

Toward a Creative Orthodoxy

Spiritual creativity is free, it does not take any external influence into account; rather, it creates in accord with its inner spiritual process. And the more faith in itself grows, the more it ascends to the heights of truth.

-Rav Kook, Orot Hakodesh vol. I pp. 176

“Stop living in poverty! Use your treasures!”

-The Great Eagle, from Rebbe Nachman’s “The Seven Beggars”

In this essay, I want to explore the contribution creativity as a broadly applied value might make to our Modern Orthodox communities. It has been my experience as a rabbi and educator that compared to other segments of the Jewish community, creativity plays a secondary role at best in Modern Orthodox identity. The marginalization of the arts and the absence of a robust culture of creativity, as evidenced in the lack of serious courses in the arts in Modern Orthodox day schools, high schools, and yeshivot, have been to our detriment. In the realms of rabbinic formation, professional development and synagogue life as well, creative development is often secondary to training in the details of organizational life. And among students and laypeople, mistrust of artists - people who put creativity at the center of their lives - remains. While in the broader society, cultural production and sharing have become increasingly accessible to anyone with a laptop or PDA, we cannot in all honesty characterize the Modern

Orthodox community as typifying the generation of creative new ideas and artistic forms. I argue here that by broadening our definition of creativity beyond halakhic discourse - as a broadly applied value, and as art *qua* art - to include new forms as well as new content, Modern Orthodoxy can accomplish its mission as a bridge and leader of *klal Yisrael* with greater power and effectiveness.

Lack of support for the arts was something I experienced firsthand in my own Modern Orthodox upbringing. As an emerging artist in a Modern Orthodox High School, I looked for support for my artistic growth, which I saw as an essential element of my Jewish growth, but found little. My Modern Orthodox high school offered not a single class in the arts, with the exception of an elective in liturgical choral music. Instead, I enrolled in art classes at Yeshiva University, but completed them within a year, for at the time the Modern Orthodox flagship university offered a total of 4 art classes for all undergraduate students. I was not simply interested in art; like many of my peers, I was looking for ways to recognize and express myself in Torah and in Jewish life, and I felt that the arts could help me do that. Some of my closest friends, frustrated by what they perceived as a lack of meaning and relevance, left the Orthodox community and halakhic observance; I traveled to Israel and enrolled in a Modern Orthodox yeshiva in hopes of finding teachers and peers who would support a deeper integration of tradition and creativity.

“We’ve got to pin that boy’s wings to the ground.” This is what a Modern Orthodox rabbi and teacher said, 3 months into my Israel experience, as I was considering leaving the yeshiva. Troubled by the absence of overt spiritual depth, of an authentic marriage of Torah and art, I had begun to explore other options. I trust that this teacher was well-intentioned, that he cared for me enough to want to see me buckle down to the job of studying Talmud and Halakhah day in, day

out. I assume also that he, being something of a *litvak* in orientation, was skeptical of the kind of spiritual experiences he probably thought I was looking for, and wanted me to find a humbler, truer form of spirituality in the beit Midrash. The problem was that he failed to see me clearly. I was not looking for spiritual pyrotechnics; I was looking for spiritual creativity, a celebration of the uniqueness of each student in the yeshiva, and a way to build a religious life on the foundations of that celebration. I was looking to study Torah with both sides of my brain. But there was little support for a young person to explore a fully halakhic, yet creative approach to Torah. In fact, my search for a more creative, self-expressive Judaism was met with suspicion. Why is this?

The “old-style” definition of Modern Orthodoxy as a synthesis of traditional Judaism and modern life limits our self-understanding. For decades the binary orientation of Torah u-Maddah, together with cultural realities in 20th century America such as the Protestantization of religious life,¹ led to an emphasis of mind over heart, Torah study over prayer, and communal conformity over subjective experience and the interior life. The concomitant emphasis on Halakhah in Modern Orthodox discourse and ethos produced a culture of conformity, in which not only observance per se but also social membership requirements superseded respect for individual uniqueness. As a result, the disavowal and delegitimization of subjective experience – and with it, suspicion and mistrust of individual creativity and artistic expression – became normative. Modern Orthodoxy was a response to the challenge of autonomy. By establishing the value of the individual, by attempting to foster brave leadership and by challenging notions of rabbinic infallibility, Modern Orthodox leaders and thinkers validated autonomy. However, that validation is circumscribed within intellectual autonomy and typically does not extend to creative autonomy; it invites new ideas but not new forms. As a result, Modern Orthodox discourse often

encourages both autonomy in content (new halakhic arguments, policy proposals) and conformity in form (academic thought-papers, op-eds) in intellectual output. Modern Orthodoxy has generated new ideas, halakhic positions and institutions, and we need to celebrate those accomplishments. But I believe our community, ghettoized in the left side of the brain, has achieved a fraction of what it could were it open to other, more creative and artistic modalities.

