AGUDAH ACHAT:
AN EXPLORATION OF DISCOURSE PROCESSES FOR JEWISH PLURALISM

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Digest

Language relating to Jewish collectivity pervades Jewish literature and liturgy. Numerous early midrashim advocate for uniting the entire community of Israel as *agudah achat*, one cluster, as opposed to *agudot agudot*, separate clusters. These texts create urgency in such unification, tying it to the very security and power of God and to the eventual redemption of Israel. In contrast to this emphasis on Israel as an *agudah achat*, the historical reality of the Jewish people encompasses extensive diversity of ideology and practice across generations and geography. Diversity within the collective leads to conflict, to which possible responses are abandoning the vision of unity, thereby avoiding potential clashes, or developing strategies for navigating conflict in the name of solidarity.

This thesis argues that the concept of *agduah achat* has utility for the Jewish people, and that it is most usefully understood as describing an *ideal pluralistic Jewish collective*. Working toward this vision promotes interaction between Jews across communal boundaries, which strengthens both the individual members and the larger group. In addition to advocating discourse as the mechanism for nurturing Jewish solidarity, this thesis offers a set of values and processes for understanding a pluralistic *agudah achat*. Its product is a procedure for conducting pluralistic discourse in the context of a text study sensitive to ideological difference.

Just as a perfectly pluralistic society that respects the presence of all members and values their experiences equally is utopian, so too is a pluralistic *agudah achat* a

messianic vision for the Jewish people. Nonetheless, Jewish communities should strive to

embody the ideal because every effort toward realizing the vision is itself transformative.

With the principles and procedures offered in this thesis, Jewish communities can move

themselves toward a more altruistic and united diverse collective.

I. Agudah Achat: A Differentiated Unity

Language of Jewish Collectivity

When the leadership of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) met in 1999 to approve what came to be known as "A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism," the body affirmed a commitment to *k'lal Yisrael*, the "entirety of the community of Israel."[1] According to the Statement's appended commentary, this affirmation arose out of a recognizing the simple reality that "Reform Judaism does not exist in a vacuum."[2] Many children of the Reform Movement, for instance, regularly come into contact with Jews of other movements in community day schools, and other Reform individuals and families move amongst various communities around the world and in Israel. Additionally, the authors recognized that the doctrinal and ritual decisions of the Reform Movement have effects on the rest of the Jewish world. Its choice to trace Jewish descent, for example, along both patrilineal and matrilineal lines impacted both other communities that do not abide by such a practice and its own members who interact with them. The commentary further states that commitment to *k'lal Yisrael* means cultivating empathy amongst the different parts of the Jewish world, advocating interdenominational cooperation to address problems common to all Jews.

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[1] Central Conference of American Rabbis. "A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism." *CCARnet*. Pittsburgh, 1999. https://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/statement-principles-reform-judaism/.

[2] Central Conference of American Rabbis. "Commentary on the Principles for Reform Judaism - CCAR." *CCARnet*. Pittsburgh. Accessed December 28, 2016. https://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/commentary-principles-reform-judaism/.

The CCAR's affirmation of its Reform Judaism's commitment to *k'lal Yisrael*

thus begins in accepting the reality of Jewish diversity and concludes with broad

assertions as to how the Reform Movement ought to navigate that diversity healthily.

Implied in the rabbis' affirmed *commitment* to *k'lal Yisrael* is the ideological assumption

that *k'lal Yisrael* and the interdenominational interaction it entails are *worth* preserving.

The CCAR could have advocated an isolationist approach to Jewish community,

effectively seceding from the rest of the Jewish world for the sake of its own ideological

and practical goals, but it did not.

The 1999 document is of note because of its ideological assumption regarding the

preservation of a body called "*k'lal Yisrael.*" The idea that the people of Israel somehow

should be united is not new; it appears in some of rabbinic Judaism's earliest midrashim.

Great importance is given to the idea that the people of Israel ought to be *agudah achat*,

one cluster, as opposed to being *agudot agudot*, separate clusters. The following midrash,

for example, elevates the significance of such unity:

> As long as Israel are joined together in one cluster (*agudah achat*) on the earth below, the kingdom of Heaven—if one dare speak thus (*kivyakhol*)—is in its place. (*Midrash Samuel* 5)[3]

According to this text, the power of God's sovereignty is contingent upon the state of the

people of Israel's unity. The midrash's usage of the term *kivyachol* ("if one dare speak

thus") hints that its author believed this assertion to be quite radical. It certainly creates

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[3] Translations of all midrashim in this chapter from: Bialik, Ḥayyim Naḥman, and Yehoshua Ḥana Ravnitzki. *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah : Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*. Translated by William Gordon Braude. New York: Schocken books, 1992. Page 345.

urgency in the situation of Israel's composition, raising the stakes of the people's unity to the level of divine reality.

The following midrash advances a similar sentiment:

> "He buildeth firmly His upper chambers in the heaven, after He hath set up His cluster (*agudato*) on earth" (Amos 9:6). The verse may be explained by the parable of a palace built on pontoons. As long as the pontoons are joined together, the palace on them stands firm. Likewise—if one dare speak thus (*kivyakhol*)—His throne stands firm above when Israel are joined in one cluster (*agudah achat*) [below]. (*Numbers Rabbah* 15:18)

Here, the stability of the divine throne is contingent upon the state of *k'lal Yisrael*. This text pushes the idea contained in the previous example further, making the very integrity of God depend on whether the people is united as one or is separated into discrete groups. Again, the midrash's usage of *kivyakhol* suggests that its author wants his audience to recognize the radicalness of the idea. That God's constitution is determined by the makeup of the people of Israel is an extreme proposition, and it also is a situation in which the unity of the *agudah achat* is an urgent need.

The parable of the pontoons illustrates an important facet of *agudah achat*: unity does not entail identity. The midrash does not advocate one large pontoon over two smaller ones, but *two* which are lashed together. The pontoons must be positioned together in order to support the palace jointly, but they also must remain distinct entities in order to balance the palace atop themselves. Mapping the parable onto reality reveals that the midrashist is advocating yet-undefined unity amongst *various groups* of Jews, not uniformity.

Even a midrash that seems to propose uniformity is somewhat equivocal in its

position:

> "And He was acclaimed Sovereign over
> Jeshurun" (Deuteronomy 33:5). When Israel are unanimous
> in counsel below, His great Name is acclaimed above. For
> the words "And He was acclaimed Sovereign over Israel"
> imply that it is so when, as the verse goes on to say, "the
> heads of the people are gathered, all the tribes of Israel
> together" (*ibid*.)—when they are together in one [large]
> cluster (*agudah achat*), not when they are made up of many
> [small] clusters (*agudot agudot*). (*Sifrei Deuteronomy*
> §346)

This midrash implies that to be "unanimous in counsel" is for all the "heads of the

people" to be gathered as *agudah achat*. In other words, this passage proposes that all

members of *k'lal Yisrael* ought to be linked with one another by *association*. Despite its

usage of the phrase "unanimity in counsel," it does not explicitly require uniformity of

practice or ideology. Nonetheless, the midrash, like the others, gives theurgic significance

to the state of the people: God's presence in the divine realm depends on the existence of

Israel's *agudah achat*.

The situation advocated by these three midrashim resonates with that offered by

the CCAR in its 1999 Statement, which affirms a commitment to membership in *k'lal*

Yisrael while supporting diversity of ideology and practice within the collective.

