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165 East 56th Street, 4th Floor
New York, New York 10022
(212) 796-1672 | info@tikvahfund.org



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Israel at 75: A Nation Built Upon Sacrifice

BY AYELET FRIEDMAN

FEATURE

I have always had a profound admiration for the Land of Israel from a religious perspective. At a young age, I learned that my heritage was rooted in the land and that my forefathers sacrificed everything they had to ensure their posterity would inherit this God-given gift. I listened with awe to accounts of the miracles the Jewish people merited simply because they were chosen by God. Despite my pre-existing respect and love for Israel, it was only through reading the great speeches of Israel's most visionary leaders that I also became imbued with a sense of pride and appreciation for the modern, hardworking statesmen who helped mold Israel into the remarkable nation it is today.

Among those trailblazing leaders, Menachem Begin and David Ben-Gurion stand out for their determination, passion, and commitment to our people. These qualities were perhaps best encapsulated in two speeches given at the moment of, and hours following, Israel's independence.

David Ben-Gurion was the first prime minister of Israel and one of the key figures involved in the creation of the state. He was a thoughtful, yet compassionate speaker, known for his intellectual depth and political acumen. When announcing the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, he not only galvanized the Jews living in the new State of Israel to defend their land, but also called on world leaders and diaspora Jews for support. At the same time, Ben-Gurion addressed Arab leadership, paving the way for their eventual acceptance of the state.

Ben-Gurion began the Declaration, saying, "The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people." He attests to a fundamental truth—that part of our Jewish identity, even in modern times, is tied to Israel, and what happens in the land should affect us wherever we are as well.

Soon after, Ben-Gurion explains that generations of Jews have prayed for, and wished to visit, the Land of Israel. My own great-grandmother, who escaped the Holocaust, had that dream, one she was sadly unable to realize. Ben-Gurion implies that in honor of those who could not reach our homeland, we must act on their behalf, supporting and investing in the new Jewish State.

Another important theme in Ben-Gurion's address is the idea of "the natural right of the Jewish people to be like all other nations, standing up on its own, in its own sovereign state." Aside from Israel being our God-given land, it is only natural that we have the same right as other peoples to act for ourselves, defend ourselves, and, in Ben-Gurion's words, "preserve the peace." Ben-Gurion completed the speech by acknowledging that what the leaders of his time had accomplished was a collective age-old dream—a dream that endured in the Jewish soul for over two thousand years. Ben-Gurion and his fellow founders of Israel made this dream a reality and demonstrated that, though many of us remain dispersed throughout the world, the Land of Israel is our home as Jews.

Menachem Begin served as Israeli prime minister from 1977 to 1983, and was the leader of the Likud Party. Formed in 1973, Begin's Likud Party stood for conservatism, economic freedom, and love for the Land of Israel based on its historical and biblical roots. Begin was a charismatic and passionate orator who was known for his strong views on national security, Israeli sovereignty, and the indispensability of the Jewish state.

One of Begin's most compelling speeches was his May 15, 1948 radio address, delivered just one day after Ben-Gurion's declaration. With the public embroiled in fear of the impending Arab invasion, Begin spoke openly and honestly, transforming fear and doubt into determination and hope. He combined a sense of grounded realism with his own optimistic vision and unflinching belief in Israeli ability.

Begin reminded the nation that as Jews, "we are surrounded by enemies who long for our destruction." Even in the most peaceful times, this remains an unfortunate truth, and one that we, as diaspora Jews, must not ignore.

Begin infused his politics with references to Torah and Jewish faith—and this speech was no different. He explained that although the Jews were amidst war, they must still remember the fundamental values of the Torah that forever

remain ingrained in the Land of Israel. Determined to unify the people, Begin quoted the Bible, declaring, “remember, you were strangers in the land of Egypt” and “justice, justice, you shall pursue.” He was adamant that despite the dire circumstances, the Biblical obligation of communal support was unwavering. To survive, the people must unite. To flourish, they must build off of one another.

As hopeful as he was, Begin was honest about the difficult road ahead. “Difficult days lie ahead of us,” he declared. “Much blood will be spilled. Fortify yourselves. Strengthen your morale. There is no other way.” Few leaders possess the strength to speak such a hard truth in a time of grave uncertainty. Begin touched on the travesties that had befallen the nation in the past and those that they would soon confront, but spoke with vigor and purpose, reminding the Jews of their strengths and what they could accomplish together.

Though Menachem Begin and David Ben-Gurion did not always share a unified belief on how to act politically, they had a coinciding vision for the necessity of the Land of Israel to the survival and flourishing of the Jewish nation.

It is our God-given right as Jews to remain sovereign in the land, and we must never forget the sacrifices made for us and our future by men like Ben-Gurion and Begin.

We should never take for granted what we have been given by those who fought for us in the past and continue to fight today. We must hold onto the messages in their words and ingrain them in our minds, reminding ourselves of the founders’ unwavering belief in our national potential, and draw inspiration from those words to continue to build the Jewish state for the future.

Ms. Ayelet Friedman is a recent graduate of Bais Yaakov of Baltimore. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

The Importance of Extracurriculars

BY ARI UNGER

FEATURE

A lesser-known and yet still important Jewish value is to maximize one's potential. Through the Torah, and enshrined in halakha, each Jew receives a roadmap to improve. Moreover, everyone is made in the image of God and therefore has something to offer the world. Even recently, it was common to pursue these talents through serious extracurricular activities. More often than not, young people would even go beyond a school club to take their talent to the next level, such as studying in a conservatory or starting their own business.

Such pursuits can help a child advance towards a serious goal, as well as teach them important values like hard work, dedication, and persistence. Most importantly, through pursuit of a serious extracurricular, a child is better prepared to become independent when they are older, setting them up for long-term success.

A frequently cited claim against extracurriculars is that it puts too much stress on children, leading to mental health complications. Denise Pope, a lecturer at the Stanford School of Education, exemplifies this view, arguing that structured activities are bad and that kids need "downtime." However, after some consideration, it is clear that this child-rearing philosophy is directly related to "failure to launch syndrome."

Failure to launch syndrome, according to the Optimum Performance Institute, is when someone is unable to successfully transition to adulthood. Such a young adult is not able to live independently or support themselves. This trend is embodied by the growing number of children returning to live with their parents. According to Prudential Financial, over half of young adults aged eighteen and over in the United States live with their parents.

Uncoincidentally, this rise in cases of failure to launch syndrome has been happening at the same time as the rise of the modern parenting strategy of not putting any pressure on children. The link between low-stress early childhood

parenting and the failure to cope with adult life happens because one's childhood is their most formative years. During childhood, people develop the habits that shape them for the rest of their lives. If one never learns how to seriously pursue anything, even in a youthful, low-pressure setting, then they will certainly have a much harder time doing so in adulthood.