Now, I imagine that readers of this paper would have no quarrel with the notion that Modern Orthodoxy needs to encourage creativity. The problem is that creativity itself has been defined narrowly. Rather than an overall orientation for how we as Modern Orthodox Jews live and interact with the world, creativity is often limited to the realm of intellectual halakhic discourse. Other forms of creativity are marginalized or even stigmatized. We pride ourselves on Rav Soloveitchik's celebration of "man as creator" in *Halakhic Man*: "Halakhic man is a man who longs to create, to bring into being something new, something original." But the realm in which this longing comes to expression is Halakhah: "The perfection of creation, according to the view of halakhic man, is expressed in the actualization of the ideal Halakhah in the real world."ⁱⁱ (Less often quoted in Modern Orthodox circles is the Rav's celebration of Adam the first's creativity, which, though not specific to artistic creation, is both intellectual and aesthetic.) The Rav focuses his discussion of creativity on practical Halakhah, regarding non-halakhic categories as purely theoretical, with no real-world application.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet Aggadah can be applied as well as Halakhah – in the form of Jewish art and creative expression.

In the current moment of the life of Modern Orthodoxy, I believe that we need to build on and broaden the Rav's great gift to our community of foregrounding creativity as a central religious value. We need to extend this value beyond the realm of practical Halakhah, acknowledging the real impact applied Aggadah can have on our communities. I call this broader

category Aggadic Creativity, precisely because it is rooted in Torah categories beyond Halakhah. By Aggadic Creativity I do not mean simply a greater focus on the rabbinic genre of Aggada, though that too is important. I intend rather to point to a new way of encountering both Torah and life. Aggadic Creativity by definition goes beyond the realm of Halakhah, but it also suggests new, more poetic ways of thinking and approaching traditional categories and ideas. It encourages us to seek new forms of authentic religious expression, as well as new media in which to express our identities and ideas.^{iv}

Aggadic Creativity

To illustrate this shift in perspective from halakhic to aggadic creativity, I turn to a perhaps apocryphal tale from beyond the Jewish community, which tells of Lord Byron sitting for his written exams in theology. The final question dealt with the theological significance of the New Testament account of water turning into wine. As the other students wrote for hours, he sat and contemplated the blank sheet of paper before him. With one minute left for the exam, he picked up his pen and wrote this line: "The water met its master, and blushed." In response to a classical theological question concerning miracles, Byron eschewed normative approaches in favor of a daring poetic (what, in a Jewish context, we would call aggadic) one. We, too, need daring poetic answers to pressing theological and other problems, and we have riches upon which to draw in the Aggada itself and in later texts that follow in the aggadic tradition.

Picasso famously stated that "Art is a lie that tells the truth." Elie Wiesel explores the tension inherent in this statement in a passage from Legends of Our Time:

“What are you writing?” the Rebbe asked. “Stories,” I said. He wanted to know

that kind of stories: true stories. “About people you knew?” Yes, about people I might have known. “About things that happened?” Yes, about things that happened or could have happened. “But they did not?” No, not all of them did. In fact, some were invented from almost the beginning to almost the end. The Rebbe leaned forward as if to measure me up and said with more sorrow than anger: “That means you are writing lies!” I did not answer immediately. The scolded child within me had nothing to say in his defense. Yet, I had to justify myself: “Things are not that simple, Rebbe. Some events do take place but are not true; others are—although they never occurred.”^v

Aggada, which articulates Jewish existential truths in symbolic, meta-rational, and poetic ways, and art, which expresses non-verbal and non-linear aspects of human life, are intertwined. Aggada tells us of that which is true, even if it did not occur in historical time. Art allows us to identify truths that cannot be perceived solely with the rational self. What would it mean to apply a narrative, poetic, artful way of seeing to the central preoccupations of Modern Orthodoxy? What new insights would this inspire? And what would the typical Modern Orthodox teacher or rabbi say to this? What would Halakhic Man say?

It seems to me that Halakhic Man, for all his vaunted creativity, will never accept such illogic as that expressed by Wiesel’s narrator; and therefore, though Modern Orthodoxy argues for openness to modernity and makes special claims for relevance, it is severely limited in its ability to engage the “right brain” of our community, and cultivating creative expression as a cornerstone of Jewish life. The potential of Modern Orthodoxy to render Torah relevant to a broad modern audience is undercut by our ignoring or marginalizing subjective, intuitive, and

artistic expressions.

