

*I am a Stranger and a Dweller Amongst You:*  
The Rav's Confrontation Revisited and Expanded  
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I.

Some fifty four years ago, in the midst of the Second Vatican Council, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik penned one of the most influential essays of the twentieth century, masterfully encompassing elements of both halakha and hashkafah.

As the Church revisited foundational doctrines regarding attitudes towards the Jewish people, considerable pressure mounted for renewed interfaith dialogue, for discussions of theology between Jews and Catholics.

Rabbi Soloveitchik, known simply as the Rav, looked to the text of this week's sedra in formulating his response. The Rav noted that while the indigenous people are only too ready to grant Avraham, whom they consider to be a prince, *nesi elokim*, a burial plot from their very finest portions, *b'mivchar kevarenu*, Avraham maintains his distance, insisting on purchasing not only the cave itself, but the entire field which would surround it.

Separate burial grounds, from Avraham's point of view, was much more than a limited acquisition, but reflective of a critical philosophical point, a deep truth concerning the confrontation between the Jew and the broad expanse of humanity. Emphasizing Avraham's introductory words, *ger v'toshav anochi imachem*, the Rav perceived a classical dialectic: yes, the Jew is a *toshav*, a natural dweller amidst all of humanity, committing to stand shoulder to shoulder to advance civilization, improve technology and medicine, civil rights, and raise the quality of human life and personal dignity.

At the same time, however, the Jew is a stranger, a *ger*, who, in matters of ritual law, whether it is burial grounds or matters of doctrinal significance, insists on standing apart. Thus, from the Rav's point of view, there could be no interfaith dialogue on matters of religion, dogma, and doctrine. Each faith tradition stands apart and alone, incomprehensible, even with respect to matters of language and nomenclature, let alone substance, to the other.

II.

Nearly three decades following the Rav's passing, it seems to me that we might extend his sublime analysis of Avraham's stance *vis a vis* broader society, and note that there is only one other occasion in the entire Torah in which we are described as *gerim v'toshavim*.

The context is the requirement of relinquishing acquired lands during the Yovel year, something profoundly difficult for a farmer who may well have tilled that acquired land for his entire life. The Torah teaches, *ki li ha'aretz, ki gerim v'toshavim atem imadi*. No human being can claim true title over the land, for the land, in the end, belongs to the Almighty.

Drawing on the Rav's analysis, it would seem that precisely the dialectic which maintains in the interpersonal sphere, in which we insist on being both an organic part of all of humanity, but also separate and distinct, the same must maintain in the context of our relationship with God.

On the one hand, we are, along with all of humanity, partners with our Creator in cultivating and developing the world, *lo tohu vera'ah, la'shevet yetzara*. It is this aspect which is emphasized during the six years we work the land during every agricultural cycle, and the six days of creative labor in which we engage every single week. The Talmud twice states that in each family unit, the maternal and paternal figure partner with a Divine in a partnership of three to bring forth a child into this world. Moreover, the Talmud accords the very same status to a judge who has, through rigor and discipline, arrived at a correct and proper ruling in a matter of dispute, *kol ha'dan din emet la'amito, na'aseh sbutaflihakadosh baruch hu b'ma'aseh bereishit*. Rambam, in perhaps a still more dramatic formulation, notes that such a judge is credited with *tikkun kol ha'olam kulo*, repairing all of society.

Moving to the more particular Jewish sphere, we are uniquely a *mamleket kohanim v'goy kadosh*, we have an intimate bond with our Father-Creator, as the mishnah in Avot proudly states, *shenikri'u banim la'makom*. This paternal relationship expresses itself in terms of proximity to the Almighty as it concerns Tefillah, where the community, as such, is perceived as having unmitigated access, *asher lo elokim kerovim elav ka'Hashem Elokenu b'khol karenu elav*.

