

Faith Shattered and Restored
Judaism in the Postmodern Age



Rabbi Shagar
Shimon Gershon Rosenberg

FAITH SHATTERED
AND RESTORED
JUDAISM IN THE POSTMODERN AGE

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Preface

The Sacred Literature of Rabbi Shagar

Like many of my generation who grew up in the Modern Orthodox world of the 1950s and 1960s, I have often needed to work hard to reconcile the conflicts of modernity with Jewish life and to integrate the modernist mindset with some of our difficult-to-reconcile ideologies. This quest led me to the work of many great thinkers: I studied the philosophies of Rabbi Kook while a student in Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav in the early 1970s, and as a layman in my later adult years, I explored the works of the thinkers Emmanuel Levinas and Yehezkel Kaufmann. Yet the psychological and spiritual strains between the modern world and some of the Jewish belief system remained ever-present. The integration of heart and mind, soul and intellect, within the context of our tradition has often escaped me.

As I entered my seventh decade, this search led me to the work of Rabbi Shagar, and his work introduced to me a new language for a new generation. In his philosophy, the strict doctrine of the yeshiva world is challenged; his is a Judaism that focuses not on obedience, but on

how the text and the law relate to the individual. Using the tools and language of the postmodernist, Rabbi Shagar helps the reader relate to the world around him, engaging the student in a stimulating dialogue that allows for a much richer spiritual experience.

Until now, Rabbi Shagar's works were known mostly within Israel; very few were available in English. So when asked to help subsidize the translation of some of his more approachable works, I immediately agreed. The anglophone world should appreciate this volume; after all, as an audience at once more individualistic and less integrally involved in the nationalist collective than their Israeli brethren, English-speaking Jews should resonate deeply with Rabbi Shagar's sensitivity to the individual's search for an independent approach. Rabbi Shagar's views are in complete opposition to the doctrinaire philosophy force-fed to many within the American yeshiva system: an approach that relies on top-down authority and leaves little room for the exploration of individual spiritual needs. I believe that many readers will be assuaged both psychically and spiritually by the enveloping and open-minded philosophy of Rabbi Shagar.

In a documentary on Rabbi Shagar by Israeli television in 2012, one of his students, Dr. Yitzchak Mandelbaum, a clinical psychologist, astutely summed up his discovery of the teachings of Rabbi Shagar as follows: "ידעתי שמצאתי את שלא ידעתי שהיפשתי," "I knew I had found what I didn't know I had been searching for." And so it has been for many who have incorporated his teachings into their worldview.

Perhaps Rabbi Shagar attained this heightened sensitivity through his own struggles and suffering. His mother went through the Holocaust. From this he learned that the world is often a bad, cold place offering no personal security. While he was serving as a soldier in the Yom Kippur War, his tank took a direct hit in battle with the Syrians; two of his yeshiva buddies were immediately killed, and he was badly burned – an event he hardly ever spoke of, but which raised in him questions of faith. As a student of the works of Rabbi Kook and Rabbi Naḥman of Breslov, he reportedly said Rabbi Kook lacked that gnawing pain of extreme religious doubt. Rabbi Naḥman, on the other hand, was suffused with doubts, helping Rabbi Shagar tackle his own questions.

This sensitivity to the inherent conflicts within modern Judaism endowed Rabbi Shagar with the tools to reach many young students

seeking intellectual and spiritual renewal. His unique fusion of a fresh and existential reading of classical Jewish texts, contemporary thinkers, the great Jewish and non-Jewish philosophers, and Hasidism addressed the growing sense of alienation within the younger generation of modern religious students, a fact rarely admitted in the yeshiva world.

The Jewish religious establishment was allergic to the concept of deconstruction – the postmodernist mode of textual analysis that parses the critical gap between text and meaning. Rabbi Shagar, on the other hand, saw this approach as an opportunity for the student to be released from the shackles of religious cliché, ideology, and convention, and to relate to religion as an ongoing existential dialogue that is more than just an institution of formal laws. Whether addressing the depth of one's relationships, the concept of forgiveness, or romantic love, Rabbi Shagar's writing blends Jewish thought with the works of secular philosophers, encouraging his students to seek a more authentic spiritual truth. As Rabbi Shagar explained, study is not only about what the Talmud says, but about how it speaks to the individual student. Even more stunningly, while always disappointed when a student who did not find his place within this spiritual world left the path of observance, Rabbi Shagar maintained warm relationships with those who questioned and rejected.

For those who chafe against the broad, grand arguments and dogmatism of the prevailing Orthodox doctrine: Take comfort in Rabbi Shagar's postmodernist melding of theories and his new paradigm of learning and understanding our Jewish texts. While Rabbi Shagar's approach encourages religious observance and a vibrant dialogue with tradition, it lacks the dogmatic security of previous generations. My exposure to the works of this great man did not lay to rest the bulk of my ongoing questions. It did, however, provide me with some solace and a modicum of harmony for the mind and soul.

I believe a new Jewish way of living is evolving. Where it will go, nobody knows. But the process is already well underway, and Rabbi Shagar's work provides seedlings for the sprouting of this Jewish way of life.

My generation failed in its mission of synthesis; by demanding a religious certitude based on fixed and rigid systems, we failed to integrate the realities of the modern world with the individual religious and spiritual needs of today's Jews. I hope the teachings of Rabbi Shagar will

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be assimilated into the mindset of the next generation of Jewish leaders, who will utilize these tools – along with the neglected and marginalized philosophies of other great modern Jewish thinkers – to disseminate a Judaism more relevant for the new era.

