to accept that message does not free us from the responsibility to teach the truth.

<sup>10</sup> For a good critique of a writer granting sociology excessive influence, see Shalom Carmy, "Rejoinder: Synthesis and the Unification of Human Existence," *Tradition* 21:4 (Fall 1985), pp. 37-51. In response to an author's analysis of the appropriateness of Orthodox Jews vacationing at Club Med, Carmy writes "To equate this with a sociological question is to say that spiritual authenticity is a matter of figuring out what—if anything—Modern Orthodox Jews really believe, and then instantiating oneself as one of them....Is it good; is it worthwhile? The question seems beside the point."

<sup>11</sup> "Rejection" is Brill's term. In truth, the Vilna Ga'on downplays petition but does not reject it. See *Shenot Eliyyahu*, *Berakhot* 5:1 where the Ga'on contends that the praying individual should concentrate during the middle section of the *amidah* on completing the supernal *keneset yisra'el* and during *elokai netzor* on his or her personal needs.

<sup>12</sup> *Shulkhan Arukh*, *Yoreh De'ab* 336:1.

<sup>13</sup> The objections of Ramah and others are discussed in Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 92-95.

<sup>14</sup> R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring 1978), pp. 65-66; *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, ed. Shalom Carmy (New York, 2003), pp. 28-36. As R. Soloveitchik argues, the link drawn by *Tanakh*, *Hazal* and later authorities between distress and prayer suggests that petition is central to the endeavor.

<sup>15</sup> For a defense of Jewish dogma, see my "Flexibility With a Firm Foundation: On Maintaining Jewish Dogma" in Volume 12 of *The Torah u-Madda Journal* (forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> R. Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Living*, Vol. 2 (Jersey City, 2004), p. 321.

---

<sup>17</sup> Plantinga is a contemporary Christian philosopher who persuasively argues for our ability to maintain traditional religious epistemology and truth claims. See his *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, 2000). De Man was one of the fathers of deconstructionist literary theory in America.

<sup>18</sup> On this issue, see the exchange between R. Lichtenstein and William Kolbrener in the Spring 2004 issue of *Jewish Action* and Jonathan Sacks, "Torah Umadda: The Unwritten Chapter," *L'Eylab* (September 1990), pp. 10-15.

<sup>19</sup> A. Lichtenstein, "Tovah Hobkumah im Nabalab," *Mamlechet Kobanim ve-Goy Kadosh*, ed. Y. Shaviv (Jerusalem, 1996), pp. 39-43.

## Alan Brill Responds

I thank R. Blau for pointing out the need for me to develop more fully my idea of Judaism and culture, and that a fuller presentation of Geertz would be needed for that purpose.

It is unfortunate, however, that Blau failed to address my essay's purpose or its fundamental thesis on the possibility of using a cultural approach. Contrary to his claims, I did not attempt to engage post-modern thought, use Derrida, deMan, or deconstructionism—and I never questioned authorial intent or rejected modernity.

Peter Berger and Clifford Geertz are in the modernist—not post-modern—canon, trodding the well-worn paths of functionalism, personal meaning, and symbolism. Geertz analyzes the world as a traditional humanist, and his work has been accepted for thirty-five years, serving as the standard in many fields. There are few works in religion, history, and literary criticism that do not refer to him (Fifteen years ago, he was already assigned to juniors at Maimonides High School.) And today historical and social sciences still write in his wake. A further discussion should engage his critics like James Clifford, Robert Wuthnow, Charles Taylor, or Hans Penner. But it is odd that Blau enlists Penner's polemic against Geertz, since Penner's materialistic and reductionist approach is contrary to any version of Orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup>

I sought to begin thought process to determine which cultural thinkers are most useful to us: Geertz, Taylor, Ricouer, Newman, Conger, evangelicals, and others. We only gain by joining the conversation.

The review credited my article with calling for a need to examine the community's elitism, yet missed the point. I wanted the reader to consider (1) that culture is not outside of Judaism; (2) that Judaism is richer than the bifurcation model allows; (3) that halakhic analysis is a thin description; (4) that we are constructed using the past; (5) and that Judaism plays itself out in a concrete way. These ideas are hardly evident to a community that treats ideal halakhic frameworks as reality. Perhaps I should have explained more of the basics.