Though some serious attempts have been made to introduce TaNaKh, midrash and machshevet Yisrael to curricula, Modern Orthodox yeshivot, seminaries and rabbinical schools continue to privilege halakhic discourse. In the realm of Jewish education, Talmudic Aggada is often sidelined or skipped over entirely, with the claim that “we’ve lost the tradition of learning Aggada,” and accurate understanding of these nuanced, narrative-driven texts remains beyond our capacity. What is the meaning of this elision of a central aspect of Torah? It highlights the imbalance in Modern Orthodoxy between rational Halakhah and meta-rational Aggada, for it is the rigorous study of Aggada that trains students’ intuitions and artistic sensibilities. Refusing to engage with Aggada also demonstrates a fundamental mistrust and second-guessing of meta-rational creativity and meta-halakhic forms.^{vi} As a result entire spheres of religious expression have been neglected, and even halakhically normative streams of Jewish spirituality, including Hasidut, Musar, Sefardi spirituality and pathways developed by maverick Torah thinkers, often remain unexamined and unmentioned. So often we forget the many forms of “Orthodoxy” that have existed as sanctioned traditions in the past. When these are included in yeshiva curricula, they appear in truncated, intellectualized form in the guise of shiurim on Jewish philosophy and Jewish thought – but the relevance of Aggadic and *machshava* texts to students’ lives is often left unspoken.^{vii}

The privileging of halakhic discourse has two effects. First, it marginalizes people who do not think and express in the normative, rational-halakhic way described above. These include many students and lay-leaders, artists, non-lamdanim, and even rabbis who do not exclusively or even primarily view life through a halakhic lens. Those people are indeed part of Modern Orthodox communities, but too often Jewish learning leaves them cold because it offers them

only one channel for religious expression and creativity, that of Halakhah. In addition, these potential leaders often don't have a substantial voice in policy-making, think-tanks, conference-planning, and educating our children. Many of our educational programs, synagogue services, and public statements simply do not speak to many people within our community, and *kal vachomer* to those beyond it. This causes real alienation from the community for many people (not just those identified as "artists"), who feel they need to leave essential pieces of themselves behind upon entering Modern Orthodox community – or who must go elsewhere to find a home. Rav Kook wrote:

"Those whose general intellectual development has brought them to a state of being thirsty for thought and avid for new and vital ideas, being unable to find agreeable and healthy nourishment in Judaism, rich in varying ingredients, prepared by workers living in our midst, and acceptable to the new generation - they become alienated. Impoverished, they stray in every direction, following the ideas prevalent in the nation where they reside..."^{viii}

We lose people, creative and brilliant people, who want a way to connect to what they see as an authentic Judaism but simply cannot squeeze themselves into the narrow discourse they find in Modern Orthodox communities. They may even want to be observant, but they intuit that Halakhah per se does not encompass, much less exhaust, all of the religious experience they have or seek. Some who do seek a halakhic life gravitate toward the Haredi community, which, though to the right in terms of *chumra*, attitudes toward authority and many communal policies, typically offers a more lucid and consistent presentation of hashkafic principles. Many more

remain outside of *shmirat mitzvot* – and not on the basis of ideology, but simply because of the absence of personal resonance and relevance. An enhanced emphasis on Aggadic Creativity, in Jewish learning and policy as well as the arts, can have a great impact on the inclusivity of our communities, expanding our vocabulary and making Modern Orthodoxy more relevant to a greater range of people and the questions with which they are preoccupied.

Further, the lack of Aggadic Creativity as expressed through the arts deprives Modern Orthodoxy of non-normative ways of thinking and expressing ideas, and this is our great loss. When we deal with educational concerns like how to deepen our students’ connection to prayer and how to help them to interiorize the Torah they learn, or pressing social issues like conversion or *aguna*, we are using a small percentage of our collective brains. In rabbinic collegial conversations, conferences and publications, we typically approach communal questions through the twin lenses of Halakhah and public policy. The task often centers on identifying hitherto unexamined halakhic opinions on thorny policy issues, arguing for new interpretations of Halakhah, and articulating new statements and messages to broadcast to the Jewish community. Make no mistake: these are critically important responses to dilemmas, especially those that are exacerbated by the intertwining of Halakhah and public policy. But much is left out of this discourse.

For example, do we use the arts to engage students in deeper relationship to God, Torah, and Israel? Do we explore prayer through poetry, as some cutting edge educators beyond the Jewish world do? Rav Soloveitchik wrote that “Prayer is an art. We have totally forgotten this art.”^{ix} But art can be prayer too, and can help us find our way back to prayer. In his *Orot HaKodesh*,^x Rav Kook writes, “Creativity is praise of God at its highest; and we have lost the ability to praise.” In order to address this, he writes, “We must return to belief in our own

creative process.”