Aryeh Rubin
September 4, 2016
Rosh Chodesh Elul 5776
Aventura, Florida

Introduction

We are delighted to present to the English-reading public a selection from the works of Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar), *zt"l*, a project of the Institute for the Advancement of Rabbi Shagar's Writings and Maggid Books. Rabbi Shagar's oeuvre, much of which has yet to be published, spans lectures (*shiurim*) on the Talmud, essays on halakhic issues, expositions on the festivals, lectures on Jewish thought (and especially Hasidism), and treatises on various philosophical themes and current events.¹ This volume contains translations of ten essays that constitute, to our minds, an optimal representation of Rabbi Shagar's groundbreaking spiritual approach. Six of them were taken from his major philosophical work, *Tablets and Broken Tablets*; two were published in his lifetime and included in the book *We Will Walk in Fervor*, and the remaining two come from his collections of expositions on the holidays

This introduction is based on the one appearing in Rabbi Shagar's *Tablets and Broken Tablets*, several chapters of which are reproduced in this volume.

1. At the back of this volume is a list of Rabbi Shagar's Hebrew publications to date, as well as two preliminary attempts to translate his work into English. This volume refers to works by Rabbi Shagar by their English titles.

(one on *Hanukka* and the other on *Sukkot*), which also contain wide-ranging theoretical treatises. Rabbi Shagar was born and lived in Israel, and his writings are very much a product of his surroundings. Thus, for this volume, we selected theoretical works that would, in our estimation, prove relevant to Diaspora Jews as they contend with the challenges to religious life posed by modernism and postmodernism. In some essays, we omitted passages liable to be lost on the non-Israeli reader.



Several weeks before Rabbi Shagar's passing, in Sivan 5767, a large crowd of his students and followers assembled for an evening of study and prayer, and in order to establish a committee for the publication of his writings. Unable to attend the event, the rabbi sent a letter to the participants that included the following:

Guided by Hasidism, for many years I devoted the bulk of my efforts to developing a personal-existential discourse that by its nature appeals to the individual whose position is often in conflict with the demand to repair society. Yet, to my mind, the rectification of the personal must also bring about an elevation of the social realm. Hence my motivation to develop a Torah-driven alternative to the current cultural discourse, an alternative nourished by our tradition, in a manner that would appeal to as large a swath of Israeli society as possible, including the secular.

What is more, I sought to create, within the national religious community, a significant Torah-based position that would provide a fitting solution for the religious and existential stirrings of our generations, and pose an alternative to the existing currents in that community. This attempt took place against the backdrop of the conflicts and contradictions faced by that community, of which I am a member, and which I often broached in my writing and lectures. I believe that through the efforts manifest in my writings, I have come a long way toward that longed-for solution, even if what I wrote still falls far short of perfection.

The word “and,” so typical of the national religious movement – yeshiva *and* military service; yeshiva *and* academia; Torah *and* secular studies – does not represent an artificial synthesis, and certainly not, as some have alleged, a sort of idolatry by association.² It should be interpreted in the vein of Franz Rosenzweig, who described the “and” as the keystone that supports the entire edifice and imbues it with meaning.³ That, to my mind, is the “straight line” of which the Maharal of Prague so often spoke...⁴

Hence my efforts to blend and include a variety of schools of thought in my writing, even if they are not generally perceived as part of traditional Torah study. In that I was inspired by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, whose legacy guides us all. I pray that my writing will constitute a notable contribution to the personal and national rectification so necessary today.

The highlight of Rabbi Shagar’s theoretical work was his attempt to provide a religious and spiritual response to postmodernism. He contended that just as Rabbi Kook – and, in his own way, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik – endeavored to unearth the positive in modernity,⁵ which to many people, including prominent thinkers, seemed an existential threat to the Jewish tradition, our generation would have to contend with postmodernism. He ruled out the prevailing stance among the spiritual leaders of Israel’s religious community, who accepted the modern ideals “kashered” by Rabbi Kook – chief among them the virtues of Zionism – but refused to extend his approach to such pervasive

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2. This common *haredi* idiom (*avoda zara beshittuf*), originally a halakic term referring to worshipping both God and idols, is applied to religious Zionism, which the ultra-Orthodox see as obligated both to Torah and to secular values like nationalism.
 3. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 247.
 4. See Maharal of Prague, *Be'er HaGola*, *be'er* 6, chap. 8; Maharal of Prague, *Tiferet Yisrael*, chap. 11.
 5. The idea, based on Lurianic Kabbala, that sparks of holiness embedded in evil must be sifted out (*birur*) and raised up – in order to vanquish evil as well as form an important layer in the structure of holiness – is central to Kabbala and Hasidism. It is also at the core of Rabbi Kook’s response to the spirit of modernity, especially atheism.

Western values as individualism, skepticism, and pluralism, all modern outlooks amplified by postmodernism. Rabbi Shagar took upon himself the task of being the vanguard of an attempt to adopt, albeit critically, those values as well.

The title of the book from which most of the essays in this volume were selected is *Tablets and Broken Tablets*, based on the famous midrash to the effect that the tablets shattered by Moses were laid alongside the second, whole tablets, inside the Ark of the Covenant.⁶ This title expresses Rabbi Shagar's unique method: the intense subversion and shattering of many religious and social conventions – while adopting, to a certain extent, the deconstructive attitude of postmodernism – alongside an attempt to formulate an alternative approach to faith and education. That method stemmed from the counterintuitive conviction that postmodern deconstruction can purify and refine religious faith. Furthermore, as is clear from the letter quoted above, Rabbi Shagar did not think his work would be the be-all and end-all for this intricate issue. In many cases, he considered his writings fragments of tablets, perhaps fragments of vessels,⁷ to be utilized by his successors in their efforts to develop and establish a Jewish worldview and educational approach for our generation. The importance of this book lies in its trailblazing boldness, its religious and intellectual potency, and Rabbi Shagar's luminous and profound spirit – all of which form a foundation for the new path entailed by the religious and spiritual realities of our generation.