Furthermore, the advocation of *agudah achat* in the midrashim suggests an element of

historical context shared by both time periods: for neither did *agudah achat*, a united

k'lal Yisrael, exist. Were *agudah achat* to be reality, one would have no reason to propose

it in the first place, let alone with the radical significance of God's security depending on

Israel's unity. More likely is that each author perceived Israel to be *agudot agudot*,

separate clusters, and desired a more unified form of association.

Apparently, the Jewish people is not accustomed to unity—at least not in the 1500

years spanning the writing of the midrashim quoted above and the 1999 Statement.

Nonetheless, language inscribing Jewish collectivity is common in Jewish vocabulary.

The CCAR's platform, for example, refers to *k'lal Yisrael*, the entire Jewish collective, in

a way that implies its readers would have understood immediately what is meant by that

term. Other Jews sing the folk song "*Am Yisrael Chai* (The People of Israel Lives),"

which not only names the Jewish collective as an *am*, a people, but links its existence

with that of God's (its second line says, "*Od Avinu chai!* [Our Father yet lives!]").

Even the Hebrew Bible uses language that assumes the existence of a Jewish

collective in perpetuity. Genesis 32:33 reads, "That is why the children of Israel (*b'nei

Yisrael*) to this day do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the socket of the hip, since

Jacob's hip socket was wrenched at the thigh muscle" (JPS). This verse concludes the

episode in which Jacob wrestles with a being and has his name is changed to Israel,

connecting the patriarch's identity with the collective of his descendants. Indeed, most of

the redacted book of Genesis is an ideological document designed to instill in its audience

a sense of ethnic identity. Literally, *b'nei Yisrael* denotes the children of Israel, but

idiomatically it is better translated as "members of Israel," i.e. those who make up the

Israelite collective. The verse quoted here presupposes that its audience would recognize

themselves as *b'nei Yisrael*—whenever they might encounter the text after its

composition—and thereby have reason to follow the proscription against consuming a

particular cut of meat. The author of Gen. 32:33 assumes that individuals who identify as *b'nei Yisrael* will live after the time of his writing.

The above examples compose, of course, a non-exhaustive set of the usage of language relating to Jewish collectivity in Jewish literature, let alone in literature from other cultures that might also refer to Jews as a corporate entity. We should also resist the temptation to harmonize all the diverse voices within the corpus of Jewish literature; the sources represent different ideologies and contexts and do not follow a linear progression, and the possibility of finding sources that resist large-scale unity is real. As anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss taught, any history is necessarily selective. A truly complete survey of Jewish literature on the subject of Jewish unity would, in the words of Lévi-Strauss, "confront [us] with chaos."[4] However, it is sufficient to recognize that much of Jewish vocabulary presupposes the existence of a Jewish collective, and that this assumption exists in tension with the assertion that Jews ought, in some way, to be a united group, since the latter stance only has weight in a world in which such unity is absent. In other words, Jews maintain a counterfactual claim to unity as a single group, even while recognizing a reality in which true collectivity does not yet exist.

Why, then, the active push for *agudah achat* at all? Why are Jewish sources concerned with *actual* unity, as opposed to being satisfied with faith in a Jewish collective independent of reality? The assertion that Jews ought to be united in a single collective, especially when paired with the urgency of having God's security depend on

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[4] Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. Translated by George George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd. Letchworth, Hertfordshire: The Garden City Press Limited, 1966. Page 257.

the people's cohesiveness, hints at fear of the alternative, of remaining separate, smaller

entities. This foundational fear could result from a various situations: perhaps the

proponent of *agudah achat* is worried a disunited will not be able to survive in the face of

a greater ruling power or of assimilation, or perhaps he is the member of a contingent

who wants to assert its influence over other Jews.

Other midrashim suggest more directly than those heretofore discussed that a

concern for survival, whether of actual lives or of Jewish ideas and practices, is the basis

for the ideology of *agudah achat.* They also complicate the equivocality of the

aforementioned texts on whether unity requires uniformity. After all, if survival is at stake

and depends on the existence of a collective, then the actions of one individual affect the

fate of the group.

The following two midrashim, for example, suggest that deviation from a

particular norm threatens the collective's survival:

> All Israel are responsible for one another. With what may
> this responsibility be compared? With a ship in which one
> compartment has split apart. Of something like this, it is not
> said, "A compartment in the ship has split apart." What
> people say is, "The entire ship—the whole thing—split
> apart." (*Tanna d'vei Eliyahu*, ed. Friedman, p. 56)

> "When one man sins, Thou art wroth with all the
> congregation" (Numbers 16:22). R. Simeon ben Yohai
> taught: The verse may be illustrated by the parable of men
> on a ship, one of whom took a drill and began to drill [a
> hole] under his own seat. When his companions asked him,
> "Why are you doing this?" he replied, "Why should it
> bother you? Am I not drilling only under my own seat?"
> His companions: "But the water will rise up and flood the
> ship for all of us." (*Leviticus Rabbah* 4:6)

Both of these midrashim inscribe the notion that what affects a single part affects the whole. The nautical parables, in particular, propose that the fate of the group is bound up with that of its members; whether *k'lal Yisrael* is the boat itself or the vessel's occupants, a leak in one spot can sink the collective. The second midrash especially condemns actively pursuing what is generally considered unacceptable behavior—drilling a hole in the boat's hull. According to the midrash, the deviant ought to have considered the effects of his actions before commencing with his dangerous activity.

The problem is that norms are subjective. As long as some sort of diversity exists within a collective, some will disagree about what should and should not be considered acceptable behavior, as well as what actively endangers the group. The Reform Movement, for example, purports to have considered the effects of its decision regarding patrilineal descent on the rest of the Jewish world, and it chose to affirm that stance anyway (CCAR, "Commentary"). From the perspective of the Reform Movement, the decision apparently rested within the boundaries of acceptable diversity that, despite its impact on other Jewish communities, did not threaten the survival of *k'lal Yisrael*.

This is not an opinion universally shared by Jews. We need not look even to the extremes, to those communities who believe that most of what Reform Jews think and do is drilling a hole in Israel's boat, to find opposition. More liberal thinkers have complimented Reform Judaism while still decrying its position on Jewish descent. For example, Rabbi David Hartman, the late champion of Jewish pluralistic learning, wrote to an unnamed Reform rabbi lauding the efforts of Reform Jews to adhere to their

positions.[5] Yet in the same writing, Hartman says, "It is important that you reconsider your approach to halakhic issues, such as your controversial claim that the Jewish identity should be defined by both matrilinear and patrilinear [*sic*] descent, which threaten our shared covenant of destiny" (*ibid.*, 203). In this letter, Hartman does not entertain the possibility that *his* position, that of recognizing only matrilineal descent, might be the one that needs revising for the sake of Jewish continuity. Rather, he understands this Reform practice as something akin to opening a leak in the ship of *k'lal Yisrael*.

How much diversity and what forms are acceptable within *agudah achat* vary by community, and conflict arises when the boundaries clash with one another. Therefore, some strategy for contending with such clashes must exist. Hartman's letter to the Reform rabbi promotes a kind of pragmatic solution. He may be right in that the Reform movement, in a gesture of solidarity with *k'lal Yisrael*, should have opted for a different approach to the problem of Jewish descent. For Hartman, the survival of *k'lal Yisrael* as a collective is at stake in the issue of patrilineal descent, and the pragmatic solution is to default to the most "traditional" position or that held by the majority of Jews, thereby valuing (from the perspective of the Reform Movement) solidarity over conscience. In practice, however, the compromise too often falls on the side of burdening the liberal group. For the pragmatic approach to be an acceptable tactic, willingness to compromise should be shared equally by all participants, and as long as one or more contingents claims its position derives from ultimate truth, such balance is unachievable.