In exploring new possibilities for the issue of *igun*, do we address the uniquely human element of each situation sufficiently? Do we mine aggadic sources and Hasidic texts for new and subtler ideas about conversion policies and secular Israeli law? For there are myriad texts that, though they may not directly impact our halakhic calculi or social policies, will certainly affect our collective ethos, will make known to us what we must pray for, will clarify our aspirations, and will influence how halakhic decisions are made and implemented. Yet every public conversation I have witnessed on these and similar topics remained firmly within the discourse of Halakhah, sidelining other literatures and approaches that would deepen our response to these and other pressing issues.

Beyond educational, halakhic and public policy issues, where do we find vigorous creativity in our community? Where are the Modern Orthodox artists, writers, musicians, and poets? Why do we not evaluate the health of our community through the lens of creative output? Where are the revelatory explorations in paint, music, theater, dance, and poetry of questions and tensions we face as people rooted in tradition and open to the world? Why are we not teaching our future rabbis to tap into their own creative capacities, that they might support their future congregants and students to do the same? Where are the teachers who reveal the song of Torah? Torah is a *shira*, a song. Are we singing it, or merely speaking the words in a monotone? Our community is in desperate need of that song right now: to reinvigorate Modern Orthodox spiritual life; to reach people who are left out of or left cold by Modern Orthodox institutions; to find creative ways of deepening our encounter with difficult questions and pressing communal problems; and to engage the hearts and imaginations of the rest of klal Yisrael and beyond.

Whether we begin with ethical reflection, theological contemplation, or utilitarian

motives, then, a commitment to make room for artistic creativity in our Modern Orthodox discourse is important. From an ethical perspective, we will create communities of diversity that welcome different types of thinkers and feelers. From a theological perspective, we will contribute to the ideal of *yagdil Torah vya'adir*, not only in the content of new *chidushei Torah* but in new forms of Jewish spiritual expression in new media. More specifically, we will support the recontextualization of Halakhah in theology, so that Modern Orthodox Jews will serve God through Halakhah, rather than serving Halakhah in God's place. And from a purely utilitarian standpoint, enriching our communities through the arts will attract more people, deepen our discourse, and perhaps even open us to new approaches to our most pressing problems.

Creativity is Traditional

The lack of emphasis on Aggadic Creativity cannot be attributed to a dearth of sources on the subject in our tradition. Torah is filled with sources on creativity, the inner life, and subjectivity; and many of these sources appear in the Aggada, and later, in aggadic traditions such as *machshava* and *pnimiyut*. Human creativity permeates – indeed, it is embodied in - every page of our sacred texts. I often remind educators that Rashi had no Rashi in his Talmud. He had only a fierce loyalty to the *daff*, to *kol HaTorah kula*, and to his own mind and questions. It was for later generations to incorporate his commentary in the page of Talmud. Therefore, I tell them, the white space on the edge of the page is key. It is where your students will write their own questions, insights and ideas. Who knows but that some of those may one day find a permanent home on the page itself?

The role of creative insight in the development of the Torah canon is clear. The famous Aggada in Menachot 29b of Moshe visiting Rabbi Akiva's beit Midrash is one way Chazal

expressed the necessity of new iterations of Torah, and the interpenetration of tradition and novelty. Though Moshe Rabbenu was lost in Rabbi Akiva's class, the content of that lesson itself turned to *halakhah l'Moshe miSinai* for its core rationale. New ideas are embedded in the initial revelation at Sinai; yet it is for later students to articulate and explicate them, and those explications may indeed be unintelligible to previous generations. This extends even to the realm of practical Halakhah, in which the student is required to learn from and serve the teacher (*shimush Chachamim*), but if the teacher's logic seems to be in error, the student has an obligation to interpret the Halakhah differently. ^{xi}

The generation of *chidushei Torah* beyond halakhic discourse is of primary importance - is raised almost to the level of mitzvah - in Kabbalah and Hasidut. The Zohar states that one is commanded to develop *chidushei Torah* on Shabbat. Chidush is not only celebrated but it is a defining feature of the religious life. For example, Reb Noson of Breslov, Rebbe Nachman's closest student and amanuensis, recorded his failing attempt one day to find a novel Torah insight. "Finally", he writes, "I pulled a *chidush* out of my little finger!"^{xii} Reb Noson took the notion of creative responsibility further, generating an entirely new form of Jewish religious literature in the form of prayers based on Torah lessons. Many of these creative prayers deal with the subject of creativity itself.^{xiii} This zealous commitment to creativity in Torah can inspire us to consider our own responsibility as *beni Torah* to be creative beyond the realm of Halakhah and in new forms as well as new content. It is a foundational teaching of Hasidism that Torah lessons are meant to be embodied, not merely contemplated, and that the student walks with the Rebbe's teaching, letting it guide him or her and become integrated into his or her being. Integration into the mind happens through learning, *chevruta* and *chazara*; other levels of integration require other forms. A student who paints a Talmudic *sugya*, or who expresses a *perek* of Tehillim

through dance integrates Torah in new and deeper ways.