Our sages said, “Anyone who cites a teaching in the name of the one who said it should envision the giver of that teaching as though he were standing before him.”⁸ Since the Torah cannot be considered independently of those who teach it, we have seen fit to sketch an outline of

6. “R. Yosef learned: ‘Which you broke, and you shall place them [in the Ark]’ (Deut. 10:2) – [The juxtaposition of these words] teaches us that both the tablets and the fragments of the tablets were deposited in the Ark” (Bava Batra 14b).

7. Hence the title of one of Rabbi Shagar's works, *Broken Vessels*.

8. Y. Shabbat 8a.

Rabbi Shagar's personality and life story, especially for readers who were not acquainted with him in his lifetime.

Rabbi Shagar was born in 1949 to a religious family. His parents were Holocaust survivors, and he attested that the *Shoah* was always a powerful presence in his world. Raised on, and molded by, an innocent brand of Zionism, along with joy and pride in the establishment of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel, he was imbued with firm national-religious convictions. Still, in many of his writings he did not shy away from criticizing the national religious movement.

This basic stratum of religious Zionism was supplemented by immersion in the world of Torah – first at the Netiv Meir yeshiva high school, headed by Rabbi Aryeh Bina, *zt"l*, and later at the precursor of all *hesder* yeshivas, Kerem B'Yavneh, headed at the time by Rabbi Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht, *zt"l*. Rabbi Shagar was educated in the *haredi* method of Torah study, which was also prevalent at national religious yeshivas at the time. He was among the cream of the crop of the *hesder* yeshivas, and in 1974 was invited to teach at Yeshivat HaKotel, a *hesder* yeshiva where he had studied after his military service (he served first in the paratrooper brigade and then in the armored corps). Two years later, he was ordained as a rabbi. He was a man of the Torah in his entire being, and strictly observant. He had great fondness and respect for the ultra-Orthodox world, and, as this book clearly attests, considered some of its attributes vital for the national religious community.

Still, already as a yeshiva student he began questioning the prevailing Brisker method of talmudic analysis as well as the classic national religious ideology. The crisis he had experienced in the 1973 Yom Kippur War – during which, as a young reservist, he lost two members of his tank crew and was himself seriously injured – further fueled his attempt to blaze a new trail in Torah learning. Even as a young teacher at HaKotel, he stood out for two innovations: an existential approach to the study of Talmud and Jewish philosophical works, and the study of hasidic literature. The two were intertwined, in that Rabbi Shagar was drawn especially to Hasidism's piercing, existential aspect. Meanwhile, he also became convinced that the various schools of academic research could greatly enhance the study of halakha and aggada, and even Jewish philosophy and mysticism. He realized that to fully actualize the three

revolutions he had engendered – the existential, the hasidic, and the academic – he would require a new kind of yeshiva. Hence his involvement in the establishment of the Makor Chaim Yeshiva, founded by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz in 1985; the Maale *beit midrash* in 1989; and Beit Morasha, founded by Professor Benjamin Ish-Shalom, the following year. At Beit Morasha, which set out to combine yeshiva-style Torah study with academic scholarship, Rabbi Shagar headed the *beit midrash*. There he honed his unique approach, fusing yeshiva methods with academic research and existential inquiry. It was during this period that he discovered postmodernist philosophy.

In the fall of 1997, Rabbi Shagar left Beit Morasha and founded, with his old friend Rabbi Yair Dreyfuss, the Siah Yitzhak yeshiva. It was important to him to implement his method within a yeshiva environment, to create an innovative program that would combine devotion to Torah study and spiritual striving with an atmosphere of freedom and intellectual curiosity. In fact, every chapter of this book is based on material he taught and wrote during the following decade (from 1997 until his passing in 2007), when he delved into postmodernism.

Immersion in the public sphere was a strain for Rabbi Shagar. He was an introvert, engrossed in a rich private world and utterly devoted to Torah study. He left thousands of computer files along with thousands of handwritten pages on a variety of Torah topics, mostly Talmud; he once told a student that he never delivered a lecture without spending at least ten hours preparing it. Yet he could not ignore the dilemmas of the time, voicing his opinions in lectures delivered in various public venues, as well as in the book *Broken Vessels*. Most of this volume is based on those lectures.

It is important to emphasize that Rabbi Shagar dwelled entirely in the tent of Torah. He never attended university and knew no foreign languages, yet he accrued an autodidactic education of remarkable breadth, based on a library he assembled for himself (featuring, among other tomes, translations into Hebrew of postmodernist works) and articles he collected. He read voraciously: philosophy (old and new), fiction (especially science fiction), history, sociology, and more. Yet his reading of theoretical works was creative (at times even homiletic). He did not consider himself a professional philosopher, and his familiarity

with secular literature was limited to what was translated into Hebrew in his lifetime. Hence the futility of asking whether his portrayal of postmodernism, or of any other thought system, is “authentic” or “precise”; what mattered to him was how external ideas could enrich and challenge the religious world.

Rabbi Shagar passed away on 25 Sivan 5767, only a few months after learning he had cancer. In those final months, he appointed a committee and provided instruction regarding the publishing of his writings. It was very important to him that his thoughts on contemporary matters be published. Thus far, the committee has put out more than ten volumes of his works, including lectures on the holidays, halakhic treatises, and essays on Hasidism. In addition, the committee has set up a website to provide access to essays, recorded lectures, and other materials from his estate. It intends to complete the publication of all of Rabbi Shagar’s writings in the coming years, with an emphasis on his inimitable Talmud lectures.



Rabbi Shagar was always immersed in study and writing, in spiritual and creative work, but he spent very little time consolidating his ideas into a cohesive system. Even the works published in his lifetime (with the efforts and coaxing of Rabbi Dreyfuss) were not assembled into book form by him; rather, he let his students edit his files. That is why the essays in this book were edited by a variety of editors (from among his many students), some in his lifetime and others after his death, based on drafts he kept on his computer. A note at the beginning of every essay provides the name(s) of its editor(s), along with a brief description of the raw materials – the lectures and drafts – that went into it and basic information regarding the circumstances in which it was composed.