I start from the text, and assume that the needs of the generation cannot eradicate the past. I see *Torah u-Madda* as quest and journey, not as a destination. In questing after the Divine, we write articles to open up debate, not to talk to the committed only or build walls against new ideas. Blau and I have a serious disagreement about the nature of Jewish tradition and its canon. He has a closed canon, and when needs change, his narrow conception opts to eradicate the past in the eternity of the present moment. My critic's canons (both Jewish and general) were formulated in mid-twentieth century, in which traditional texts can only be "mined" for

their modern value. I prefer an open, multi-faceted canon that discusses the wider positions of Maimonides, Nahmanides, and the Vilna Gaon and where the full ideas of *Sefer Hasidim*, Maharal, and the Ari can still speak to us.

Rather than “substituting sociology for theology,” I tried to set the ground for future theology. I asked to probe the role of work, family life, playing with one’s children, and building community within the ideology for the future theology of the laity. Hirsch’s Torah and *Derekh Erets* addressed the needs of a community of families that combined a cultured bourgeois life with Torah; *Torah u-Madda* helped Yeshiva College students navigate the use of their college years. But we still need a theology for the family in contemporary America or a discussion of many other constructions of Orthodoxy. High culture’s lack of influence in suburbia is not due to economics or laziness. Contemporary people learn practical skills through role models and sound-bites; their application of the high theory in popular culture often creates results the opposite of their original intent. A reality check is very much in order—especially since the yeshiva world produces leaders who capture their hearts and minds of the laity.

Nor was my essay a rejection of Rav Lichtenstein’s important approach to combining the best of Western culture with Torah. I pointed out, however, that *pace* Berger, Geertz and Taylor, his approach is only one cultural construct, embedded in his time. It

seems that R. Blau illogically mixes up very different elements of modernity, post-modernity, academia, and historicism. This conflation only obscures the issues.

Despite its missing the mark, Blau’s critique admits the following points that can bring a dogmatic position closer to mine: (1) contextualizing R. Soloveitchik as influenced by dialectic thought, and R. Aaron Lichtenstein as influenced by Victorian thought as mediated by new criticism; hence neither thinker’s ideas should be regarded as eternal truths; (2) acknowledging that Modern Orthodoxy’s Rambam is closer to Maimonides’ critics (R. Meir Abulafia and R. Abraham Adret, who selectively use the conservative elements) than it is to Maimonides himself, and that Maimonides’ own position on divine language has not been accepted; (3) advocating reading evangelical thinkers like Alvin Plantinga, whom no one sees as value-neutral; (4) acknowledging that Modern Orthodoxy uses Bible as the means of fostering its own sense of modernity and openness, usually through reading the text as reflecting the human condition, despite the fact that literary criticism assumes that texts are a human product.

Yes, my categories will date themselves as all human texts do, but non-dogmatic products are not futility. Goethe wrote “all theory is gray and the golden tree of life is green.” And following German Romanticism, R. Hirsch enthusiastically presented Judaism as embracing progress and the eternal tree

of the *mitsvot* as reflected in the ever verdant blossoming culture. Yet, the historian of Neo-Orthodoxy, Mordechai Breuer describes the doom of later Hirsch followers who dogmatically justified Judaism based on Schiller, decades after that poet lost his cultural resonance. We dare not risk the same epitaph.

Paradoxically, Blau's position places him as modernist knowing more Victorian thought than R. Hayyim's *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*—in contrast to those that teach R. Hayyim of Volozhin without any need to explain his thought in contemporary terms.

Ultimately though, his essay offers an approach that turns all into ideological dogmatism and relegates his opponents to orthopraxy. I am also against the recent trend toward orthopraxy and am an advocate of Jewish thought. To imply otherwise is uncalled-for rhetorical snowballing.

I strive to be in the center by explaining *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* in modern categories. I do not “mine” the tradition—I strive to be part of it. Tellingly, Blau's thinking excludes we who are steering a middle course to explain Jewish texts, who seek God in our lives, and who are formulating theory for our age.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It is common in certain Orthodox circles to use a rhetorical device whereby the author finds a citation from a critic of Western thought and uses that citation to dismiss the field under discussion, or even all secular studies without any need to sustain an argument. A prime example was Orthodoxy's dismissal of psychology in the 1950's and 1960's. Knowing that an argument from traditional views of the soul would not be accepted, some portrayed the entire discipline as contrary to tradition and sought to ridicule it by means of out-of-context citations. Blessed with hindsight, we now see that R. Abraham Twersky's integration of psychology into Torah has been more successful than superficial past critiques.