Hasidism as Applied Aggada

In order to help us define Aggadic Creativity and articulate some of its essential characteristics, we will turn now to the literature of Torah that perhaps most explicitly develops the aggadic tradition in the post-Rabbinic period: early Hasidism. Hasidic sources provide unique categories that can contribute to a deeper approach to Modern Orthodox life because their authors reflected on the methods by which a traditional, committed Jew can honor meta-halakhic values without serving two masters. The Hasidic thinkers were preoccupied by questions of personal relevance for the masses of Jews in Eastern Europe who were not learned enough to find spiritual satisfaction in Talmud study and *pilpul*.

Beginning with the Baal Shem Tov, Hasidism used received kabbalistic language to convey new religious concepts. The Lurianic concept of *shoresh neshama*, for example, originally meant that each person's soul is a branch of a "soul-tree," whose individual identities are connected to a larger collective, and that those are in turn are linked to the root soul of the Tzaddik. The Besht used this concept in new ways as a cornerstone of his teaching, in order to articulate the religious significance of authentic yet non-normative behavior. A Jew might actually express his or her religious identity and connection to God in ways that are unique, even challenging of communal norms.^{xiv} The Besht taught that the language of the Amidah liturgy is precise:

Why does it not say, "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob", but rather, "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob"? To teach us that, like the Patriarchs,

every person has a unique relationship with God. ^{xv}

Witness the many Hasidic legends of communal salvation through the seemingly bizarre behavior – a boy blowing a whistle in *shul* on Yom Kippur, a mother’s extemporaneous prayer challenging God’s justice, or the love song of a simple shepherd - of unlearned Jews. The Besht’s friend and disciple Rav Pinchas of Koretz stated, “Where others have a Rebbe, I have my *neshama*”, thus raising the concept of *shoresh neshama* to the realm of religious authority. A later Hasidic tale extends this principle further, in the form of a story:

A woman came to the Kozhenitzer Magid and asked for a blessing for children. She’d been married 12 years without having a child, and she was at the end. The Magid told her: “The same thing happened to my mother – she had no child. She went to the Besht and asked for a blessing, and she brought him a beautiful coat she’d sewn for him. He received the coat with joy, gave her his blessing, and a year later I was born.” The woman stood up and said, “Thank you Rebbe! I will go right now and start on your coat. I’ll be back in a few weeks”. But the Magid stopped her: “No, you don’t understand. You see: my mother did not know the story.”^{xvi}

The early Hasidim argued that we are meant not only to live an inherited story, but to live a new story, one unique and unprecedented. The charge to identify, get to know, and live out one’s *shoresh neshama*, one’s unique way of serving God, was expressed in Hasidic communities in the form of various introspective practices, like *hitbodedut* (spontaneous personal prayer), *hitbonenut* (contemplative practice), and *sichos chaverim* (conversation with a friend about

personal spiritual issues). Taken more generally, the concept asserts the legitimacy of the subjective in Jewish life. This legitimation is often missing from our communal life, and it is the cornerstone of my argument for a return to Aggadic Creativity.

If each person has a unique *shoresh neshama*, what of the realm in which religious life is expressed? How can one's unique "soul personality" be expressed within the limits of a sanctioned, defined, delimited religious life and community? This question was addressed in early Hasidic thought in the related concept, taught by the Besht and his disciples, of *avodah b'gashmiyut*, service of God through the physical, which broadens the scope of *avodat Hashem*. This concept has broad implications: not only does it refer to serving God through physical activities like eating, sexuality, and business, but it softens the distinction between sacred and profane. Every moment, every situation becomes an opportunity for spirituality, for as the Zohar says "*let atar panui Miney*", no place is empty of God.^{xvii} While Torah study and prayer maintain pride of place in Hasidic thought, every moment is potentially sacred, and every thought, word or action can be sanctified. Lurianic kabbalah established the notion that there are sparks of primordial holiness in everything. The early Hasidic thinkers translated that into a practical program for a life of seeking and redeeming *nitzotzot* in every moment. Serve God in the workplace, in the family sphere, and in the commons, the Hasidim cried. In the 21st century, we must extend this to say: serve God with paint and brush, with music and dance, with poetry and prose.