We have also included notes on various terms used by Rabbi Shagar (especially kabbalistic terminology) as well as references to other works of his, most published posthumously.



We will now attempt to sum up the main arguments in this collection of essays.

As noted, the heart of the book is Rabbi Shagar's grappling with postmodernism and the cultural and spiritual changes it wrought. In chapter 5, he attempts to get at the foundations of postmodernism: the denial and deconstruction that come from the erosion of belief in any "grand narrative" and in the ability to perceive the truth. Rabbi Shagar distinguishes between "hard" and "soft" postmodernism: While the first leads to utter nothingness, the second does not deny the existence of truth and goodness, but claims that these values are not predetermined, but rather man-made; hence their relativistic nature. According to Rabbi Shagar, the first brand of postmodernism should generally be rejected. Yet he notes a surprising connection between it and the religious agnosticism discussed by, among others, Maimonides and Rabbi Nahman of Breslov (both of whom figure prominently in his writing). Elsewhere, he grants an important role to hard postmodernism in the post-Holocaust context.⁹ While postmodern nothingness can breed heresy, moral paralysis, and nihilism, its religious counterpart emphasizes the divine infinitude and human humility. It bears mention that the extreme of postmodernism's negative theology is only one aspect of Rabbi Shagar's outlook, which is characterized more by its search for immanence, the divinity indwelling in the human world.

Rabbi Shagar devoted most of his efforts to exposing the positive in soft postmodernism, which does not necessarily lead to nothingness in that it recognizes beingness – albeit as a human construct (which is thus dangerous in that it can engender relativism and even contempt for morals, norms, and responsibilities). To his mind, it is faith, of all things, that can redeem postmodernism by imbuing human constructs with new value and validity, as vessels for the divine light. Soft postmodernism can also foster a humility and tolerance capable of greatly enriching the religious outlook. The religious person's challenge in the postmodern world is to choose and believe in his path, and to trust his creative powers. Paradoxically, Rabbi Shagar argues, it is easier to maintain a religious lifestyle in a postmodern world. For while modernism

9. See Rabbi Shagar, "Muteness and Faith," in *On That Day*, 64–77.

was characterized by an onslaught against religion and faith – in light of philosophical and scientific discoveries that were perceived as absolute truths – postmodernism’s skepticism casts religion as an option no less valid than others. The challenge for us as believers, of course, is to choose religion as the best option.

Rabbi Shagar develops these points in chapter 2. There he also posits a solution to a problem arising from soft postmodernism: In acknowledging that our values and conceptions are constructed, do we not relegate religion to the subjective realm? Inspired by the work of the influential psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Rabbi Shagar explains that faith belongs to the domain of the Real, where there is no difference between subjective and objective.

That domain is also mystical, and, indeed, one basic argument in this book is that postmodernism leads to mysticism, and that the concurrence of postmodernism and the various strains of New Age mysticism is no accident. Rabbi Shagar elaborates in chapter 7, emphasizing that Kabbala describes multiple worlds and aspects and can thus serve as a basis for life in a postmodern world where the psyche must contain syntheses and contradictions. Furthermore, postmodern nothingness can be congruent with the mystical and kabbalistic nothingness – indeed, in Kabbala, the highest *sefira* is *keter*, nothingness. Seen from this perspective, postmodern skepticism and relativism can translate into the sublime levels described by Kabbala, which enables us to think of the former as bettering the world, not degrading it. However, to prevent these lofty strata from shattering our basic world, with its simpler faith, religion, and mores, we must temper our fervent relativism and skepticism with more elementary kabbalistic aspects (*malkhut*, or kingship) that enable us to revalidate our certainty and dedication to a particular path as a decision that itself partakes of the divine. The equation between postmodernism and mysticism requires us, in the vein of Rabbi Kook, to see Jewish esoterica (*torat hasod*) as the foundation of religious thought in the postmodern age.

In chapter 6, Rabbi Shagar discusses one of the most acute problems raised by postmodernism: how to create an ethical society when we possess no ultimate yardstick for judging actions. Here, too, he argues that soft postmodernism provides adequate means to deal with

the challenge. It does not necessarily lead to nihilism, because we can create a society with agreed-upon ethical norms, even if they are not predetermined but rather emerge from dialogue between all segments of society. Moreover, postmodernism does not rule out ethical action; on the contrary, it elevates it by portraying it as arising from the decisions of humans who require no external fulcrum upon which to prop their worldviews.

This ethical outlook does not clash with the basic conception of Judaism, according to Rabbi Shagar, because it too acknowledges that, at least until the Messiah's arrival, it exists in a variegated world. For the time being, Judaism has no aspiration to foist itself on the rest of humanity and, in any event, can make do with a complex message wherein, while believing fully in its truth, it is willing to compromise with those who believe in other, even contradictory paths. Chapter 10 elaborates on this matter, employing the idea of the remainder, as elucidated by the German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig. Rabbi Shagar posits that Jewish chosenness need not render us aloof and hostile to the rest of humanity; rather, it requires us to be the ultimate Other, constantly challenging the world order with our difference.

Chapter 4 does not deal with postmodernism directly, considering it instead as the culmination of a problem that has vexed religion throughout the ages (and Rabbi Shagar for many years): the place of freedom in the religious world. He describes the various incarnations of the idea of freedom, and shows that although freedom appears to clash with religion, it has in fact always been a cornerstone of Judaism. In this respect, too, postmodernism propels freedom to the most radical places, which, in the religious context, at once pose the largest threat and present the greatest promise. Rabbi Shagar argues that only an atmosphere of freedom can give rise to an authentic, profound religiosity.