Finally, this perception impacts our observance of Yom Ha'Din itself, as we are, at the national level, secure in the knowledge that despite the terrifying circumstances of judgment before the celestial tribunal, our sense of intimacy and familiarity with the judge Himself gives us otherwise unfounded confidence, at the national level, that we will be exonerated. There is, without question, in our relationship with the Almighty, an aspect of *toshav*, of familiarity, of partnership, of shared purpose and mission.

And yet, we are also removed at a certain distance from the Creator. It is this aspect of *ger*, of estrangement, of distance, that we observe every seventh year during the agricultural cycle, and every seventh day during the week, when our creative labor must come to a halt. It is for this reason that the Torah reintroduces this dialectic of *ger v'toshav* in the context of relinquishing our control of the land during the Yovel year.

Indeed, this sense of distance relates to even when the greatest of all prophets inquired as to the Divine essence. He was told that no living being, not even the most rarefied, could possibly fathom the essence of God, *lo yirani ha'adam va'chai*. All the more so, we can not understand the deep mysteries of Divine Providence in this world, nor do we countenance presumptuous attempts to explain that which He has obscured from us, *ki gavhu shamayim me'aretz ken gavhu machshivotai mi'machshivotechem*, the chasm between our understanding and His is indeed as capacious as the distance between Heaven and Earth.

At once, we are His partners, and yet, we stand apart. We are His intimates, and yet, He remains cloaked in a shroud of mystery, *ki banane re'eh alpha-kaporet*. We proudly engage in acts of creative labor, and then, humbly withdraw to bear witness to His mastery and sovereignty. We surge forth with deep love to draw near Him, and then immediately recoil in awe and reverence, overwhelmed by His perfection, and our relative insignificance<sup>1</sup>.

### III.

On further reflection, it seems anything but accidental that it was Avraham himself to introduce this dialectic of *ger v'toshav*. While, as noted, Avraham employed this dialectic vis a vis his personal relationship with the indigenous population of Canaan, it seems extremely clear that Avraham himself sensed, and lived this dialectic with the Ribbono shel Olam himself.

On the one hand, as stated in the Navi Yeshayahu, and as codified by Rambam Avraham is the paradigmatic *ohev Hashem*, Avraham *ohavi*. He surges forther, unceasingly, to draw near to the Almighty, living a life of *derishat Hashem* and *keriah b'shem Hashem*. This sense of almost magnetic attraction to the Creator of all things leads Avraham to feel the kind of intimacy that is reflected in his reverential, but still audacious, challenge to the Almighty, in the context of the verdict against Sodom and Amorah.

On the other hand, Avraham is the first and quintessential *yare shamayim*, as expressed by his willingness to sacrifice everything- not only his beloved son, but all of his dreams for the future, and no less consequently, the entire moral message to which he devoted his life- on the basis of a divine command which is, from his point of view, totally inscrutable.

For all of this intimacy which Avraham experienced with the Creator that he discovered over decades, whom he loved so immersively, whom he challenged when he felt there was the potential for injustice and, concomitantly, *chillul Hashem*, Avraham knew when to step back and simply submit to a Divine command, no matter how difficult, no matter how confounding, *batel retzoncha mipnei retzono*.

The halakhic legacy of this dialectic is codified by Rambam. In his classical formulation of the dynamic interplay between Ahavat Hashem and Yirat Hashem, Rambam notes the need for complete and full integration of these cardinal spiritual virtues. Ahavah, in that celebrated passage, draws one increasingly close to the Creator, whom one aspires to know with increasing depth and intensity. Yirah, by contrast, causes an immediate sense of recoil, *mi'yad nirta la'achorav*.

Avraham, who knew very well of the experience of *ger v'toshav* as it concerned his relationship with the Almighty, was able to perceive a parallel at the human level as well.

#### IV.

The Rav's model remains as relevant today as it was six decades ago. Halakha requires of us, both as it concerns our relationship with the Almighty, as well as our national interactions with others, a careful balancing act. We must know the areas in which we are not merely permitted to engage broader society, but mandated to do so. We must equally know the ways that our halakhic tradition rests on a careful balance of Divine intimacy as well as a healthy sense of insuperable distance.