It is no accident that Hasidism generated not only new concepts and interpretations of Torah, but new genres as well. Many teachings of Hasidism were transmitted in the form of tales, parables and metaphor. Rebbe Nachman's Tales form a unique corpus in Jewish literature, and even more traditional hermeneutic offerings make use of interpretive modes not found

elsewhere. In addition, *divrei tzachut* (*vertlach*), anagrams, and even riddles all make their appearances in Hasidic works. ^{xviii}

This radical elaboration of the aggadic tradition offers a unique model of what forms meta-rational creativity in Torah can take. Some dismissed these forms as frivolous, and many feared them as a threat to traditional modes of expression of Torah ideas. But the impact on the Eastern European Jewish community was enormous, both socially, in igniting the imaginations of countless Jews who otherwise would have been semi-engaged at best, and by extending an invitation to simple unlearned Jews to participate in Jewish exaltation. At this moment, in America, we are at a similar moment, in which the majority of our people remain unengaged, and we have a tremendous opportunity to open doors for them to enter Jewish life. Will they do it on the basis of halakhic practice and study alone? Some, a small self-selecting group, will, and we will celebrate them. Many others will instead seek communities and leaders, books and online media that speak more directly to their lived emotional and spiritual realities. And more will simply opt-out of a quest for meaning, choosing the dominant culture of entertainment, social networking, and celebrity over meaning, face-to-face community, and *chesed*. In order to speak to these alienated Jews, we need a language that will speak to the entirety of the human being. We need to honor the ineffable nature of humanity and each person's unique story. We need to cultivate personal relationship with God, Torah, and Israel. And we need to provide our people with tools to express their Jewish selves in a fuller way. This will not only give them a place at our table but it will deeply expand our own creative lives, individually and as a community, as well.

To summarize, Aggadic Creativity encourages subjectivity and celebrates a vision of individual uniqueness (*shoresh neshama*) that encompasses every area of life. It finds expression

in all areas of life in an integrated way (*avodah b'gashmiyut*), including through traditional forms and practices as well as new ones. And it generates new forms for expressing Jewish religious insights, forms that are creative, playful, and that challenge a purely rationalistic way of engaging Torah and life. Through the lens of Aggadic Creativity, every moment, situation, and challenge becomes an opportunity to express holiness in new ways. Nothing is beyond the scope of Torah; there is no gap between Torah and Maddah, or between Torah and the world. In Reb Tzaddok Ha-Kohen's famous words, "Torah is a commentary on the world, and the world is a commentary on Torah".

Benefits of Aggadic Creativity

Aggadic Creativity challenges the notion of Judaism as a subject, separate from the rest of our lives. For less affiliated as well as more affiliated Jews, it offers a vision of total relevance, and total hospitality, announcing that no part of you – neither left- nor right-brain, subjective perception nor personal expression - needs to be left behind as you enter into Jewish life. It not only acknowledges but celebrates each person's unique perspective. For, as Rav Kook wrote, "The most exalted talent is the ability to enter into the depth of our selfhood." ^{xix}

"There is no *beit Midrash* without innovation". Aggadic Creativity opens new thinking in the realm of Jewish education, beginning with the student's *shoresh neshama* and pushing educators to explore constructivist learning, the use of *chavurot*, and other modalities of empowered learning. Widespread integration of the arts into Modern Orthodox education can benefit every student. It will engage more of the student's mind, personality and identity. It will open new angles into Jewish texts and ideas and it will render Jewish history more vivid and alive. And it will empower students to be co-creators of their own educational experience

through artistic expression. Imagine the vibrancy of our classrooms, *batei Midrash* and shuls when they are filled with the sounds of learning, and with color, melody and movement – and when these are integrated, part of a whole educational picture. Here is Rav Kook’s vision of a creativity-centered Jewish educational approach:

It is not sufficient to be confined to superficial study alone. For the flame of the soul rises by itself, and it is impossible to prevent its flow. Expanses for new thoughts, that is what the soul demands constantly.