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[5] Hartman, David. *A Heart of Many Rooms: Celebrating the Many Voices within Judaism.* Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 1999. Page 198.

Another possibility for achieving unity is to use coercion or violence, for the

purpose of correcting or excising those whose behavior is deemed inappropriate by the

coercing power. This is the preferred method of many political states, which execute,

imprison, and impose fines upon citizens who violate standards of acceptable behavior.

The majority of Jewish communities today, except the most stringent and insular, have

little to no capacity for coercing their members to adhere to certain practices or

ideologies; rather, they operate using means of persuasion, education, and social

conformity. Even so, there exists no overarching body of Jewish leadership to whom all

Jews worldwide will grant authority in such matters, and there is no universally accepted

norm to enforce.[6] Only in the smallest of contexts might coercion effect unity, and I reject

the use of violence as the means to Jewish solidarity anyway.

Instead of resorting to pragmatic compromise or coercion, we can reorient our

conception of *agudah achat* in order to understand how it can be a functional idea for

Jews today. The midrashim warning that diversity threatens the survival of the collective

imply that we ought to have unity despite any internal diversity. Differences should be set

aside in order not to sink the ship. But what if the diversity itself is what keeps the ship

afloat? The term *agudah achat* preserves, as do the midrashim that advocate it, some

degree of diversity as inherent in the cluster. Without the internal diversity, there would

be no *agudah*. *K'lal Yisrael* can be united *because* of its variation, not in spite of it. We

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[6] The Israeli Rabbinate is the closest, because it is a religious body endowed with the power of the state. However, a discussion beyond the scope of this paper is needed to reveal all the problems that arise regarding pluralism in Israel under this model. In any case, the Rabbinate has no direct authority over Jews living in other parts of the world, and thus has no truly global power of coercion.

can view the Jewish people as a united body, like a complex biological organism, as a whole consisting of various parts that operate together and according to their own agenda —and out of the diversity emerges something greater than the sum of the parts.

When we make this conceptual shift, the problem of determining precisely how much diversity is tolerable falls away. This is not to say that *k'lal Yisrael* would be a group without boundaries; various typicality conditions will continue to define membership, and some contingents likely still will disagree on who is in and who is out. But the question of exactly when diversity endangers the collective ceases to be an interesting topic of conversation. The discussion moves from who is drilling holes in the ship to how each contingent is making the vessel stronger and more beautiful with its contribution.

Developing a Sense of Unity

This discussion is predicated on the belief that diversity is more desirable than homogeneity, that the presence of many voices is valuable. A pluralistic *agudah achat* projects this image onto the world, yet the question of why we should continue to make use of the idea at all remains. After all, Jews could simply drop all terms implying Jewish collectivity from their vocabulary, thereby solving the entire issue of conflicting ideas about communal norms. But such an option denies the value of terms like *agudah achat*: they create urgency in Jews' interactions with one another.

Interaction across communal boundaries is important because, as will be illustrated, it cultivates altruistic dispositions amongst members of each sub-group, and it

thereby provides the greatest chance for the preservation and transmission of the macro-

group's values, ideas, practices, and other cultural elements. Though cultivating altruism

in individuals is a worthwhile activity in and of itself, it is also a major factor in ensuring

the survival of the collective. Therefore, we will first treat the issues of how an altruistic

attitudes and behaviors benefit the group's preservation, and of why the group's survival

is a matter of concern at all.

To that last question, why the group should survive at all, there is no ultimate

answer. There is no necessity to the continued existence of the Jewish people or of

Judaism as a set of values and practices, nor is there for any other people or religion. Just

as with plant and animal species, extinction is a real possibility, and the long processes of

natural selection seem to work toward no end other than continued existence. If, however,

we believe Judaism has something of value to contribute to the world, then likely we

wish for the continued existence of both it and its practitioners. Once we decide in favor

of Judaism's persistence in order to fulfill what we see as its contribution, its best chance

is in a group that exhibits internally altruistic behaviors.

We can define altruistic attitudes as those that are concerned for the welfare of

another for the other's own sake, and altruistic behaviors as those motivated by that

concern that increase another's welfare, with or without some element of sacrifice on the

part of the agent.[7] For years, altruism had confounded evolution researchers because it

seems to defy the narrative that natural selection is "survival of the fittest," at least at the

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[7] Based on chapter 1 of: Ricard, Matthieu. *Altruism : The Power of Compassion to Change Yourself and the World*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell and Sam Gordon. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015.

level of the individual. However, research in the 1960s suggested that altruism fits into the story of natural selection if the frame of reference is adjusted to the level of the group that shares a set of genes (Ricard, 159). While the greatest chance for the preservation and transmission of a particular set of genes *could* be to produce the greatest number of surviving offspring, it could also be for individuals to work to ensure the survival of close relatives so *they* can reproduce.

When an individual exhibits altruistic behavior toward their kin, they promote the survival of the group, even at the expense of the individual. In his book *Altruism*, cellular-geneticist-turned-Buddhist-monk Matthieu Ricard gives the following illustration:

> "If a wolf sacrifices itself by breaking away from the pack when it's being pursued by hunters in order to attract attention to itself, saving the lives of a sufficient number of its brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, who carry its genes and now can reproduce, then its sacrifice represents a clear benefit for the propagation of its own genes" (161).

As long as "the cost of the act borne by the 'altruistic' individual is less than the corresponding gain for the propagation of his genes by his relatives," the altruistic behavior is beneficial from an evolutionary perspective (*ibid.*).

Humans, of course, cooperate today in societies much larger than kin groups, and further discussion would explain how such behavior is comprehensible from the perspective of evolution. For this paper, however, it is sufficient to establish that altruistic attitudes and behaviors directed towards others in one's group increase the chances of one's group to survive, thereby increasing the chances that its genes will survive as well.

If we think of the values and practices of Judaism as the cultural "genes" of the Jewish people, then Judaism has the best chances of survival if its "carriers" exhibit altruism *vis a vis* one another. Therefore, the claim that Judaism has something of value to contribute to the world—and thus ought to continue in existence—is best served by cultivating altruism amongst the members of *k'lal Yisrael*.

One could argue legitimately that altruism is unnecessary for the survival of a collective; indeed, at the level of group-versus-group competition, the measure by which we can predict which group has better chances for survival is the degree to which it exhibits cooperation, not altruism (Ricard, 169). Though altruistic attitudes can motivate cooperation, such activity can also be coerced. A ruling force can *impose* strictures by means of violence upon its subjects, thereby forcing the coerced into performing behavior that *appears* cooperative. We can imagine that such a collective's chances for survival are quite good, relative to a comparatively unorganized group.

However, if we reject violent coercion as the mechanism for creating unity, then an alternative means of fostering cooperation is required, a means that nurtures altruistic attitudes. To that end, *agudah achat* is a useful concept, because it places value on Jews seeing one another as part of the same collective. Such consciousness is easily cultivated amongst individuals who share characteristics and affiliations. As Ricard states, "The more points you have in common with someone, the more you will interact with him, and the more your shared interests will encourage you to cooperate" (Ricard, 170). The greater challenge is to nurture altruistic dispositions toward those who seem drastically different from oneself, who affiliate with a groups divided by apparently firm boundaries,

or whose interests seem to conflict with ones own. If we understand the concept of *agudah achat* to be one in which diversity is valued in—indeed integral to—the constitution of the collective, then this challenge is one we should face.