If advocates of kids, particularly affluent children, growing up with no pressure or obligatory extracurriculars, believe that children in wealthier neighborhoods have a lower risk of getting caught up in illegal activities during their downtime, it is simply not true. According to the Scottsdale Recovery Center, a prominent rehab facility in Arizona, people from comfortable backgrounds often have more money at their disposal, and can therefore more easily buy drugs and other vices.

Since the late 1990s, Arizona University professor Suniya Luthar has routinely conducted studies comparing psychological risks in high-income and lower-income teenagers. Each study yields similar results: teenagers from high-income families are more likely to experience substance abuse, anxiety, and depression than their lower-income peers. This often happens due to the pressure they feel to succeed and follow in their parents' footsteps. Both mental health and substance abuse are common factors in failure to launch syndrome.

If a child has a talent, then they should be encouraged to pursue it to the fullest. By doing so, they not only maximize their potential, but also avoid falling into dangerous situations. They learn important skills that can later be applied throughout all fields and seasons of life. Most importantly, by encouraging children to pursue serious extracurricular activities, there will be fewer people experiencing a failure to launch.

This is crucial for our society, because if we don't have an independent society, full of leaders who are accustomed to dealing with adversity, then the ideals our society was built upon will cease to exist. Slowly over time, they will be lost and forgotten. This is particularly important for Jews. In fact, one of the reasons Judaism has managed to survive throughout the centuries is because of the many strong Jewish leaders who have risen up throughout the generations, both because of our values and out of necessity. Incentivizing

children to function independently will be key to forming emerging leaders and generations that are self-sufficient and capable again.

Mr. Ari Unger is a rising junior at Manhattan Talmudic Academy. He resides in Riverdale, New York

Fortifying the “Torah” in Torah u-madda: A Plea to Modern Orthodox Day Schools

BY GAVRIELLA COHEN

FEATURE

Several weeks ago, Jewish teens across the country graduated from their respective high schools, running the gamut from officially “secular” public school to Haredi yeshiva—and everything in between. I myself graduated from a Modern Orthodox high school, among the more “modern” of Modern Orthodox high schools by most counts. Looking back on my four years of living and learning there, I’m both grateful and alarmed as I prepare for the next phase of life at a secular university.

The reasons for gratitude are many. I have formed deep friendships with fellow students I love and admire, studied with a few remarkable teachers who taught me about the heights of human culture and civilization, and acquired a foundational level of Jewish literacy that I hope to build upon. However, if the true purpose of an Orthodox Jewish Day School education is to prepare young Jews to defend and embody the Jewish way of life in the face of an often-hostile culture, I am alarmed. And I fear that Modern Orthodox education—at least the version of it I experienced—may be in real danger.

Modern Orthodoxy espouses a “best of both worlds” philosophy regarding how committed Jews ought to engage with the secular world. It holds that Torah study, halakhic observance, and secular learning are greatly important and can meaningfully enhance each other. This worldview is embodied in Yeshiva University’s motto “*Torah u-madda*”—advanced by the great rabbinic leader Norman Lamm and translated as “Torah and secular knowledge.” This aspirational synthesis of the best of the Torah world and the Western world aims to create students of deeply-rooted religious commitment who are also full-fledged participants in the workings of contemporary society. It aims to produce young men and women who are able to adapt to modern circumstances, including the advanced professional world, while never straying morally from the core commandments, practices, and ideals of Judaism.

The possibilities for such learning are rich and endless: a comparison of the Greek versus Jewish conception of the hero, an exploration of how Talmudic ideas influenced the American legal system, a careful look at Shakespeare's biblical inspirations, and a study of how Jewish bioethics can help us live well with many modern scientific miracles are all examples of synthesized study that Modern Orthodox thinkers have recently advanced. Rightly executed, a *Torah u-madda* education would put Jewish understandings in their rightful place as the bedrock of Western civilization and show young Jews why Judaism is—and always will be—fundamentally relevant to modern life. Such an education also allows Jews to recognize that modern knowledge, especially in fields like economics and engineering, can often strengthen Jewish life.

And yet the hierarchy of values—and thus the boundaries—of this *Torah u-madda* approach must be clear. Secular ideas of dubious merit should never be used to supplant deeply rooted religious truths. The proponents of a Modern Orthodox education must comprehend that certain core religious values infuse every part of secular existence with moral meaning and structure, while subjects such as science, literature, philosophy, and art can all serve to provide an even richer window into the workings of God. This can be, at times, a difficult and delicate balance. Yet preserving this balance is possible when Jewish institutions know what they stand for and why they exist. And as a student shaped in one such institution, it seems clear that Modern Orthodoxy is in the midst of a great struggle—and perhaps a true identity crisis—over what it means to be modern.

In the current age, the greatest threat to the integrity of the Jewish people comes not from the confinement of ghettos or torch-and-pitchfork pogroms. Rather, it stems from the unrestrained liberationist worldview that pervades modern culture. This worldview combines a limitless form of secular individualism and a gospel of moral subjectivity, all enforced by a new thought police that intimidates into silence (or actively punishes) those who might dare to dissent in the name of traditional religious principles and practices.

Many of the prevailing norms of modern culture are irreconcilably opposed to Orthodox Jewish values, and the very institutions that many Modern Orthodox Jews seek to join—such as mainstream universities, corporations, and law firms—increasingly allow no conviction to stand against them. Core Jewish and American ideals, such as judging individuals according to

objective standards of merit, celebrating the responsibilities of motherhood and fatherhood, adhering to core religious obligations, and even believing that there is such a thing as biological males and females, are now seen as forms of backwardness or bigotry.

With a philosophy that preaches the unbridled pursuit of selfhood shaped around individual desires, it is no wonder that orthodox religion has become an increasingly countercultural force. Religious values like communal responsibility and commanded obligations are discarded as barriers to a new form of idolatry: the deification of the unencumbered self. With modern technology to carry its message on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, this deceptively freeing model of moral degradation permeates every sphere of social life faster and further than ever. It increasingly pervades every facet of the lives of the young, including young Jews in Modern Orthodox schools.

In an earlier era, the American values of freedom and toleration allowed Jews to build successful lives in this country. Today, a perverted version of these same values has been weaponized toward far more dangerous goals. A nation that was once a bulwark of democracy and the symbol of the free world has become a battleground for the very soul of modern civilization. And a society that bends over backward to accommodate any individual desire—from polyamory to pornography, no matter how obscene—does not stop at accommodation. It veers increasingly towards a form of cultural totalitarianism in its mandate of support for identity affirmation.

In this cultural situation, the effect on Modern Orthodox Jewish education has been clear: schools find themselves torn between the embrace of modern values and the affirmation of enduring religious truths. Will they be modern? Will they be Orthodox? Or will they refuse to choose, leaving students confused, adrift, and left to choose for themselves?