Superficial study can constrict thought, can damage it in its early stages. And regular superficial study, with shallow discipline, is what strengthens the sickness of narrowness of thought. With all our might we must redeem ourselves of this, to redeem our souls from those pressures, from Egypt, from slavery. ^{xx}

In addition, a return to the study and practice of Aggada will help us to address some of the central challenges facing the Modern Orthodox community: excessive Halakhic formalism, lack of devotion and personal connection to Jewish spirituality, and a dry, depersonalized approach to Torah. Aggada is the missing ingredient that re-theologizes Halakhah, restoring Halakhah to its proper context in human life. It charges us to build a personal relationship with God, Torah and Israel, such that our halakhic observance is an expression of that relationship. Aggada deepens one’s personal connection to Torah ideas, harnesses the imagination in seeing all sides of human situations to which Halakhah is meant to respond (a critical element of *psak*), and encourages personal expression, which leads to greater personal meaning. And Aggada restores a broader framework of relevance that enables true leadership to emerge from the beit

Midrash. ^{xxi}Expressing these insights and connections through the arts will enrich and enliven our communal conversation, awakening the curiosity and passion of our membership and especially our youth.

In moments when we encounter the edge of our ability to communicate our truths to the rest of the Jewish community, Aggadic Creativity challenges us to find new ways of speaking – through poetry, playful riddles and anagrams, through paint, a musical score, choreography and theatrical scripts. These forms have the power to transcend barriers that words cannot.

And finally, Aggadic Creativity offers the possibility of new revelations of Torah through the arts. As we engage in Aggadic exploration, for example in arts *batei Midrash*, not only are we engaged in rigorous critical thinking and traditional methodologies of *iyun*, but we are also engaging our intuitive selves, the right sides of our brain, our peripheral thinking and embodied sense, and as a result we uncover new perspectives in Torah: *yagdil Torah v'yaadir*. ^{xxii}

Applied Aggada: Toward a Creative Orthodoxy

This examination of a broadened understanding of creativity based on Aggadic categories leads to a new understanding of Modern Orthodoxy itself. Rather than defining Modern Orthodoxy in the traditional sense, as a policy-based community whose contours are shaped by Zionism, women's empowerment, and openness to central aspects of modernity, we can instead define Modern Orthodoxy as a *method* for holding the tension between tradition and creativity.

Rooted in commitment to creativity and drawing on myriad traditional Torah sources and diverse streams of Jewish thought, Creative Orthodoxy offers a variety of forms for negotiating the tensions embedded in contemporary life, especially those represented by the clash of Halakhah and meta-halakhic values such as egalitarianism and universalism. These forms

include innovative *piskei halakhah*, public policy discourse, and methods of interpreting Scripture and rabbinic texts. But they also include other modalities, ways and approaches to text and life, especially the arts, in order to offer relevant, creative, responsive ideas and solutions to pressing problems. Creative Orthodoxy challenges facile solutions and conventional wisdom, and, in addition to offering new *solutions* to problems through Halakhah, it offers new *questions* to old answers through Aggadah and art. Artists are valued as thought-leaders of Creative Orthodoxy; learners, from Day School children to rabbinical students, are exposed in deep and sophisticated ways to the arts; and the cultivation of subjectivity, of the student's own unique perspective, is a cornerstone of curricula and training. Drawing from the wellsprings of tradition, using all the resources of classical Jewish text and methods, with a fearless openness to the wider world and a concern with current issues, Creative Orthodoxy can bridge the roots and the leaves of the tree of Judaism in ever more innovative ways.

In order to serve the Jewish community and the world, Creative Orthodoxy will articulate questions of meaning, spirit and the relevance of Judaism. Appealing to the arts will enable it to do so in new and powerful ways by bringing Torah beyond the beit Midrash and into every aspect of life. Creativity Orthodoxy will be *relevant* to the entirety of klal yisrael, including the many people who currently look outside the Jewish world for aesthetic inspiration and spiritual guidance. It will be *inclusive* of those with different learning styles, talents and personality types. It will be *responsive* to a fuller array of the human situation, more closely approaching (but of course never fully encompassing) the ineffable nature of our lives.

Creative Orthodoxy will *sensitize* us as we engage in *psak* and pastoral care, as we teach children in Day Schools, give sermons in shul, and take to the streets to solve communal problems. It will *deepen* us as we connect to the poetic side of Torah and life, generating new art,

music, poetry and dance, pushing us to become a truly generative community. As a result we will see new things: Torah insights, creative possibilities for our communities, and perhaps even solutions to critical dilemmas. It will *strengthen* us in transmitting Torah to our students and children. And it will *intrigue* our children to ask, “What is this service to you?” And we will answer: it is beauty in the service of holiness.

ⁱ For more on this, Daniel J. Elazar. *Community and Polity*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1976).