The simple desire to cultivate altruism across the divisions between the various sub-groups of *k'lal Yisrael*, however, does little to temper the daunting nature of the task. We can easily imagine individuals who disagree so vehemently that seating them around the same table for conversation is all but impossible. Perhaps one party subscribes to an ideological dogma that justifies *harming* the other for the sake of a "superior" cause; in such an instance bringing the two into the same space would not be advisable, at least not without significant preparation. Limits to the possibilities of peaceful interactions thus may exist, but anecdotal evidence suggests that change is possible even in extreme cases.

The story of Christian Piccolini serves as an example. At age 15, Piccoloni became involved in a neo-Nazi group, the Chicago Area Skinheads, and he eventually became its leader. He spent years engaged in violent activities, actively spreading his group's message of hate, and attracting more supporters.[8] Piccolini has since left that world, and he now runs the support network Life After Hate, an organization he co-founded whose mission is to "counter the seeds of hate we once planted."[9] Life After

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[8] Ludwig, Jamie. "From White American Youth to Life After Hate: Former Racist Skinhead Vocalist Pens Memoir About His Road to Peace." *Noisey*. Accessed November 28, 2016. https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/from-white-american-youth-to-life-after-hate-former-racist-skinhead-vocalist-pens-memoir-about-his-road-to-peace.

[9] Life After Hate. "About Us." *Life After Hate*. Accessed November 28, 2016. http://www.lifeafterhate.org/about.

Hate works to help individuals leave hate groups and find healing for themselves and their loved ones.

In telling the story of his utter reversal, Piccolini cites moments of being "taken out of the bubble [he] had created" (Ludwig). In particular, he describes his experience as the owner of record store, which brought him into contact with people with whom he would not have otherwise interacted. Piccolini would help his customers browse the music selections, and many would return as regular visitors. "After getting to know these people," says Piccolini, "I started to realize that I had a lot in common with them and I realized I couldn't justify the feelings I was having anymore. They weren't making sense. I got out of the bubble and opened my eyes" (*ibid.*). Piccolini's story demonstrates the power of creating moments of interaction between people across lines of difference.

Research into neuropsychology, too, is encouraging for the work of cultivating altruism at all stages of life. Studies have shown that, "from the age of one, when they are just beginning to learn to walk and speak, children already spontaneously exhibit behavior of mutual aid and cooperation that they were not taught by adults" (Ricard, 208). Not until around the age of five do children learn to *moderate* their altruistic attitudes and behaviors by internalizing the social norms of the cultures in which they are raised (*ibid.*, 214). Many of these norms serve the worthwhile function of protecting the individual from exploitation at the hands of those who would take advantage of one's innate tendency to trust and act for the sake of another, but in cultivating skepticism and distrust the norms also create boundaries between the child's in-group and out-group. Fostering altruism across that boundary later in life thus requires dismantling, or at least

problematizing, those protective norms. Understandably, this can be a frightening undertaking, because dropping one's protective dispositions and behaviors leaves one feeling vulnerable. At the same time, this research says that humans' natural disposition is *toward* cooperation with others, so nurturing altruism is less about actively cultivating it than about removing the obstacles to its expression.

Neuropsychological research further suggests that such change is possible, even late in life. Neuronal plasticity is the capacity of the human brain to rearrange its neural networks, activate new pathways, and shift activity to different areas of tissue in response to new situations or stimuli. Though much of this activity takes places in the early developmental stages of childhood, studies show that the adult brain "remains extraordinarily malleable" (*ibid.*, 242). This means the adult mind can be trained, and just as one can practice in order to play a new instrument, so can one practice the attitudes and behaviors of altruism. Ricard, in line with his Buddhist practice, names this sort of training the mind "meditation," that is, the act of "*familiarizing* ourselves with a new way of being and also *cultivating* qualities that otherwise remain latent if one makes no effort to develop them" (*ibid.*, 260). Studies have shown that *very* long times spent in meditation, i.e. accumulating 10,000–60,000 hours of experience over 15 to 40 years, can have profound effects on the brain and the ability to inhabit various mental states (*ibid.*, 248). So too can a practice of only 20 minutes a day for a few weeks lead to "significant changes" (*ibid.*, 255). Of course, the intensity and duration of such meditation will affect the degree of mental change, just as will the starting point at which an individual begins

cultivating altruism. Nonetheless, sustaining the work of cultivating altruism over time can produce stronger altruistic dispositions in people of all ages.

The concept of *agudah achat*, as a state of unity to which the Jewish collective ought to aspire, is useful because it narrativizes interactions between Jews across communal boundaries as a worthwhile activity. Such moments can make up the kind of sustained practice in which altruistic dispositions can develop. The following chapters will explore what such experiences aimed at cultivating altruism might look like, and they will consider how we might facilitate these moments so they nurture prosocial dispositions and behavior in individuals, thereby benefitting the whole, diverse collective. This project explores a set of values and procedures that allow us to work toward a pluralistic understanding of *agudah achat*, in which unity is derived from differentiation, without resorting to violence as a means of coercing cooperation. It is motivated by a desire to understand the conditions under which active, nuanced Jewish pluralism can occur and the limits that define it.

II. A Theology of Pluralism

David Hartman and Covenant Theology

One of the foremost leaders in Jewish thought on the subject of pluralism was David Hartman (1931-2013).The Shalom Hartman Institute he founded professes to be a "pluralistic center of research and education," with an explicit commitment to "[b]uilding a Jewish people and a State of Israel that respect and celebrate diversity."[10] The work he undertook as the leader of this organization is evidence that, for Hartman, to be engaged with the contemporary challenges facing the Jewish people means to engage with Jews of many backgrounds. Today, further discussion of how Jewish diversity functions within the collective of *k'lal Yisrael* should build upon and respond to Hartman's work.

Hartman considered pluralism as inherent in Jewish tradition. He understood the need for pluralism (both within Judaism and between Jews and other faith communities) as both a theological imperative and a practical necessity. Exploring Hartman's understanding of pluralism is thus useful for talking about pluralism using Jewish language, and doing so also reveals the limits of such language.

Hartman's conception of pluralism rests on his understanding and veneration of rabbinic tradition as a model. In effect, his exploration of pluralism is a commentary on *Tosefta Sotah* 7:12:

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[10] Shalom Hartman Institute. "About Us." *Shalom Hartman Institute*. Accessed January 11, 2017. https://hartman.org.il/About_Us_View.asp?Cat_Id=187&Cat_Type=About&Title_Cat_Name=About%20Us.

> Make yourself a heart of many rooms and bring into it the
> words of the House of Shammai and the words of the
> House of Hillel, the words of those who declare unclean
> and the words of those who declare clean.

Hartman's initial explanation, in which he defines the pluralistic mindset, follows:

> In other words, become a person in whom different
> opinions can reside together in the very depths of your soul.
> Become a religious person who can live with ambiguity,
> who can feel religious conviction and passion without the
> need for simplicity and absolute certainty. (*Heart*, 21)

Hartman thus sets himself the following three tasks in unpacking his definition of pluralism: (1) demonstrating how multiple opinions can exist alongside one another, (2) anchoring that paradigm in the soul, i.e. showing how it grows out of a certain understanding of theology, and (3) illustrating how one might hold strong convictions even while accepting ultimate uncertainty.