In my own experience, the cult of modernism is winning. Old-fashioned ideas like modesty, duty, and halakhic observance are being revised, dismissed, or diminished in the name of a false form of sophistication. Popular culture is remaking halakhic culture in its image. And this great concession to—or really, embrace of—modern relativist values is undermining the moral clarity that young Jews need.

Courses on sexual morality for teenagers are prefaced with an open acceptance of manners of sexual conduct directly in opposition to halakhic norms. Israeli history and Zionist education are brief and shallow, with inadequate attention given to why the Jewish state is both just and necessary, or the existential threats that Israel routinely faces from its most radical enemies, both abroad and on its borders. Indeed, Jewish nationalism is sometimes treated as a challenge to the very modern values that have so perverted our moral imagination. We are encouraged to love Israel—and then shown why Israel does not live up to its supposedly progressive ideal. Not only is it confusing for the students, but it is confused in its own message.

This moral and intellectual confusion runs deep. The most modern of our Modern Orthodox schools seem unable to decide: Do they want to remake Jewish character so it fits, however uncomfortably, within the new progressive ethos, or do they want to build up a form of Jewish character rooted in reverence for halakhic ideals and practice? Do they want to accommodate and incorporate the oppositional values of modernity, or do they want to build young Jews with the Torah confidence to resist these anti-Jewish values?

There is great concern about the return and resurgence of anti-Semitism today. This too reveals the great divide in the Modern Orthodox soul: is the response to anti-Semitism a defense of tolerance at all costs, or is the response to anti-Semitism a bold affirmation of Jewish identity? While modern anti-Semitic incidents such as the vandalism of a synagogue or Kanye West's troubling remarks are met with the rightful rebukes and laments, the response stops there. Students are not challenged to understand the ideological roots of anti-Semitism in the modern age nor are students given any concrete strategies for fighting back as proud Jews rather than anxious victims.

Students are repeatedly slammed over the head with references to movements such as Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS), but they never study the underlying worldview of these movements, or learn how to respond to fellow college students who call Israel a "racist, white, settler apartheid state." If anything, they are made to worry that Israel might become such an awful place, and they are made to believe that tolerance and pluralism are the prime values against which to judge the virtue of Israel. The idea that Jews are a chosen people and that Israel is an exceptional nation, whose strength and survival are indispensable to the fate of mankind, is rarely raised or discussed in these current debates.

As a result, sadly, a large number of my peers became gradually less observant of halakha, less interested in Jewish law and history, and less invested in becoming pro-Israel voices in America. If being good means being modern, why defend and observe the old ways? Yes, many of my peers love the experience of being part of a Jewish community—the holidays, the inspiration, the *ruach*. But many of them also feel that they can wholly embrace the new ethos without sacrificing their Orthodox Jewish identity. We know where this pathway out of Modern Orthodoxy leads: to the assimilated Jews of the Pew Research Center report, who define themselves as “Jews of no religion.”

At present, these schools are producing many students with many of the basic tools of religious life and observance but little understanding of the moral and communal way of life that such modes of observance are meant to embody, protect, and perpetuate. They have studied Tanakh, but they don’t understand (as I learned from reading Leon Kass) that the Jewish vision of life stands apart—and in conflict—with its Canaanite, Babylonian, and Egyptian rivals. The very rivals that modern Jews must resist today, in new forms, if we are to stand our cultural ground.

Perhaps young people are expected to suffer these times of religious and moral questioning as part of the process of growth, maturity, and self-discovery. The problem, however, is that the grown-ups do not seem to know who they are either. And this leaves the questioning teenager all the more confused and our developing religious identities all the more in peril. If the schools themselves are unsure of what they believe—or if they advance a value system that is so clearly in tension with the biblical words and halakhic practices we recite every morning in our daily prayers—what are the students supposed to think?

Whether we like it or not, we are living in a period of intense cultural conflict. Yeshiva University, the institutional home of Modern Orthodoxy, is engaged in an ongoing battle about whether it should be required to recognize and support LGBTQ+ extracurricular groups. Israeli society is increasingly divided between traditionalist Jews and secular Jews over the soul of the Jewish state, as we have seen in the recent protests. Many American universities seem to have developed admissions policies designed to reduce the number of Jews admitted on the merits, and the culture of the mainstream universities seems

all too willing to tolerate and embrace attacks on Jews that would never be tolerated if directed at any other minority group.

A student graduation speaker at a major university in New York recently delivered vitriolic remarks about the Jews at commencement—and the university did nothing in response. We are sending Modern Orthodox graduates into this fray, ill-prepared for the fight they face. We know that they will encounter a collegiate experience that is fundamentally hostile to Israel and more than hostile to traditional Jewish values. What do we expect of these young Jews? What do my Jewish elders expect of *me* in this inevitable conflict of ideals?

Now, we should not resign ourselves to defeat. I believe—or at least hope—we can reverse the current state of confusion, and our Torah values can guide our Modern Orthodox schools through the current moment. But it will require decisive and courageous action on the part of our Jewish communities.

Any great revitalization of the Modern Orthodox educational system must start at the top, with school leaders who clearly articulate the foundational principles of the schools they lead. It is surely an incredibly difficult task to run a modern Jewish school. The leaders of such institutions must find a way to shape the headstrong independence of youth in light of thousands of years of religious tradition. They must never lose sight of the larger moral mission of Jewish education, even when surrounded by the deafening broadcast of competing trends and ideologies, as well as the ever-present political and cultural pressures of the surrounding secular society.

School leaders can never surrender our Torah values for political comfort. A truly effective head of school must possess not only the necessary managerial, organizational, and collaborative abilities, but also a clear moral vision rooted in tradition. Most importantly, they need the will to defend and preserve that vision in the face of great challenges. And it is not only saying the right words in an inspired speech. Those words must be backed up with policies that support and educate the students in the values that desperately need defending today.

Every teacher in the school—in both Judaic and general studies—must embrace and embody the Torah vision. I had many great teachers, including

many teachers whose cultural sensibilities were very different from my own and from whom I learned much valuable knowledge and wisdom. Yet however talented those teachers were, I was left wondering how an Orthodox school could permit an English class that featured “Queer Theory,” “Marxist Theory,” “Feminist Theory,” and “Monster Theory.” How Jewish Identity courses could explore the homoerotic lessons of gay marriage. How a Tanakh class spent time exploring the writings of Tamara Kolton, who posits that the story of Eden was a tale of Eve being sexually assaulted by God. How some classes could posit “gayified” readings of classics like *Frankenstein*. How we could be asked to take seriously the idea that pornography is actually empowering for women.