Rabbi Shagar claims that the rise of postmodernism compels the religious person to let go of the modern attempt to "rescue" the religious world from its theoretical and practical conflicts with the modern world by offering up an interpretation of Judaism, or modernity, or both, that resolves the contradictions. He suggests that such interpretations cause both Judaism and modernity to become shallow, even sterile. It

is postmodernism that may provide us with proposals for contending with these contradictions. In chapter 2, Rabbi Shagar proposes a new brand of compartmentalization that places faith in its own realm, one that he identifies with Lacan's Real, thus "rescuing" it from its clash with modernity. In chapter 3, Rabbi Shagar emphasizes the centrality of halakha as the Jew's way of life (or, put philosophically, based on Ludwig Wittgenstein's later work, as a religious "language game"), a lifestyle that encompasses both faith and tradition as integral aspects of the religious world. By maintaining these two ingredients, we can lead a rich religious life within the modern world, without relegating faith to the rack of philosophical apologetics.

Chapter 3 also features a rare, in-depth treatment of Reform and Conservative Judaism. Rabbi Shagar sings the praises of Orthodoxy, but not from the classic ideological and conservative perspective. To his mind, the Reform and Conservative movements lack two critical components. The first is what he terms the "difficult point," the total commitment, the self-sacrifice that sometimes takes precedence over comfort, cultural fads, and life's constraints. Second, both movements fail to apprehend the nature of halakha, which is not an ideology but rather a flowing of life. That flow is characterized by commitment to the past, to the source of holiness, and by imperviousness to the academic-critical gaze with which Reform and Conservatism (inspired by the nineteenth-century "science of Judaism" movement) examine halakha.

The existentialism adopted by Rabbi Shagar led him, as he wrote in the letter quoted above, to the individual and his world. For example, chapter 2 opens with the assertion that faith is a private language that percolates in the most intimate realms of one's psyche. Chapter 1, which is devoted to midrashim on the Binding of Isaac (and offers a glimpse of Rabbi Shagar's profound analysis of *Hazal's* thought), demonstrates that faith need not be a rigid ideology; rather, it can be a personal, frank, and blunt grappling with the elemental gulf between human and divine.

Another aspect of Rabbi Shagar's work is the idea, brought into relief by postmodern discourse, that it is not us, as individuals, who create language (be it social or religious); to a large extent, language

(formed by society) creates us. The question of the relationship of the individual and society was a cardinal one for Rabbi Shagar. Chapter 9 provides some of his thoughts on the matter, emphasizing the issue that troubled him most: how to build a society without denying the inimitability and choice of the individual. Rabbi Shagar was repulsed by outlooks that portrayed the individual as an organ of society, with the latter superseding agency and choice. To his mind, every community is an assemblage of individuals, but not in the sense propounded by economic liberalism, which can easily slide into alienation and the instrumentalization of society; rather, in the sense of establishing a genuine unity.

Another window into his conception of society can be found in chapter 8, which deals with the effects of the postmodern world on one of the most sensitive and painful subjects for the religious individual: sexuality and family life. Here, too, he highlights postmodernism's potential to facilitate loftier relationships through our growing awareness of the commercialization of romance, and by lending a quality of absoluteness to the random world of dating.



As stated, Rabbi Shagar did not consider his work the be-all and end-all. In fact, it seems he had an aversion to bottom lines. He saw himself as someone who provokes thought, subverts outmoded conventions, and opens up new vistas and possibilities for holiness and divine worship. Thus, this book should be treated not as a systematic program for religious life in a postmodern world, but rather as a trailblazing work that, to our mind, is unique in the landscape of Jewish philosophy and of great importance for Judaism in the twenty-first century.

This book invites the reader to engage with its thought processes in a penetrating manner and to ask questions. For instance: Are the ideas raised by Rabbi Shagar, a man immersed in the Torah world, relevant to young people living in a far more secularized world? Are the traditionalism and intimacy that he held in such high esteem still accessible to a young generation in whose world Western culture is the dominant force? The rabbi was aware of these difficulties. He was

never certain that he had established the optimal balance between openness and isolationism, certainty and doubt, yet it was clear to him, as it is to us, that the directions he highlighted are essential to striking such a balance.¹⁰ With his keen eye, discerning heart, and broad mind, he added fundamental questions to the spiritual agenda of Modern Orthodoxy – formulating them sharply and profoundly, without dressing them up – and even proposed new philosophical directions and spiritual paths. These emanated from the depth of the soul of a true man of God, devoted to Him with every fiber of his being and prepared to give his life in his quest for truth.

We invite the reader to embark on a spiritual journey with Rabbi Shagar. His is a unique blend of a Torah vocabulary – informed by so many and varied Jewish sources – and the postmodern discourse, giving rise to a new religious language. Understanding requires patience, openness, and a willingness to delve deep; we hope that readers who accept the invitation will enrich and strengthen their religious and spiritual world.



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10. Rabbi Shagar's own conceptions frequently changed with the times and with the development of his theories. Thus, we should take into account that, had we merited his continued presence among us, he likely would have reexamined his words and, on various issues, diverged from the ideas presented here.

Faith Shattered and Restored

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Dr. Zohar Maor
Managing Editor of Rabbi Shagar's Writings
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Chapter One

Uncertainty as the Trial of the Akeda

The *Akeda* (Binding of Isaac) is one of the most significant events in Jewish history. On the one hand, it shaped the core Jewish values of sanctifying God's name and of self-sacrifice. On the other hand, it raises difficult questions regarding the relationship between divine commandment and human ethics. That is why interpretations of the *Akeda* are not restricted to deliberations among Torah scholars. The trial of the *Akeda* has become a reality of Jewish life throughout the generations. I would like to begin by surveying the approaches of several modern thinkers to the *Akeda*. I will then focus on a sampling of midrashim, to see what disturbed *Hazal* about the story of the *Akeda* and what did not, what answers they found to their questions, and how the *Akeda* was perceived in their world.