To address the first task, Hartman cites rabbinic tradition as an existence proof of how multiple opinions can exist alongside one another, and he employs two strategies to expose different modes in which such diversity exists within the tradition: halakhic and aggadic. The paradigmatic example of diversity in halakhic opinions is stated in *Eruvin* 13b, when after a debate between the Houses of Hillel and Shammai, a *Bat Kol* exclaims, "These and these are the words of the living God, but the Halakhah follows the school of Hillel." According to Hartman, this passage demonstrates that both halakhic interpretations of the situation are held legitimately by their proponents in the eyes of God, even if, as a practical necessity, the community must adopt only one practice as a communal norm. This is a formulation of the pragmatic solution to differing perspectives

on norms within a single collective, which I previously ascribed to Hartman's specific view of the Reform Movement's position on Jewish descent.

This discussion reveals an important distinction for Hartman: practice is not the same as truth. The confirmation of one practice over another does not imply that its advocate is closer to the truth than its opponent. Either Hillel or Shammai's position might be "plausible or meaningful," but for the sake of communal unity in practice, only one could be adopted (*ibid.*, 149). In fact, claims Hartman, the *Bat Kol* sides with Hillel's opinion in this instance precisely because Hillel approaches the situation with the humility such an awareness entails. In that way, the tradition explicitly condones Hillel's mindset. Hartman further notes that, in other talmudic passages, the preservation of minority opinions shows the distinction between practice and truth on the part of the tradition as a whole. Had the editors of the Talmud wanted to make claims on singular interpretations of Torah, they would have eliminated all but the winning opinion. Hartman accordingly posits that comfort with multiple interpretations is a decidedly Jewish attitude.

Hartman's second strategy to show how multiple interpretations can exist alongside one another (still toward his first task in describing pluralism) is to illuminate the differences various Jewish thought leaders have held regarding the *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, the reasons for performing the commandments, which Hartman identifies as aggadic discourse. Throughout the centuries, Jews have had numerous conceptions of why certain behaviors should be performed—conceptions varying so much that one might have trouble classifying them as doing the same action, even if they both conform

to the letter of the law. "When one is exposed," says Hartman, "to the playful mythic

imagination of the mystics; the sober, rational passion of Maimonides; and the love of

imagery in Halevi, one recognizes that the tradition was able to accommodate many

different spiritual sensibilities" (*ibid.*, 97). Given that Hartman holds all engaged Jewish

opinions as contributions to a single, ongoing discussion, he can cite differences in

ta'amei ha-mitzvot as further evidence that rabbinic tradition tolerates multiple points of

view within an *agudah achat*.

Hartman's conception of pluralism thus focuses on accepting the feasibility of

multiple interpretations of truth. Although Hartman is concerned primarily with

differences in thinking within Judaism, Hartman's best demonstration of how he tolerates

multiple truth claims while being wholeheartedly committed to Judaism is revealed by his

discussion of other religions. To that end, Hartman draws a sharp distinction between the

universalism of divinity and the particularity of revelation. Unpacking this distinction is

vital to Hartman for promoting pluralism: "Pluralism requires an epistemological

framework that limits the claims of revelation. It requires a political philosophy in which

the unity of God does not imply one universal way for all humankind."[11] With such a

statement, Hartman prepares himself to contend with the dissonance between divine

election of Israel and acceptance of the legitimacy of other religions. Moreover,

addressing this challenge allows Hartman to perform his second task in establishing a

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[11] Hartman, David. *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism.*
New York; London: Free Press ; Collier Macmillan, 1985. Page 18.

pluralism based in Judaism: providing theological foundation for the idea that multiple interpretations of truth can exist alongside one another.

Revelation, according to Hartman, is an instance of the infinite divine inserting itself into the finite world of human existence. Revelation happens at a particular moment to a particular person or group, and human beings, in their finitude, cannot comprehend that which is beyond their capacities *qua* finite creatures. Therefore, any divine revelation must be expressed in terms humans can understand, not in its infinite fullness. Hartman clarifies, "Revelation need not be understood as a source of absolute, eternal, and transcendent truth. Rather, it is God's speaking to human beings within the limited framework of human language" (*Heart*, 159). Hartman notes that the diversity of spiritual traditions on earth attests to the complexity and fullness of the divine, and accordingly he celebrates that modern secular society has created conditions in which individuals can encounter multiple perspectives on divinity. He further decries as idolatry any attempt to transcend the human condition and claim knowledge of ultimate truth, and he claims that religious violence comes from attempts to universalize one particular revelation to the whole of human experience.

Because Hartman is interested in the particular experience of Jews *vis a vis* divine revelation, he focuses his discussion on the theophany at Sinai. Hartman explains that moment as the paramount manifestation of divine love for humanity, because in delivering the Torah, God expresses complete acceptance for human beings as creatures equally as capable of error as of rightness. Hartman cites the story of Noah and the flood as the moment when God learns how drastically humans can behave immorally but

decides to tolerate their existence anyway (*Living*, 28). The revelation at Sinai, however,

marks God's complete acceptance of human weakness, because despite human

limitations, God gives them the responsibility of the Torah and its precepts anyway.

Revelation at Sinai is thus a supreme act of love on God's part, according to Hartman,

and he cites it as reason enough that human beings should feel dignity in their condition

as finite beings (*ibid.*, 23).

This conception of covenant has two implications for Hartman's pluralism. First,

it means human experience is necessarily limited to particulars, and, due to human

finitude, human beings cannot know any truth beyond their own faculties (including

memory, reason, and imagination). Second, it insists human beings should feel secure in

their limited knowledge. They should feel no need to transcend their particularities and

attempt to universalize their claims, and there is no need to do so, because God lovingly

accepts humans as they are. In recounting his studies with Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik,

Hartman reflects, "You argued, you discussed, you disagreed with intensity, but you

understood that you were defending a human point of view, not the final word of

God" (*Heart*, 23). Every revelation is to finite human beings, so religious thought always

represents limited human mediation of infinite divinity. Covenant theology is thus vital to

Hartman's ideology of pluralism, enabling its plausibility using Jewish language.

Establishing a theology in which conviction need not rely on ultimate certainty also

moves us toward addressing Hartman's third task: showing how an individual can hold

strong convictions while accepting ultimate uncertainty.

Accepting the plausibility of an attitude is not the same as adopting it, and to take on a pluralistic mindset informed by covenant consciousness, we need concrete steps that cultivate it. For Hartman, the key is a specific kind of education, one that relies on the model of talmudic discourse. Students should be exposed to the dialectics of the Talmud, and they should perceive themselves as continuers of the ongoing discussion. Hartman does not want students to accept what they are taught as wisdom handed down from on high, but rather as representative of various human viewpoints on the divine. In that way, students acclimate to a multiplicity of voices, without accepting one as *the* certain truth. Students can then to find their own voices, understanding their contributions as partial, particular expressions of the infinite totality of religious experience. This method, Hartman believes, can help students "internalize the spirit of the covenantal idea," helping them dissolve any "obsession with certainty and finality" (*ibid.*, 36). Then, when students encounter other voices outside the classroom, they need not respond by feeling threatened. They will be able to resist the urge to universalize their understanding of divinity against others'.

Hartman's description of pluralism places it as the meaningful conclusion of covenant theology's narrative, as the fulfillment of a the covenant between God and humanity. Additionally, his conception of pluralism integrates a philosophy of epistemology, a theology of covenant, and a practice of education. He shows how cultivating a pluralistic mindset can open individuals and communities to greater respect for others, as well as for their internal differences, and he explains how it can lead to less violence and suffering. In doing so, he demonstrates how Judaism uniquely can

contribute to the betterment of the world, because it has built-in pluralistic tendencies, which nourish spiritual and intellectual humility. However, Hartman's deep integration of an ideology of pluralism with a Jewish theology is also a weakness.