Welcoming such ideas into Modern Orthodox classrooms is not an admirable form of diversity or a way to expand our horizons. It is, rather, a direct assault on the moral mission of a Modern Orthodox school—and a missed opportunity to study the greatest heights of human culture in a way that truly embodies the *Torah u-madda* vision. It is a way to wreck utter havoc on the minds of teenagers who are at the most fundamental stage of their moral, mental, and religious development.

The curriculum itself also needs to be reimagined and restored. In the current situation, many Modern Orthodox students are not observing vital aspects of the halakhic life, such as keeping Shabbos, keeping kashrut, and praying daily outside of school. While our schools are doing an adequate job of teaching the *what* of Judaism, they are not adequately imparting the *why*. The most effective Judaics class at my own high school was on Jewish philosophy. We tackled the Jewish perspective on great philosophical issues such as free will, predetermination, and theodicy. We discussed a wide range of Jewish thinkers from the Rav to Ralbag. We mined the teachings and mysteries of biblical texts like the Book of Job. It was by far one of my favorite classes of my entire high school experience, and one that made me more capable of and open to understanding my own place in the rich Jewish theological and philosophical tradition.

It is of course essential to teach the textual skills necessary to learn halakha, Tanakh, and Gemara. We should never compromise on giving students the tools for a Torah life. But we also need to impart the Torah vision of the *good* life—including a meaningful exploration of the theological and philosophical

ideas that make up the moral foundation, and moral justification, for the very laws students are being instructed to keep.

We need to understand how the minutiae of Jewish halakha and the trials of Jewish history shape our Jewish identities. We need to make sure that students never feel disconnected from the commandments, especially when those commandments are countercultural. Jewish schools need to focus on the big ideas: the great Jewish thinkers, books, and ways of being that have allowed the Jewish people to carve out a remarkable path through history.

In writing this plea to my elders, I do not wish to sound ungrateful or to suggest that I know better than they do. Indeed, it is only because of a few wonderfully discerning and countercultural teachers that I see the world the way I do. But I do hope that Jewish leadership might come to see the world through the eyes of a recent graduate. It is a world of confusion for students looking for moral guidance.

We don't know whether direct violations of Jewish values should or should not be tolerated. We don't know whether teachings about modesty and sexual conduct will or will not be held to traditional halakhic standards. We don't know whether traditional Jewish identities will be celebrated or undermined. It is unfair to expect us to be courageous in the name of Torah values if the very Jewish schools we attend choose the pathway of uncritical accommodation or frightened silence. And it is unrealistic to expect us to create Torah communities in college if our Jewish high schools do not prepare us for what we are about to face when we get there.

Ms. Ella Cohen will attend Emory University after a gap year in Israel. She is the co-editor-in-chief of the Solomon Journal.

Allen Ginsberg and the Dilemma of “Bop Kabbalah”

BY JOSH STIEFEL

FEATURE

In 1957, the literary scene in Paris was dominated by existentialists and expatriates whose lofty novels formed the backbone of Western literature in the post-war period. These writers, whose profound influence was felt for generations, included such grand figures as Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and James Baldwin. And from the confines of the dingy Beat Hotel at 9 Rue Gît-le-Cœur, the 31-year-old Jewish writer Allen Ginsberg added his name to the list when he began the momentous composition of “Kaddish,” an elegiac poem that would shake the foundations of the literary world.

When he began “Kaddish,” Ginsberg had already made a name for himself as the seminal voice of the Beat Generation, a newly established school of poetry created by Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs in New York City. The Beats, as they became known, were a generation of poets dedicated to the veneration of the tragic figures of America’s grimy underbelly. In Kerouac’s infamous words, the Beats revered “the new angels of the American underground.” Ginsberg spurred the irreverence of the Beats’ iconic identity, as his gritty and emotionally charged writings were often imbued with expletive language and references to homosexuality.

With his explicit verse—eventually the subject of an obscenity lawsuit in the Supreme Court of the United States—Ginsberg revolutionized poetic form. Indeed, under Ginsberg’s guidance, the Beats staged readings of poetry over musical accompaniment—more akin to concerts than poetry readings. As true masters of these spectacles, the Beats would read their works before crowded venues in sermon-like tones, making soaring appeals to the spirits of the American zeitgeist. Amid this melodramatic influence, Ginsberg introduced an almost religious veneration to this new school of poetry. Within the Beats’ writing, a thread of Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah, runs deep; this influence became instrumental in the composition of “Kaddish.”

Kabbalah first reared its head within Beat literature as a method of emotive expression. With its introduction, Ginsberg opened the floodgates to a world of spiritual poetry, which, in its breadth, enjoyed a popularity that can be best compared to Walt Whitman's transcendentalism. The Beats were a diverse group of individuals, so it follows that Kabbalah posed different influences for each of the Beat disciples it created. But, regardless of which form Kabbalah assumed, there was a notable consistency in its usage. Even at the hands of Jack Kerouac, a religious Catholic, Jewish mysticism became a tool for literary emotion.

In this respect, the spirit of a particular American Judaism was granted its own space inside the heart of the national Beat culture, a culture originally founded largely in tension with religion, to say nothing of traditional Judaism. Nevertheless, the intermingling of a uniquely Jewish worldview with popular culture became a unique effect of Ginsberg's work, as Jewish philosophy became enshrined within the mainstream of American literature.

To understand the profound effect of kabbalistic influence on the Beats, understand the cultural nuance of Ginsberg's childhood religious development in the town of Patterson, New Jersey. Born on June 3, 1926, Ginsberg grew up a secular Jew in the wake of Patterson's cultural renewal at the hands of the Imagist poet William Carlos Williams, who became Ginsberg's literary idol. Allen's father, Louis Ginsberg, was a local school teacher and poet, and his mother, Naomi Levy, was a Russian immigrant and dedicated communist. From a young age, the Ginsberg home was dominated by Naomi's schizophrenia, which often drove her into sudden and uncontrollable fits of paranoia and psychosis.

The influence of Naomi's mental illness was profound; even after the young poet left his home for Columbia University, he was still haunted by what he refers to in his poem "Howl" as the "shade of [his] mother." It was in the wake of this childhood trauma that the maturing poet first encountered Kabbalah. During his time at Columbia, the tension of Ginsberg's childhood caught up to him, and he suffered what his doctors called a psychotic episode. Ginsberg in his wry mysticism called it a "cosmic vibration breakthrough."

Yet, despite the concerning health ramifications of this experience, there is no doubt that the poet underwent a religious awakening. When he emerged from

the episode, Ginsberg immersed himself in the writings of Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber, from which he derived his own set of kabbalistic beliefs. The two thinkers, themselves giants of twentieth-century Jewish literature, were firm believers in the transcendentalism of Jewish faith. They believed in a Jewish gnosticism, or a spirituality that took precedence over all textual and halakhic thought.