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QUESTIONS ABOUT THE AKEDA

In the world of modern philosophy, the *Akeda* raises several key questions. The first, elucidated by Kierkegaard, became the foundation of his famous interpretation of the *Akeda*. What is the distinction between what he terms the religious, which at its core is an appeal to the individual, and the ethical, which considers the individual as part of a collective? In the broader context, the question is whether man must carry out a commandment that is unethical. Is man permitted to become a criminal in the name of faith? For Kierkegaard these issues define the trial of Abraham.¹ The prevalent outlook in the Modern Orthodox world is that God stands above ethics. This idea was emphasized by Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who would often call attention to the gap between human ethical values and the divine law, to which man can relate only through obedience. To his mind, the meaning of the *Akeda* is that ethics is irrelevant to the religious world.² Obedience is an equally central component of Rabbi Soloveitchik's thought. To him, the *Akeda* means man must subject his will to the divine will, for the purpose of the religious act is to reveal holiness, God's transcendence, in the world. Unlike Leibowitz, however, he sees obedience as cutting against man's natural impulses, but not against ethics. As a student of Maimonides, who asserted that "in every passage [the sages] state clearly that for Him, may He be exalted, justice is necessary and obligatory,"³ he maintains that God would never commit an injustice. Drawing from the philosopher Hermann Cohen, Rabbi Soloveitchik identifies the ethical imperative with God's attributes of action.⁴

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1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Yehuda Shaviv, "Mitzva Versus Morality: The *Akeda*" [Hebrew], *Megadim* 1 (Nisan 5747): 9–17; Hannah Kasher, "How Could God Command Us to Perform Such an Abomination? Rabbi Joseph ibn Kaspi's Critique of the Binding of Isaac" [Hebrew], *Et HaDaat* 1 (1997): 39–47.
 2. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
 3. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), III:17.
 4. Pinchas H. Peli, *Soloveitchik on Repentance* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 245–48.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook espouses a different point of view.⁵ He rejects the notion of a contradiction not only between ethics and religion, but also between nature and religion. The *Akeda* thus constitutes decisive proof of the harmony between a father's natural love for his son and God's true commandment, between the general and the particular. His interpretation of the *Akeda* is antithetical to that of Kierkegaard. An entire generation in Israel was raised on this harmonizing idea, and we are still eating its fruits.⁶ But can we find another approach in *Hazal*, one that calls for rebellion, insubordination, or at least protest?

The second question that arises in the context of the *Akeda* is not that of humans' obeying an ostensibly unethical divine command, but that of the very injustice of God's ordering a trial involving the sacrificing of one's son. Can God act unjustly? The question begs comparison to Job, whose ordeal was caused by Satan. Would it be correct to assume the same of the *Akeda* and similar cases?

The comparison to Job is quite problematic. *Hazal* teach that "Job sought to overturn the platter"⁷ and "he rebelled against his suffering."⁸ According to a straightforward reading of the biblical text, his protest is accepted by God. He says to Job's friends: "You have not spoken of Me the thing that is right, as My servant Job has" (Job 42:7). It would appear that Abraham's reaction is identical to that which Job's friends demand of him, but while they are admonished by God, Abraham is praised. What, then, is the relation between Abraham and Job? Several midrashim draw comparisons, and we will get to one of them soon enough, but first we must mention an extreme, thorny statement by R. Yoḥanan:

Greater praise is accorded to Job than to Abraham. For of Abraham it is written, "For now I know that you fear God" (Gen. 22:12), whereas of Job it is written, "That man was perfect [innocent] and upright and one who feared God and eschewed evil" (Job 1:8).⁹

5. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *Olat Re'iyā* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1963), pt. 1, 84–98.

6. See *Tablets and Broken Tablets*, 161.

7. Bava Batra 16a.

8. *Pesikta Rabbati* 47.

9. Bava Batra 15b.

R. Yoḥanan contrasts fear of God with innocence, and uprightness with eschewing evil, as if there is a fear of God that is not innocent, an eschewing of evil that is not upright. His words are astonishing not only due to our tendency to identify these traits with one another, but also because Job is portrayed as having been awarded loftier praise than Abraham.

The third question returns to the issue of humans' following an apparently unethical divine command. How can a person be sure such a command really comes from God? Can man ever attain absolute certainty as to the will of God? The *Rishonim*, including Maimonides, used the *Akeda* to prove the objective certainty of prophecy. Abraham would never have been willing to slaughter his son, they posited, were he not absolutely certain of the authenticity of the divine command.¹⁰ In many ways, such a portrayal of the ordeal renders it irrelevant to us, for we have not been granted the privilege of prophecy, and God does not speak to us as He spoke to Abraham. But does the ordeal of the *Akeda* in fact presume Abraham's sense of certainty as a prophet? The Midrash suggests that this is not necessarily the case:

As [Abraham and Isaac] were walking, Satan appeared to Abraham and said to him, "Old man, are you out of your mind? You're going to slaughter the son God gave you at the age of one hundred?! It was I who deceived you and said to you, 'Take now [your son] ...'"¹¹

10. *Guide of the Perplexed* III:24.