Limits of a Religious Ideology of Pluralism

Hartman's theoretical foundation is entirely theological, which inherently limits its applicability. Recall that Hartman, based on the passage on the heart of many rooms, urges his students to "[b]ecome a religious person who can live with ambiguity, who can feel religious conviction and passion without the need for simplicity and absolute certainty" (*Heart*, 21). To establish the theoretical plausibility of such a position, Hartman uses the Jewish language of covenant to describe the idea that no human being can lay claim to ultimate truth. In order for him to claim that his own experience is limited, he has to say that all others' understandings of the divine are similarly finite, but his basis for that position is his interpretation of the particular revelation as transmitted by *Jewish* tradition. Hartman thus universalizes the particular experience of Jewish revelation to the broader human context, which, according to Harman's own discussion, is a conceptual error that can lead to religious violence.

Hartman's methodology is valuable insofar as he it allows *him* (and those who subscribe to his version of covenant theology) to engage in pluralistic discourse with others who hold different commitments. Because Hartman purports not to be engaged in a quest for ultimate certainty, in which any given worldview must either be harmonized with others or rejected, he likely would not experience anxiety about his own

commitments being undermined (or at least he might experience the discord as a source

of worthwhile agitation). All this works *for Hartman*, but because his vision for pluralism

is based in Judaism, he can offer no convincing reason for why anyone who does *not*

operate within a Jewish vocabulary (let alone his particular Jewish vocabulary) to

participate in a pluralistic conversation.

Hartman considered this limitation. He adamantly states that his philosophizing is

limited to the particular Jewish experience: "I make no claims regarding all the non-

Judaic ways of giving meaning and significance to human life" (*Living*, 3–4). Admittedly,

any description necessarily rests within its author's own vocabulary. Therein lies the

problem: a meaningful conception of pluralism should enable conversations amongst

participants who have different (perhaps conflicting) reasons for participating. It should

function for a heterogeneous set of ideologies and commitments individuals might bring

to the table. Such a conception of pluralism cannot, therefore, preference any one

ideology publicly, or it risks alienating anyone whose truth claim conflicts with the public

basis for discussion.

Hartman's pluralism, therefore, is simultaneously attractive and dissatisfying. On

the one hand, it offers a beautiful narrative for why Jews should feel privately

comfortable participating in pluralistic discourse; on the other, it offers no public

ideology for enabling such discourse with others who do not tell that same narrative.

Furthermore, while Hartman describes an educational process by which Jews might

cultivate a pluralistic mindset, he lays no groundwork for the processes by which

pluralistic conversation might occur amongst individuals with differing convictions. A

procedure of pluralism that can enable the vision of a differentiated *agudah achat* should

enable conversation amongst interlocutors with widely varying ideologies and

commitments. The best conception of pluralism for this purpose should not require one's

subscription to any particular ideology in order to participate in a pluralistic interaction.

Once such a conception is established, the vision of *agudah achat* may impel Jews to

engage in such an interaction, but its procedures ought to exist independent of that

particular narrative.

III. A Discourse Model of Pluralism

Preference, Ideology, and Context

Before even beginning to establish under what parameters a pluralistic discourse might occur, we must first establish what kinds of situations could be categorized as pluralistic conflicts. In other words, we must answer the following question: When does a conflict "flip" from being a mere disagreement among preferences, such as which restaurant a family will choose for dinner, to being a potential moment of pluralism, such as when two Jewish communities want to worship together but disagree over whether to allow a volunteering woman to lead the service? What makes this question so challenging is the unique complexity of every situation. At some point, enough factors pile up on a situation that we might label it pluralistic, but determining exactly which and how many characteristics is fraught with relentless indeterminacy.

As a starting point, let us try to determine what distinguishes the two examples I have just described. I have implied that a family's debate about dining options is likely not pluralism, while the prayer conflict likely is. In this case, a salient feature differentiating one scenario from the other is that the latter is rooted in a question of ideology, while the former is not. Precisely defining the limits of what can be considered ideology is as difficult as defining what exactly qualifies as pluralism; however, we can turn to the work of Terry Eagleton on ideology to help us capture some features of what

we might call "ideology."[12] For the sake of this paper, ideology can be understood as a set of often unconsciously held beliefs or attitudes that help one categorize one's experiences (into moral or immoral situations, for example), motivate certain actions, or construct an identity for its subjects. An ideology must conform to one's social reality enough to be useful in making sense of it, or one likely will drop it in favor of a more useful ideology. As ideologies function in the private realm to categorize situations according to certain normative elements, so do they in the public realm. This means ideology can function to legitimate social power structures between individuals and groups, or between people and their environment.

Bringing this description of ideology now to the distinction between the two scenarios, we can see why the dinner example is non-ideological while the prayer example is. Which restaurant to pick likely is not a matter of power structures within the family, nor is it the choice of dining location somehow constitutive of individual or group identity. It is a matter of *preference.* In contrast, the argument over the place of women in prayer may not be not merely a matter of aesthetic preference; the empirical datum of women's participation in public prayer is categorized according to the normative element that says, according to some interpretations, women are not obligated in prayer as men are and therefore should not lead a mixed group. The question is rooted in the ideologies of the religious communities involved. Hence, we are able to say that one way of determining whether a conversation is about pluralism is whether it is about ideology or mere preference.

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[12] Eagleton, Terry. *Ideology: An Introduction*. London; New York: Verso, 1991.

However, no simple heuristic exists for reliably determining whether discourse qualifies as ideological. Too many contextual factors are always in play. Eagleton provides the following example to illustrate this concept:

> A breakfast-time quarrel between husband and wife over who exactly allowed the toast to turn that grotesque shade of black need not be ideological; it becomes so when, for example, it begins to engage questions of sexual power, beliefs about gender roles and so on. (*Ideology*, 8)

Similarly, we can *make* the example of the family choosing dinner appear ideological by providing additional context: decisions in this family unit are typically made by the male members, so the preferences of the female members are always subservient to the men's discretion. Suddenly the decision of where to eat now involves questions of how power in the family is distributed and legitimated. Furthermore, only some members of the family (likely those enjoying less power) may be aware that the conversation is ideological; the ideology could be held unconsciously by those who hold power in this case. Thus the *context* of any debate matters, and what appears ideological to one party (or observer) may or may not to another.

If we are distinguishing pluralistic discourse by whether or not it is ideological, we face the same challenge: what appears pluralistic in one context may not in another. For that reason, determining exactly when a conflict involves ideology and is thus pluralistic is always context dependent. Therefore, we are not served well by attempting to delineate the necessary or sufficient conditions for labeling an interaction as pluralistic. Instead, a more useful procedure for pluralistic discourse is one that incorporates a dynamic process of discernment, by which participants can uncover the source of

conflict. It should include mechanisms that help participants become more aware of what ideologies might underly a given situation, as well as the contextual factors as to why each party might perceive the situation as ideological or not. In other words, the procedure should allow for the discussion of ideology and each participant's experienced effects of the relevant ideology.