But proponents of gnosticism were an extreme minority, as its acceptance is tantamount to heresy for many Jews. In Ginsberg's time, the movement existed as a sectarian offshoot of traditional kabbalistic spirituality, effectively isolated from traditional Orthodox Judaism through their rejection of halakha. The primary basis for this separation lay in the gnostic belief in esoteric biblical codes, which would steer the believer on the path to a spiritual "good"; more traditional Orthodox Jews believe in no such thing. For Ginsberg, this particular idea was epiphanic; as a lover of Walt Whitman, Ginsberg was quite familiar with transcendentalism, so kabbalistic literature appealed to his every sense of poetic identity.

Ginsberg was missing one single piece for the implementation of Kabbalah into his long-standing literary style: integration with Beat culture. This obstacle, however, was easily surmountable, as Ginsberg merely forged a new identity for his poetry under the moniker of "Bop Kabbalah," a play on a popular term for 1960s hippie culture. This identity perfectly encapsulated Beat style, in which the everyday figures of American folklore became one with a greater spiritual consciousness. Thus, for Ginsberg, the convergence of Jewish spirituality with American cultural identity was an inevitability.

Jewish faith and mysticism exerted deep influence on Ginsberg and inspired the poet to create a whirlwind mix of the secular and religious. But he did not allow these newly discovered religious teachings to constrain his profanity. For the poet, the mere question of devaluing his artistic production in the name of religious values was absurd. Ginsberg's ideals followed a specific theme—an exploration of the outer boundaries of human morality in all areas. Gnosticism took root as a conferrer of poetic license, permitting Ginsberg to explore his own esotericism through empirical observations of everyday life. In this respect, Jewish transcendentalism and American grit met within Ginsberg's poetry as a blend of consciousness, exemplifying the artist's particular American Jewish experience.

It is from this entanglement of spirituality and irreverence that “Kaddish” was born.

Composed and dedicated as an elegy for Naomi Ginsberg, the poem was written in tragic memoriam following Naomi’s death in 1956. *Kaddish*, the Jewish prayer for the dead, is monotonically recited during daily prayer services for an eleven-month mourning period following the passing of a close family member. As such, the prayer is the ideal framework for a Beat poem, as it thoroughly captures the mysticism of death amid the biting pain of a tragic loss. It is in this style that Ginsberg’s “Kaddish” begins: “Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I walk on the sunny pavement of Greenwich Village.” From the very outset of the poem, Ginsberg delves into the relationship between reflection and death.

Yet the poem’s tone soon ascends into a monotone; this is the return of Jewish mysticism in the form of Ginsberg’s own prayer to his mother’s memory. The poet cries out in ululations to God, begging that He “Take this, this Psalm, from me, burst from my hand in a day, some of my Time, now given to Nothing—to praise Thee—But Death.” This anguished appeal, however, is soon cast to the poem’s periphery, as Ginsberg returns from his mystic heights to the depths of physical suffering—a classic transition in Beat poetry.

Through this return to reality, the poem quickly flashes through a series of vignettes regarding Naomi’s psychosis, in which she enters a mental hospital, returns home, and then relapses into a frantic paranoia that pursues her until death. The Beat progression of spiritual heights and tragedies concludes with a haunting image of Naomi’s grave, which is surrounded by crows who call to Ginsburg, seeking the truth of “an instant in the universe.” This carefully applied usage of mysticism incomparably captures Ginsberg as an individual. With subtle brushstrokes, the profane and holy were wielded with precision by the father of the Beats in this exemplary work of post-war Jewish American art.

It is difficult to pin Allen Ginsberg under one identity. Constant tinkering with religious faiths gave the poet a uniquely ambiguous relationship with his own Jewish identity. Even in “Kaddish,” the influence of Kabbalah is not absolute; it is compounded with the philosophies of Buddhism, Americana, and the author’s personal philosophy. But, for all of its profound reflection on the life

of a deeply spiritual yet complicated man, “Kaddish” serves as a window into the soul of Jewish faith within the culture of a secular American world.

The ensuing conflict between Orthodox asceticism, spiritual Kabbalah, and secular culture thus contorts itself into a dilemma for American Jewry—a dilemma that persists today. Ginsberg’s exaltation of gnosis in “Kaddish” demonstrated his own perception of this distinction, as the values of Kabbalah spread themselves through the tapestry of the American spirit. It, however, remains up to each reader to decide whether the culture Ginsberg spent his career devoted to, even once infused with a certain Jewish mysticism, has served American Jewry well.

Mr. Josh Stiefel is a rising senior at The Frisch School. He lives in Teaneck, New Jersey.

An Introduction to the Solomon Journal Symposium

KENNEDY LEE, CONSULTING EDITOR

In the inaugural Solomon Symposium this winter (Vol. 2, Issue 1), we asked students to answer the question: *As American Jews, do our American interests and Jewish interests ever come into conflict?* The resulting responses beautifully weaved stories and concepts from Tanakh with the American founding and modern political discourse. The contributors to the Symposium articulated visions for standing defiantly as Jews on often hostile college campuses and elucidated high-priority challenges in the US-Israel relationship. Responding to the prompt, *In 1996, the Jewish intellectual Milton Himmelfarb predicted that the future of American Jewry would be “fewer but better Jews.” Looking back, was he right? Looking ahead, is this still an accurate prediction of the Jewish future in America?*, the Solomon Fellows exhibit similar creative and diverse thinking in this spring edition. The Solomon Journal exists thanks to the dedication of the Solomon Fellows and their diligence in forming distinctive, insightful, and thought-provoking responses to the most important questions facing young American Jews today. In the following responses to this unconventional, even provocative, assertion, the Fellows’ maturity and commitment shines through. We hope you enjoy this edition.

Fewer but More Extraordinary Jews

BY OCEAN TIMMINS

SYMPOSIUM

In 1996, the Jewish intellectual Milton Himmelfarb predicted that the future of American Jewry would look like “fewer but better Jews.” When I first read this line, I made the common assumption that by “better,” he meant “observant.” However, if you read the text in which Himmelfarb says this closely, it is very vague. He makes this bold, even confusing statement in a symposium response not too dissimilar from the one here. A list of questions was posed to 47 Jewish American thinkers and intellectuals, and among them was: “Do you see any prospect of a *large-scale* revival of Judaism in America?”

This is the question that Himmelfarb was answering when he referenced the movie *Ninotchka*, in which the main character, whom the movie is named for, justifies Stalin’s mass killings by saying, “Therrre will be fewerrr but betterrr Rrrussians.” While a dark quotation, it illustrates Himmelfarb’s point in a powerful way. *Ninotchka* implies that Russia would be better off without the undesirables among its population, just as many believe Jews would be better off without those who have assimilated out of the community.