11. Solomon Buber, ed., *Midrash Aggada* (Vienna, 1894), *Vayera* 22. See the criticism of Kierkegaard in the essay "On the Suspension of the Ethical," in Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 100: "Where, therefore, the 'suspension' of the ethical is concerned, the question which takes precedence over every other is: Are you really addressed by the Absolute or one of his apes? ... Ours is an age in which the suspension of the ethical conscience fills the world in a caricatured form. The apes of the Absolute, to be sure, have always in the past bustled about on earth. Ever and ever again men are commanded from out of the darkness to sacrifice their Isaac. Here the sentence is valid, 'That which the Single One is to understand by Isaac, can be decided only by and for himself.' But stored away in men's hearts, there were in all those times images of the Absolute, partly pallid, partly crude, altogether false and

In some midrashim, *Hazal's* approach is far from simplistic, eschewing the view that God's voice is clearly apprehensible and that the focal point of the ordeal is Abraham's willingness to obey it. The question of Abraham's capacity to know whether it is indeed God's voice speaking to him – and that he must obey – or whether it is Satan's, is posed in all its starkness. Perhaps *that* is the essence of the ordeal – the ability to distinguish between the two voices. From an ethical standpoint, Abraham is commanded to commit a crime, precisely the kind of crime against which he has railed his entire life. Moreover, the victim is to be his “only son,” whom he loves, the sum of his hopes and his purpose. Such an action must spring from an absolute certainty that the commanding voice is indeed God's. The question of conviction thus emerges in all its harshness.

The Talmud raises a similar question regarding the story of the false prophet Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah. The Book of Kings tells of how Zedekiah prophesied to the king of Israel that he would be victorious in his battle against the king of Aram. The Bible reveals that this prophecy was in fact sent by God through a spirit (identified by the rabbis as that of Naboth) in order to deceive the king of Israel. With regard to this account, the Talmud asks:

But what [else] could [Zedekiah] have done, seeing that the spirit of Naboth had deceived him, it is written, “And the Lord said: Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead? And there came forth a spirit and stood before the Lord, and said: I will persuade him. And [the Lord] said:

yet true, fleeting as an image in a dream yet verified in eternity. Inadequate as this presence certainly was, insofar as one bore it concretely in mind, one only needed to call on it in order not to succumb to the deception of the voices. That is no longer so... since the image-making power of the human heart has been in decline so that the spiritual pupil can no longer catch a glimpse of the appearance of the Absolute... False Absolutes rule over the soul... Everywhere, over the whole surface of the human world – in the East and in the West, from the left and from the right, they pierce unhindered through the level of the ethical and demand of you the ‘sacrifice’... in the realm of Moloch honest men lie and compassionate men torture. And they really and truly believe that brother-murder will prepare the way for brotherhood! There appears to be no escape from the most evil of all idolatry.”

You shall persuade him and prevail also; go forth and do so” (I Kings 22:20).¹²

The Talmud’s answer is interesting: “R. Yoḥanan said: ... He should have scrutinized [the predictions of the assembled prophets], even as R. Yitzḥak said: The same communication is revealed to many prophets, yet no two prophets prophesy in the identical phraseology.” It is a Kierkegaardian answer: A true prophecy is revealed to the individual as authentic, and it cannot be duplicated or imitated. The very fact that several prophets prophesied in the style of Zedekiah should have made him doubt the prophecy’s authenticity. The general, the social, is infected with lies.

Another question relates to the essence of the ordeal. This is a major aspect of the *Akeda*, and I will not address it at length. *Ḥazal* present many contradictory approaches to the ordeal, of which we will cite two. The first is in Sanhedrin. Commenting on the opening words of the *Akeda* story, “After these words” (Gen. 22:1),¹³ the Talmud states, “R. Yoḥanan said in the name of R. Yose b. Zimra: After the words of Satan.”¹⁴ Abraham’s ordeal is explained along the same lines as Job’s: Both were initially goaded by Satan. The ordeal is seen as an “act of Satan” and thus evil. In this context, it is worth mentioning another statement of R. Yoḥanan’s: “Were it not expressly stated in Scripture, we would not dare say it: [God is made to appear] like a man who allows himself to be persuaded against his better judgment.”¹⁵ In effect, the ordeal is unjustified, something God was incited to do.

Other midrashim maintain that either Abraham or Isaac, eager to demonstrate devotion to God, sought an ordeal. The ordeal is thus the ultimate religious act. The Talmud attributes this opposite approach to R. Levi:

12. Sanhedrin 89a.

13. [Ed. note: The Hebrew word *devarim*, rendered here as “words,” can also mean “things.” In context, the simple meaning of the phrase in question is “After these things,” i.e., after the events of the previous chapter. Other midrashim indeed understand the text this way. Two such midrashim are quoted below.]

14. Sanhedrin 89b.

15. Bava Batra 16b.

R. Levi said: After Ishmael's words to Isaac. Ishmael said to Isaac: "I am more virtuous than you in good deeds, for you were circumcised at eight days [and so could not prevent it], but I at thirteen years." "On account of one limb would you incense me?!" he replied. "Were the Holy One, blessed be He, to say to me, 'Sacrifice yourself before Me,' I would obey." Straightaway, "God did test Abraham" (Gen. 22:1).¹⁶

In framing Isaac's words as a response to a challenge from Ishmael, R. Levi's statement also emphasizes the struggle against the nations. The motif of martyrdom is pronounced in the following midrash as well:

"After these things" – after the ponderings that transpired on that occasion. Who pondered? Abraham, who said to himself, "I have rejoiced and caused all others to rejoice, yet I did not set aside a single bull or ram for the Holy One, blessed be He." Said God to him, "It was so that if We command you to offer your only son, you will not dither."¹⁷

SATAN, AND ABRAHAM'S MISGIVINGS

Many midrashim feature a conversation between Satan, Abraham, and Isaac.¹⁸ The purpose of these midrashim is to provide a backdrop and context for the conversation between Isaac and Abraham:

...so they went both of them together. And Isaac spoke unto Abraham his father, and said, "My father." And he said, "Here am I, my son." And he said, "Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together. (Gen. 22: 6–8)

16. Sanhedrin loc. cit.

17. Genesis Rabba 55:4.

18. See *Midrash HaGadol* on Gen. 22; *Tanḥuma* (ed. Solomon Buber), *Vayera* 46. On these midrashim, see Jacob E. Ephraïm, *The Trial of the Akeda: A Literal Interpretation of the Biblical Text and Its Literature* [Hebrew] (Petaḥ Tikva: Agudat Bnei Asher, 5743), 197 ff.