In the course of conversation, it may become clear that no real ideological conflict is at play, that the salient differences between parties come down to preference regarding the *expression* of a shared ideology, not the ideology itself. Differences in preference arising from habit, tradition, or aesthetics could be the source of conflict. However, ideological conflicts, especially those in which participants' beliefs are rooted in some sort of ontological claims, are of greater import to a discussion of the vision of *agudah achat*. Many—though not all—communal norms, especially in religious communities, develop on the basis of ideological positions, attitudes, or beliefs. Therefore, a procedure for creating a sense of unity amongst sub-groups with varying norms should include processes for navigating ideological conflict. Specifically, it should provide tools for facilitating conversation between parties whose ontological claims conflict with one another.

The Moral Conversation

For understanding what kind of discourse allows participants to discuss their conflicting ideologies, we turn to the work of philosopher Seyla Benhabib, who writes on the intersection of feminism, postmodernism, sociology, and political science. Benhabib

argues that metaphysical models of ethics and epistemology are tired and incapable of

accounting for the full diversity of human experience. She proposes we champion

discourse ethics instead, which can be acutely sensitive to the particular experience of

individuals, especially in the realms of gender and community. Discourse ethics does not

privilege any moment as a "given, evidential structure which cannot be further

questioned."[13] Rather, validation is granted by the discourse and its makers themselves:

what is rational is that which is accepted as such within the context of the conversation.

The moral dialogue Benhabib suggests will be sensitive to individuals' particular

experiences, whatever they are, because in discourse those particularities form the

background against which any claim might be legitimated, and it theoretically will be

applicable to any combination of individual experiences.

Benhabib expressly states that her envisioned goal for discourse ethics is not

agreement or consensus, but the establishment of conditions under which disagreeing

parties can come to communicate healthily with one another. The participants might

decide to reach agreement eventually, but they must develop their ability to hear and

speak to one another before that point. They must cultivate their capacities for

understanding (Benhabib, 9). The conversation in which such preparatory work might

occur is the object of Benhabib's interest, and its principles of engagement differ from

those of a discussion aimed at agreement or consensus.

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[13] Benhabib, Seyla. *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Page 5.

To illustrate the two kinds of conversation between which Benhabib distinguishes, let us return to an example presented in the previous section: two Jewish communities want to worship together but disagree over whether to allow a volunteering woman to lead the service. According to Benhabib's thinking, two distinct conversations (or at least two stages) should take place, each functioning according to its own procedures, and they should happen in a specific order. First, the two groups should come to a mutual understanding of why they hold their respective positions on women's leadership of public prayer. Then, with the awareness of one another's reasons for their positions, they can determine an arrangement for the prayer service with sensitivity to the various viewpoints on the matter. The first stage is about understanding; the second about compromise. The goal in the first part is to *prolong* the conversation until understanding can be reached; the goal in the second is to *end* discussion and reach an agreeable state of affairs. Of course, the successful completion of the first stage does not entail that such an acceptable compromise necessarily will be attained in the second, but it lays the groundwork for potential agreement.

Once the discourse has reached the second stage, the interlocutors are, basically, sifting through the data collected in the first stage and performing cost-benefit analyses about their respective values and preferences, in order to determine whether acceptable compromise can be attained. Though it still may involved ideological differences, this second discussion is not the kind of pluralistic conversation in which I am interested, as the discernment and discussion of ideological difference itself is no longer the focal point of dialogue. Rather, the first conversation—the moral conversation, to use Benhabib's

term—is the subject of my study. That is the time when participants can develop a shared vocabulary with which a choice regarding the state of affairs might be formulated. Participants must understand the speech of one another accurately, before mutually acceptable decisions can be reached.

According to Benhabib, all relevant voices need to be heard and understood in the conversation in order for the outcome of the second stage, the compromise phase, to be morally acceptable. Benhabib defines moral acceptability according to a principle of universalizability, which states that a given situation must be freely accepted by each individual involved (*ibid*., 34). Stances are not granted validity because of some metaphysical or divine standard, but validity is generated intersubjectively. The principle of universalizability does not generate positions, but it does allow participants to test whether propositions are morally acceptable according to discursive ethics. The second-order conversation, for it to be moral on Benhabib's terms, must allow for the testing of proposed solutions according to the principle of universalizability. But the first conversation is a necessary prerequisite. It creates the social conditions out of which decision making, when the principle of universalizability is implemented, becomes possible.

Benhabib argues that implementation of the principle of universalizability requires participants to relate in two complementary ways to the "other:" as the "generalized other" and as the "concrete other." To adopt the standpoint of looking toward the generalized other means "to view each and every individual as a rational being entitled to the same rights and duties we would want to ascribe to ourselves." It is the

background of the "golden rule," to treat others how we want to be treated. To look toward the concrete other means "to view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity and affective-emotional constitution." It is to recognize that people's circumstances and particularities are inseparable from who they are. According to Benhabib, both conceptions of the other, generalized and concrete, are important for making moral decisions. We should accord others moral respect for being human beings (generalized) and, to borrow from Benhabib's discussion of feminism, for being embedded and embodied creatures (concrete) (*ibid.*, 189).

The first-stage conversation should allow participants to express themselves and come to understand one another as *concrete* others, as much as generalized others. This allows participants to cultivate "moral vision" or "moral imagination" *vis a vis* one another, i.e. the capacity to "see the moral texture of the situation confronting a person," which is historically contingent and bound up in relationships (*ibid.*, 51). In other words, moral vision is the ability to imagine a situation from the perspective of another who is truly *other*, not as one reduced to the imaginer's own understandings of reality. In the next section of this paper, I will reframe the concept of moral imagination to be more precise about the processes comprising it.

Benhabib states succinctly and beautifully the value of cultivating moral imagination and how it relates to the moral conversation:

> Such a capacity is essential to being a good partner in a moral conversation, and is itself furthered by the practice of moral conversation. In conversation, I must know how to listen, I must know how to understand your point of view, I must learn to represent to myself the world and the other as

you see them. If I cannot listen, if I cannot understand, and
if I cannot represent, the conversation stops, develops into
an argument, or maybe never gets started. (*ibid.*, 52)

Listening, understanding, and representing—all elements of moral imagination—are

crucial psychosocial processes for healthy and productive decision making, and the moral

conversation acclimates participants to them. Moral imagination is thus an end in and of

itself, because it prolongs the very conversation that cultivates it, but it is more

meaningfully a means to sustaining ongoing human relationships (*ibid.*). This is why

Benhabib posits that the moral conversation happens in *anticipation* of reaching

agreement; she presumes the participants will continue to be in relationship with one

another and wants them to do so with more fully actualized moral imaginations, with

greater empathy. The second stage of the conversation, the agreement phase, need not

ever happen, but without the specter of needing to coexist—let alone cooperate—looming

ominously overhead, participants have no reason actively to develop their moral

imaginations.

It is perfectly reasonable to argue that no such specter really exists. One can

imagine a world in which individuals associate only with like-minded others, so

ideological conflict ceases. Or, perhaps messianic redemption will arrive to erase

ideological conflict from human society. Neither scenario represents the world in which

we live. As long as we live in history, with contingencies such as race, gender, religion,

politics, etc., influencing our particular situations, and as long as we need to determine

the how do distribute finite resources, we need to navigate conflict. But the specter need

not even be that dramatic; by virtue of being humans that exist in social relationships, we

always are exercising moral judgment. We can "opt out" of making political judgements, but as long as we interact with other human beings, we cannot "opt out" of making moral judgements (*ibid.*, 125). The only alternative is complete hermitage, and if we extend morality to include how we interact with non-human creatures and objects, the only way out is death.