At first glance, I took issue with the word “better” in the context of Jews. I found it hard to make a value judgment on people when it is impossible to quantify such value, in contrast to the quantitative measure of “fewer.” Some questions that ran through my head include: How can you say one Jew is better than another? Is it in terms of halakhic observance? There is a lot more to Judaism than the laws. Is it based on community engagement? What about those without an engageable community? Is it based on education? Not everyone has access to a Jewish education and not everyone has the ability to take advantage of it even if they do. Could it be a combination of these things?

Then, after thinking about it a little more, I realized that Himmelfarb was not referring to individuals when he said “better.” Rather, he was referring to a group: the fewer Jews that were left. I was still left unsatisfied, as I do not like the idea of the Jewish people being “better” without a portion of the current population. Then I thought to myself, are the “fewer but better Jews” fewer because they are better? Or are they better because they are fewer? At this

point I realized, all of the issues I have with Himmelfarb's statement come from the word "better," so I set out to find an alternative.

It took me a long time to find a suitable replacement that keeps the sentiment but eases my qualms. It took a rereading of Himmelfarb's original symposium response to find the right word. Earlier in the piece, while discussing whether Jews are the chosen people, he posits, "Maybe we would feel more comfortable if, instead of talking about Election and Mystery, we talked about less lofty extraordinariness." Extraordinariness. The future of American Jewry very well may be fewer but more extraordinary Jews. Now what does more extraordinary entail? I believe that the more extraordinary Jew values the Jewish people, Jewish culture, Jewish identity, and Jewish practice.

Nevertheless, looking back, thankfully, I believe Himmelfarb was wrong. The American Jewish population is increasing, albeit slowly, and the majority are connected to their Judaism in one way or another. In 1996, there were an estimated 5.9 million Jews in the United States. Today there are an estimated 7.6 million. That is a 28% increase over 27 years, though it is only marginally more than the increase in the total American population (about 23%) over that same time period.

One cause for concern is that in 1996, the rate of intermarriage was 37%, and in 2020, it was recorded at 61%. However, almost 80% of Jews that intermarry are "Jews of no religion," and many are considered Jewish in census data only. On the contrary, most Jews who hold some form of connection to Judaism, whether it be going to synagogue, engaging with the community, or even just celebrating holidays with family, are continuing to marry other Jews and furthering Jewish continuity. People discuss intermarriage as the downfall of Judaism, but the sad reality is that most of the people that do not marry other Jews and do not raise Jewish children lack any Judaism to pass on in the first place.

Looking ahead, there is a fear that the numbers will catch up with us. All of the Jews in name only will eventually stop showing up on the census, ADL reports, and the Pew Research Center study because of intermarriage. Thus, a significant portion of the population will fall away, causing numbers to decrease. I am afraid that by the time I am an adult, the number of American Jews will start to dwindle as trends that have been boiling under the surface for a while start to show up on paper.

I believe Milton Himmelfarb's prediction has not yet come to pass, as the number of Jews in America is growing according to every major poll. However, I, like Himmelfarb, do not see the prospect of a large-scale revival of Judaism in America in the near future. Rather, I see the possibility of a contraction in the Jewish population overall, but alongside this contraction, the Jews that will remain are the "extraordinary," leaving us with fewer but more extraordinary Jews.

Mr. Ocean Timmins is a homeschooled rising senior. He resides in Brooklyn, New York.

Hard Times Create Strong Jews

BY RAFI UNGER

SYMPOSIUM

The Jewish intellectual Milton Himmelfarb made a bold prediction in the year 1996: the future of American Jewry was fewer but better Jews. This prediction evidently did not come to fruition. As of 2020, there were an estimated 7.5 million Jews in America. In 1996, there were about 5.9 million Jews living in America. Obviously, Himmelfarb was incorrect in believing there would be fewer American Jews, or at least not soon. However, there is another aspect to Himmelfarb's prediction: that Jews would become better following 1996. This part of Himmelfarb's prediction is also clearly mistaken.

It is impossible for present-day American Jews to be of higher quality than the Jews before them since their experiences and success cannot compare to the generation of Jews who rebuilt their lives in America following the Holocaust, which was an unthinkable feat. Many Jews immigrated to America immediately following the Holocaust. This generation of Jews primarily grew up low-income, living in tenements or other poorly made housing. Most Jews came over from Europe with a weak understanding of English. This generation of Jews had to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. They had to rebuild their lives in a new country following the destruction of the Holocaust.

Eventually, this generation of Jews and their children began to prosper as they started businesses or entered other high-paying professions. This becomes clear when one looks at the statistics—by the 1990s, Jews made up a quarter of *Forbes Magazine's* richest Americans, and the average Jew earned 130% of a non-Jew's salary. Thus, by the 1990s, Jews were a flourishing and comfortable people. However, following the 1990s, and Himmelfarb's prediction, Jews stopped getting better to the extent previous generations had.

That is not to say there have not been famous Jewish intellectuals following the 1990s, or that Jews stopped prospering following 1996, because that is simply not true. However, for Jews to be better than before, they must do more than just prosper, have their share, or comprise more than their share of famous Americans and intellectuals. For Jews to become better, it is not

enough to just excel in already prosperous circumstances. They must do what the Jewish immigrants did following the Holocaust: rebuild from nothing and lay the foundation for future generations. American Jews since 1996 have not done this.

There is a well-known saying attributed to Michael Hopf: “Hard times create strong men. Strong men create good times. Good times create weak men. And weak men create hard times.” By 1996, the Jews had created good times. Financially, these good times did not create weak Jews. However, American Jewry is now slowly falling apart.

The polarization between the left and right politically in America has not stopped at the Jews. The less religious, and usually more politically liberal, one is, the less likely they are to communicate with their more religious and politically conservative brethren. This polarization leads to many disagreements between Jews of different political opinions and backgrounds. In this way, weak times have come upon us.

It is clear that Himmelfarb’s hypothesis was not only incorrect, but rather inherently flawed. Himmelfarb assumed that less Jews meant better Jews. Since 1996, American Jews have been dealt a good hand: many grew up comfortable in a great environment. When Jews first came to America, this was not the case. Times can always get tough, even now, and if these Jews who have had mostly easy, comfortable lives ever have to deal with a harsh environment, it is fair to wonder how they will be able to deal with these new circumstances, or if they will be able to at all.

Everybody, including Jews, is a product of their surrounding environment. Nowadays, society is polarized and times could get very tough, including for the Jews. Perhaps then we will see these better Jews that Himmelfarb once predicted would emerge. Hopefully these better Jews can create good times once again.

Mr. Rafi Unger is a rising junior at Manhattan Talmudic Academy. He resides in Riverdale, New York.