This conversation is characterized by intimacy and much tenderness. The words “father” and “son” are used repeatedly as terms of address, and it is clear from the text that beyond the explicit conversation is a covert dialogue about the unfolding *Akeda*. The verses allude to intense internal tumult throughout the exchange, such as in the verses that say, “they went both of them together,” and in Abraham’s response: “God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Yet the Torah, as is its wont, is restrained in its description of these occurrences, a restraint that thickens the plot with meaning and retains its depth. *Ḥazal* raise questions about the conversation: Did Isaac realize what was about to transpire and appeal to his father’s mercy? What was Abraham’s answer? The ostensible meaning of his response is that God will provide the sacrificial lamb. The additional phrase “my son,” an expression of mercy, more than hints at the identity of the intended sacrifice. Still, the sentence is ambiguous. Did Abraham conceal from Isaac the true purpose of their journey?

Ḥazal see Isaac as a willing participant in the sacrifice, as implicit in the repetition of the phrase “they went both of them together.” Satan’s presence is a device for the portrayal of Abraham’s and Isaac’s internal dialogues and thoughts leading up to the *Akeda*.¹⁹

Several midrashim suggest that Satan is inside Abraham, and that the dialogue between them expresses Abraham’s stream of consciousness. “Satan [and] the evil inclination ... are one,” the sages taught.²⁰ This approach is apparent in the *Midrash Tanḥuma*:

Satan appeared before him on the road in the guise of an old man and asked, “Whither are you going?” Abraham replied,

19. It appears that these midrashim developed out of interpretations of the last part of the passage, “God will provide” (for instance, see the statement by R. Shimon b. Yoḥai in *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 30), and the first part, which describes Isaac’s address to his father. The *Pesikta Rabbati*, for example, describes Satan speaking only to Isaac. Academic scholars have pointed out that the later midrashim are more simplistic and tend to dull the radical edge of their precursors, yet several of these later texts display a keen psychological eye and an unflinching willingness to see things through.

20. Bava Batra 16a.

“To pray.”... Satan departed from him and appeared at Isaac’s right hand in the guise of a youth. He inquired, “Where are you going?”²¹

Satan appears to Abraham “in the guise of an old man” and to Isaac “in the guise of a youth” – each according to his own identity. To put it in Freudian terms, we might say that he is a projection of their inner worlds. The misgivings, then, are Abraham’s own.

The Talmud strings together several early midrashim (also quoted in the *Midrash HaGadol*) to form a sustained, charged dialogue between Abraham and Satan. It is a riveting and very instructive exchange in light of the aforementioned questions about the *Akeda*:

On the way Satan came toward him and said to him, “Because He tried you with one thing, will you be weary? ... Behold, you have instructed many, and you have strengthened the weak hands. Your words have upheld him who was falling, and you have strengthened the feeble knees. But now it is come upon you, and you are weary” (Job 4:2–5). He replied, “I will walk in my integrity” (Ps. 26:11). But [Satan] said to him, “Is not your fear of God your confidence?” (Job 4:6). “Remember,” he retorted, “I pray thee, whoever perished being innocent?” (4:7). Seeing that he would not listen to him, [Satan] said to him, “Now a word was secretly brought to me’ (4:12). Thus have I heard from behind the curtain: The lamb for a burnt offering, but not Isaac for a burnt offering.” He replied, “It is the penalty of a liar that even should he tell the truth, no one listens to him.”²²

First, we must point out that the conversation is composed mostly of statements made by Eliphaz in his first address to Job. This insight takes us right to the heart of the problem: Abraham’s behavior is diametrically opposed to Job’s. “Job sought to overturn the platter,” *Hazal* said; in effect, he rebelled against God. His friends regale him with

21. Samuel A. Berman, trans., *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu: An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 1996), 144 (*Vayera* 22).

22. Sanhedrin 89b.

religious platitudes, but apparently God prefers Job's integrity over his friends' virtue, which is deemed a sin. And what of Abraham? He seems to conduct himself according to the same sinful maxims espoused by Job's friends. The author of the midrash puts Eliphaz's words – "Because He tried you with one thing" – in Satan's mouth, but reverses their meaning. While Eliphaz demanded obedience from Job, the midrash reads his statement as a reflection of Job's actions: rebellion and protest over the injustice done him. The subversion of Eliphaz's utterance implies that the fear of God he demands of Job leads to a conclusion that's the opposite of the one he proffers. The correct conclusion is Job's, borne out by Eliphaz's own argument. It is a twofold paradox: Eliphaz's words are put in Satan's mouth with a subverted meaning, while their original meaning calls for the exact same behavior practiced by Abraham. What can we learn from this paradox? Here is Rashi:

"Because He tried you with one thing, will you be weary?" – Should He who loves you have tried you with a thing that wearies you and eradicates your progeny?!

"Behold, you have instructed many" – You revived the entire world with your teachings, and now He comes to weary and frighten you?!

According to Rashi, this is a protest over God's very demand of Abraham. Yet the words of the *Midrash HaGadol*, which are likely the source of the midrash in the Talmud, have different implications:

And it is of him that the verse says, "Because He tried you with one thing, will you be weary?" This verse speaks of Abraham our forefather. For when God said to him, "Slaughter your son and make an offering of him before Me," he immediately resolved to slaughter him. On the way, Satan came toward him and said to him . . . "Couldn't an old man like you misinterpret such a thing? [God] sought only to deceive and weary you, for the Torah writes, 'Whoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed' (Gen. 9:6), and yet you erroneously intend to slaughter