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. *Halakhic Man*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983), p. 99.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is possible that the Rav is basing this idea on the Gemara Brachos 10, which states “eyn tzayar k’Elokenu” – there is no Creator (Painter, Sculptor) like our God. This statement of ChaZaL simultaneously sets a limit to human creativity – no human will ever create a living thing, as God does – and opens the way to that human creativity. Imitatio Dei applies; as God creates, so you must create.

^{iv} An evaluation of the many halakhic issues relevant to the arts is beyond the scope of this paper. But as a rabbi, educator and artist, I want to suggest that it is critically important for those of us making halakhic and policy decisions to recognize how essential creativity is.

^v Elie Wiesel. *Legends of Our Time*. (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), preface.

^{vi} I use meta-halakhic precisely, to mean forms, streams of thought and methods whose sources are in areas of Torah outside of the literature of Halakha.

^{vii} The exceptions prove the rule: Rabbi Marc Angels’ beautiful and stirring article “Orthodoxy and Diversity” in *Conversations*. Issue 1 (Spring 2008) touches on Sefardi spirituality, aesthetics, and folkways. Rabbi Alan Brill’s “Judaism in Culture: Beyond the Bifurcation of *Torah* and *Madda*”, which appeared in the *Edah Journal* 4:1 (2004), has examined the ways in which Hasidic approaches might take us beyond the bifurcation of Torah and madda. I am building here on these and other comments.

^{viii} Ben Zion Bokser. *The Essential Writings of Abraham Isaac Kook*. (Ben Yehuda Press, 2006), The Inner Dimension of the Torah.

^{ix} Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. *Reflections of the Rav, Volume I*. (New Jersey: Ktav Publishing Inc., 1993), 146.

^x Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot Hakodesh*. (Jerusalem: The Rav Kook Institute, 1963).

^{xi} See Rabbi Marc Angel. “Orthodoxy and Diversity.” *Conversations*. Issue 1 (Spring 2008): 73.

^{xii} *Siach Sarfei Kodesh (Breslov)* (Jerusalem: Agudas Meshech HaNachal, 1987), vol. 2, par. 609.

^{xiii} See for example Likutei Tefillos, (Jerusalem: Agudas Meshech HaNachal), Tefillot 13, 58, 61, 71.

^{xiv} It is important to keep in mind that, although early Hasidic groups flirted with anti-nomianism and occasionally stepped outside of halakhic bounds – as for example in the issue of *zman tefillah* – as a rule, the Hasidim remained within Halakha. Breslov Hasidism offers a fascinating response to the tension of unscripted personal expression with Halakhic bound. Rebbe Nachman was very critical of other Hasidim who prayed after the halakhically appropriate *zman tefillah*. He emphasized total commitment

to Shulchan Aruch, and made its study a central practice among the Breslover Hasidim to this day. The wild creativity to be found in unscripted, non-liturgical practices like *hitbodedut* (spontaneous, non-liturgical personal prayer) had to be balanced by commitment to Halakhah, which serves as an anchor, corrective and safety net. But Halakhah alone is not enough; “It is impossible to be a good Jew without *hitbodedut*”.

^{xv} Quoted in *The Aryeh Kaplan Reader*, (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1983), 185.

^{xvi} Cf. Buber, Martin, *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 286.

^{xvii} A Hasidic teaching attributed to several Hasidic masters takes this idea to an extreme that is both theologically disturbing and ethically provocative. In it, the students ask the Rebbe why God created atheism. The Rebbe replies that when a pauper comes to you in need of help, you must act as if you alone can help him. Faith in God’s compassion will only distract from the need of the. In this way, the Hasidim attempted to bring the secular – even atheism – into the realm of holiness.

^{xviii} See for example, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh vol. 2* pp 132-135 (Jerusalem: Lashon Hasidim, 1960).

^{xix} Abraham Issac Kook. *Orot Hakodesh Volume I*. (Jerusalem: The Rav Kook Institute, 1963), 171.

^{xx} Abraham Issac Kook. *Orot Hakodesh Volume I*. (Jerusalem: The Rav Kook Institute, 1963), 174.

^{xxi} The concept of *shimush chachamim* is relevant here – book-learning alone, even of “Mikra, Mishna, and aggada” does not suffice in rabbinic formation. See also Rav Volbe’s introduction to *Alei Shur* on the need for a restoration of *shimuch chachamim* and integration of Torah study.

^{xxii} Programs of which I am aware that do explore this integrated mode of Jewish learning include the Atid Fellowship, the Drisha Arts Fellowship, Avodah Arts, Nesiya, LabaLights, and, in Israel, Elul and Alma. The latter four are pluralistic and not Modern Orthodox, but many Modern Orthodox rabbis and scholars were involved in their founding. We have much to learn from these initiatives and their leaders.