What It Means To Be Jewish

BY FREDERICK LEN

SYMPOSIUM

Jews are no strangers to self-examination, particularly when it comes to our ancestry, faith, and culture. In the diaspora, Jews had to find creative solutions in order to survive in an environment frequently hostile to Judaism while retaining, upholding, and passing down our core values as Jews. While this was the case for 2,000 years, we now live in a world where the largest threat to Judaism no longer comes from outside threats, but from internal disillusionment with the Jewish faith. At least, that is the perspective that the late Jewish intellectual Milton Himmelfarb held when he predicted in 1996 that the future of American Jewry would be “fewer but better Jews.”

He made this prediction in the face of demographic trends in which the majority of Reform and Conservative Jews were losing their connection to the religious principles that had guided the Jews since before the diaspora. He believed that further Jewish assimilation into American society would mean the dilution of American Jewish connections to their ancestry. One supposes that only Orthodox Jews, with a strong connection to their faith and relative insularity towards modern society, would remain as the “better Jews.”

Nearly 25 years later, Himmelfarb’s demographic prediction has roughly proven true. According to a study conducted by Pew Research Center in 2021, most non-Orthodox American Jews have indeed de-emphasized religion in their own lives, with only one out of ten listing religious faith as of high importance when it comes to “being Jewish.” Writing for *Commentary Magazine* in 2006, Professors Jack Wertheimer and Steven Cohen, from JTS and Stanford respectively, were also quick to emphasize the negative effects of this disconnect between American Jews and Jewish faith. Wertheimer and Cohen argued there is a “weakened identification among American Jews with their fellow Jews abroad, as well as a waning sense of communal responsibility at home.”

However, while the average American Jew is less likely to interact with Judaism through religious precepts, they have instead embraced Jewish

culture and values through the pursuit of intellectual thinking, equality, and an ethical life. There are unique benefits to this cultural approach, as researchers Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar argued in 2012. Kosmin and Keysar asserted that “[s]ecular Jewish culture...has one especially positive feature; not only is it open to Jews of all kinds but also it does not erect barriers to their non-Jewish partners. Its inclusiveness...helps to make it viable.”

Whether or not American Jewry is, as Himmelfarb puts it, in “a state of transition or disintegration,” is open to interpretation. It will ultimately be up to future generations of Jewish leaders to decide whether this transition towards openness and inclusivity will dilute the strength of Jewish faith or strengthen its place within modern society.

Mr. Frederick Len is a recent graduate of Staten Island Technical High School in Staten Island, New York. He resides in Brooklyn.

The Orchard

BY OCEAN TIMMINS

REVIEW

One can only imagine the combination of fear and excitement that Aryeh “Ari” Eden, the protagonist of *The Orchard*, felt as he was uprooted from his greyscale life in Borough Park, Brooklyn to move to technicolor Zion Hills, Florida. The move from a Hasidic Brooklyn neighborhood, home for the first 17 years of his life, to a Modern Orthodox suburb of Miami, with no idea what it had in store, was a sheer thrill for young Ari—and the reader.

David Hopen started writing *The Orchard* during his senior year of high school. Though Hopen is a native of Florida, this book is not autobiographical. It is simply a powerful story he felt he could tell about a community in American society that, in his words, is often neglected.

There are two main portrayals of Jews in modern media, but *The Orchard* does not conform to either. There is the exoticized image of Orthodoxy, frequently seen in pop culture in the form of TV shows like *My Unorthodox Life* (on Netflix), which often puts Jewish faith on display in a negative light. Then there is the secular, typically self-hating or disconnected Jew, as seen in *You People* (also on Netflix), who disrespects the religion and culture often for comedic benefit.

While the portrayals of the religious communities in Hopen’s novel are not without flaws, they are shown with more nuance than in other recent cultural works shedding light on religious Jews. Tellingly, all of the characters in the story articulate an appreciation for Judaism, even the ones that may not be the most religiously inclined.

Before his move, Ari spent his life in a K-12 yeshiva in Brooklyn called Torah Temimah, where the rabbis refused to teach any modern Hebrew, advanced math, or science. From a young age, his mother would take him to the New York Public Library, where he educated himself on the great works of classical literature. He read Shakespeare, Elie Wiesel, Mark Twain, and many others,

but other than his frequent library visits, his life felt a little dull. In the beginning of the book, looking back on his life, he proclaims, “It took me all this time to realize that this amounted to a beautiful life.” Yet when his father lost his job in New York and was offered another in Florida, Ari embraced the change. He felt no remorse leaving his childhood home, friends, school, and life behind.

In Florida, Ari starts his senior year at a Modern Orthodox school, where he meets new friends: Noah, the school’s golden boy athlete; Oliver, a slacker and pothead; Amir, one of the most religious and academically focused kids in the school; and Evan, the mysterious genius with a very close relationship with the headmaster of the school, Rabbi Bloom. Noah, who lives across the street from Ari, takes him under his wing, and all at once Ari is immersed in a high school social life that is completely foreign to him.

Suddenly he is going to parties, talking to girls, drinking, and playing basketball—things he couldn’t have dreamed of in Borough Park. Ari undergoes a transformation, some of which is natural growth that may have been suppressed in his previous environment, and some perhaps extracted by his new surroundings and the people that inhabit it.

The Orchard is a fabulous book about change, morality, and love. It does a remarkable job of sharing an American coming of age story and explaining the added complexity of Orthodox Judaism. It is a story guided by a kabbalistic fable through momentous changes in the lives of five adolescent boys. It is a beautifully written narrative that takes the reader on a wild ride that is joyful, sad, funny, serious, suspenseful, romantic, has heroes and antiheroes, is triumphant and defeatist, and will leave you wanting more.

Mr. Ocean Timmins is a homeschooled rising senior. He resides in Brooklyn, New York.

The Dignity of Difference

BY HADASSA BECKER

REVIEW

One of the most widely known Jewish figures of the twenty-first century, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks devoted much of his life to studying humanity, philosophy, and the world's religions. In his book *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Sacks speculates that in today's interconnected world, the only way to reach universal peace is by recognizing and respecting the differences in others, and juxtaposing that with the equality inherent in all people as human beings.

In the book, a principal topic Rabbi Sacks explores is the relationship between politics and religion. He explains how during the Enlightenment, leaders strove to remove rule by and traces of religion, claiming it divided society and caused suffering. Political leaders took the place of the clergy; their job was to toil for the common good and merge society into one cohesive group.

However, it soon became evident that there were problems not only with the old religiously-dominated world, but with a political one as well. On the one hand, as policies were made towards "the common good," it became clear that for anything to be good for everyone, all people had to be the same; in order for any policy to apply to the common, there needed to be a commonality. On the other hand, religion and faith give its believers an identity and a purpose in this world. Any given religion unites its followers by telling them: "We were chosen by God to fulfill such-and-such mission, and we must work together towards that goal."

But as Rabbi Sacks writes, "By creating an us, we automatically create a them."

Thus, after presenting the pros and cons of both religious and secular worlds, Rabbi Sacks explains that while religion may seem to cause conflict, the removal of religion also removes obligatory moral standards, only increasing strife and discord. He then boldly suggests that religious leaders must find the strength within themselves to take a stand, even in this highly political world. "If religion isn't a part of the solution, it will certainly be part of the problem," Rabbi Sacks asserts.

Next, Rabbi Sacks outlines how other religions can follow Judaism's example, as a religion that has begun the path to world peace by recognizing that while there is only one God, there are many hundreds and even thousands of ways to serve Him. In Judaism, there is a concept of the "pious of the nations"—even those that are not members of the Jewish faith can be considered pious and have a share in the World to Come.

Unlike Christianity, Jews do not go out in search of converts to our faith, although we do believe in the seven commandments God gave to Noah, which every person is obligated to keep. This is why, multiple times, Rabbi Sacks refers to Judaism as a religion which is both tribal and universal—one which manages to create an "us" without creating a "them." In other words, Judaism is both particular but not hostile towards others. To once again quote Rabbi Sacks, Jews believe that "God may at times be found in the human other, the one not like us."

Rabbi Sacks served as Chief Rabbi of Britain for upwards of twenty years. Serving in a very public position, he had many unique experiences informing the beliefs found in this book. In the prologue, Rabbi Sacks describes an experience that led him to believe that there can be peace between religions. He once saw nearly 1,000 religious leaders gathered in the United Nations. There was a serene and respectful atmosphere, charged with a sense of urgency—the immediate need to create peace between peoples. He concluded that if the leaders of these religions could interact peacefully and respectfully with each other, then so could their followers.

Shortly after this conference, the tragedy of 9/11 occurred, serving only to deepen the sense of urgency in reaching peace between nations and religions. *The Dignity of Difference* was published less than a year later. Although Rabbi Sacks never said so outright, one can infer that the book was written in response to the tragic event, a heartfelt plea to all religious leaders and followers to work towards the goal of world peace.

Having read *The Dignity of Difference* once, appreciating the raw emotion as well as the pure intellectualism evident in Rabbi Sacks' writing, I read it again to make sure I caught every last insight. When given an opportunity to write about this amazing book, I grabbed it, in the hopes of inspiring others to read this pioneering work as well. I strongly recommend *The Dignity of Difference*

for any person, religious or not, to read as we work to realize a world that is a true global village, with people from all walks of life living side by side in relative harmony.

Ms. Hadassa Becker is a recent graduate of Pe'er Bais Yaakov in Monsey, New York. She lives in Monsey.

Ethics in *A Song of Ice and Fire*

BY JACOB SHAYEFAR

REVIEW

The world of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* roughly mirrors that of medieval Europe, with similar events, customs, and geography. Notably, Westeros seems to have a chivalrous deontological system of ethics, simply called "honor," by which some characters abide while others do not. In particular, Ned Stark is renowned for his limitless honor, following his code to his demise, while Tywin Lannister represents the other end of the spectrum, committing numerous atrocities any time he deems them beneficial. Due to the author's deliberate opacity on the matter, it is the goal of this review to ascertain which ethical system is superior, Ned Stark's idealism or Tywin Lannister's pragmatism.

Honor in Life

Ned Stark is undoubtedly honorable, as one of the only characters always taken at his word even by his enemies. He detests the corrupt politics of King's Landing—only moving there because his King requested it of him—and desires to save everyone, even his enemies. In fact, he even temporarily relinquishes his role as one of the most powerful men in Westeros because of the King's insistence on assassinating a young teenager who may become a threat to his dynasty, as Ned could not bear to punish someone for crimes they have yet to commit.

Ned dies, almost immediately, because of his desire to save the lives of children, an honorable pursuit indeed. After he finds out that the apparent heir to the throne is a bastard born of incest, instead of going straight to the King—who would kill the Queen, her incestuous brother, and all their young children—he warns the Queen, hoping to give her an opportunity to escape the city with her children. Instead of doing as he recommended, she used the time to consolidate her son's rule as her husband lay on his deathbed, ultimately arresting Ned Stark. As the old King died, the new King executed Ned Stark for his treasonous mention of the King's illegitimacy. In other words, Ned's obedience to his code, demonstrated by his insistence on saving children, got him killed.

Dishonor in Life

Soon comes Tywin Lannister, the father of the incestuous Queen and the double grandfather of the new King, to fill Ned Stark's former position. Before Tywin is formally introduced, the reader is privy to some important information about his character; namely, his tendency to tolerate rape, murder, and pillaging among his men. In fact, before he inherited his position, he killed the noble house of one of his vassals for insubordination. Moreover, in the uprising just preceding the events of the books, he entered the capital, claiming to be there to defend the reigning monarch, and then proceeded to sack the city, murdering the baby princes and pillaging the peasants. Tywin Lannister thus earned his reputation as untrustworthy and dishonorable.

Yet, despite this, or perhaps because of it, he lives significantly longer than Ned Stark. He becomes the richest and most powerful man in Westeros through his cunning. It seems as if his lack of honor serves him quite well.

That is until he dies at the hands of his own son whom he disrespected, specifically in return for a series of dishonorable actions. This time, dishonor killed the lion.

The Afterlife

And so it appears that Martin reached a verdict in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Dishonor seems superior. One should do whatever they deem necessary to increase their power. After all, if they will die regardless, why not do what will tangibly improve their lives? But such a synopsis misses an important part of the picture: the legacy each character left behind.

After Tywin Lannister dies, nobody misses him. In fact, not even his loyal children are truly sad about his passing. Instead, they are only shocked and vengeful. Soon, the dynasty that he spent his entire life strengthening is on the cusp of falling apart, with brother pitted against sister, each vying for the head of the other. Tywin Lannister was ruthless, and it seemed to benefit him. But, when his ruthlessness proliferated, destruction ensued.

Meanwhile, the Stark family faces no such fate. While some Starks do die or are presumed dead, the remaining Starks stay loyal to one another. Even Ned's

bastard son breaks his oaths, literally resulting in his death, for the possibility of saving his half-sister and retaking their home. In fact, primarily due to Ned's honor, many of his former vassals hold a grudge against their new King and liege lord, secretly plotting to overthrow the latter. It is no coincidence that when the honorable man was executed, his people led a rebellion. When the dishonorable man was murdered, reduced to a rotting corpse, hardly anyone so much as wept.

Thus, the moral lessons in Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* are precisely the opposite of what appears at first glance. People should do what is moral, even if it comes at a cost. Doing the right thing, regardless of consequence, is the only way to live in the long term, as immorality is necessarily self-destructive. And so the noble Starks shall last while the ignoble Lannisters are doomed to fail. Morality trumps self-aggrandizement.

Mr. Jacob Shayefar is a rising senior at Beverly Hills High School. He resides in Beverly Hills, California.