In every human interaction, the specter of anticipating agreement is present, but it may be invisible or willfully ignored. To encourage people to be more mindful that they are making moral judgements, we can use narratives that push people toward cultivating their moral imaginations. For Jews, the narrative of *agudah achat* is valuable to that end. The various Jewish groups *could* exist in their own sort of hermitage, avoiding interaction —and ideological conflict—with one another, but when we subscribe to the idea that we are all one collective, we bring the specter of anticipating agreement out of the shadows. The concept of *agudah achat* gives urgency to Jewish groups cultivating moral imagination, and the moral conversation is worth having, because it strengthens the kind of social fabric from which political decisions can be made. It fosters altruism within the large collective.

Constructing spaces in which we do the work of actively cultivating moral imagination is thus worthwhile. Building on the work of Jürgen Habermas, Benhabib advocates establishing such spaces according two guiding principles: the principle of moral respect and the principle of egalitarian reciprocity. The principle of moral respect asserts that every being capable of speech and action is, within the context of the conversation, entitled to participate in the discourse. The principle of egalitarian

reciprocity requires that, within such conversations, every interlocutor has the same rights

of participation: "to initiate new topics, to ask for reflection about the presuppositions of

the conversation, etc." (*ibid.*, 29). The two principles complement one another to create

the following situation: anyone who wants to join the conversation according to its

parameters should be allowed to do so, and no single interlocutor has a greater claim on

the discourse than any other. Thus the only two strict requirements for participation in the

moral conversation are to be capable of speech and action (the principle of moral

respect), and to agree to allow all other participants to contribute just as much to the

discourse (the principle of egalitarian reciprocity). These are the only two "rules" of the

moral conversation, and they are reinforced by the conversation itself.

This situation is complicated by the fact that discourse always occurs about a

particular subject, and a given participant's level of competence in that subject will, in

effect, limit their capacity to engage in the discussion to the full extend the two principles

stipulate. For example, if one were to arrange a moral conversation on the topic of Jewish

unity, using the aforementioned midrashim about *agudah achat* as a vehicle for

discussion, one participant's unfamiliarity with the genre of midrash and the concepts

contained in the specific texts may, in effect, limit her participation. Such a situation

violates the principle of egalitarian reciprocity, because the person in question might feel

apprehensive about joining the discussion, or she might be dismissed by the interlocutors

who view her as unqualified to comment on the texts. The actual discourse, therefore,

ought to be conducted with sensitivity to the participants' varying levels of competence.

Though fully equalizing all participants' competence is impossible, because each brings

her own unique experience to the table, preparatory work and pragmatic boundaries on the subject matter of conversation can help approximate a level playing field.

The ultimately unsolvable issue of competence raises an important facet of the two principles: they are ideals. The two rules are useful for guiding conversation, but spaces that function perfectly according to them are "utopian projection[s] of a way of life in which respect and reciprocity reign" (*ibid.*, 38). Our social world, largely, does not function according to these two moral principles, but that does not negate their usefulness. In conscientiously constructed environments, we can train ourselves to live by them, so they might influence our social interactions *outside* the constructed conversations. In other words, an artificially constructed moral conversation serves as a laboratory in which one *practices* what it is like to live according to the principles of moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity, until those principles become integrated into one's social norms—just as Matthieu Ricard's meditation can cultivate altruistic dispositions over time. Until we reach the utopian ubiquity of moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity, we need artificial training spaces to practice discourse ethics.

The great challenge of acclimating participants to the moral conversation also highlights the limit of moral imagination laboratories: a prerequisite is the provisional acceptance of the principles of moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity, at least within the boundaries of the conversational space. It is entirely possible for someone to disagree with and challenge these two principles, and for the rules of the game to have any validity in a dialogue, they submit to the universalizability test of discourse ethics: they are legitimated only by the free assent of all participants. But they also create the conditions

within which the universalizability test can be implemented. Therefore, they can only be challenged from *inside* the conversation. "[T]he normative conditions of discourses are… rules of the game which can be contested within the game, but only insofar as one first accepts to abide by them and play the game at all," says Benhabib (*ibid.*, 107). One can choose not to abide by the two principles, but that means choosing not to participate in the moral conversation.

Because moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity are not universally held and perfectly applied in human society, it is safe to assume that most potential participants in the moral conversation do not already live according to them. Joining the conversation does not require the full integration of the principles into one's world view as a prerequisite; it merely requires one to "play the game" and agree to *try* to operate according to them for the duration of the conversation. Participants must, at the very minimum, "fake" the principles until behaving according to them becomes natural. That is, after all, the desired outcome of the moral conversation: that individuals leave the space consciously constructed for the purposes of a particular conversation with a more developed capacity for moral imagination, which they can then use to make more nuanced moral judgements in their lives.

All of us can grow our empathic faculties, and many of us may even want to become more attuned to others such that we can better extend moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity to them. The artificial, "practice" moral conversation can help us do that, especially when it can expose us to those with whom we might never come into contact under normal conditions. However, many people also *reject* the idea that moral

respect and egalitarian reciprocity should be extended universally. These self-conscious proponents of "inegalitarianism" tend to say that their beliefs can be demonstrated or understood only within the group that already professes them. Such dogmatists usually require that "others 'see' the validity" of their principles and are closed to dissenting argument (*ibid.*, 33). A racist will try to convince others that white people are inherently superior to people of color, a sexist will not be swayed regarding his belief in women's inferiority to men, and a fundamentalist will not allow the possibility that someone of another faith can live a morally acceptable life. According to Benhabib, "[E]ither inegalitarianism is irrational, i.e. it cannot win the assent of those it addresses, or it is unjust because it precludes the possibilities that its addressees will reject it" (*ibid.*). Proponents of these ideologies do *not* admit the principle of egalitarian reciprocity, so they implicitly reject Benhabib's moral conversation.

Coincidentally, getting such individuals to engage in discourse with members of other inegalitarian groups and with people neutrally disposed toward the two principles, let alone excited about them, is perhaps the most important kind of moral conversation we could arrange. It certainly has the largest potential for growth from all perspectives, especially since "liberal-minded" folks *also* frequently struggle with affording reciprocity to people they perceive as bigots. *This* conversational makeup is where we have the most work to do, but it will also be the hardest to convene.

How do we create conditions under which all of these people, egalitarian and inegalitarian alike, might engage in real dialogue with one another? At a certain point, we may simply reach a limit as to who can—or at least will agree to—be part of the

conversation. While determining precisely at what point a given individual will not be able to participate is impossible, we can at least recognize that some simply will not walk into the room with one another. Only those who will agree to "play the game" according to the principles of moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity will participate in the moral conversation; it is necessarily a self-selecting group.

One devoted to this cause, therefore, should develop strategies for lowering the barriers to entry and for encouraging the apprehensive to play along. One strategy for doing this, at least in a Jewish context, is to educate toward a theology of pluralism such as that of David Hartman, because it can both acclimate people to the moral conversation and narrativize participation in such discourse as a moral good. However, his theology allows us to explain, from a theoretical perspective, neither what dynamics are at play in the discourse process nor what we mean precisely by cultivating moral imagination. Knowing what processes are happening for individuals when they encounter others will help us determine how one might, in practice, facilitate the moral conversation for individuals with widely varying ideologies.

Expansion of Final Vocabulary

"Sir, surely only things that exist are worth believing in?" said the enquirer, who was wearing a uniform of a sergeant of the Holy Guard.

"If they exist, you don't have to believe in them," said Didactylos. "They just are." He sighed. "What can I tell you? What do you want to hear? I just wrote down what people know. Mountains rise and fall, and under them the Turtle swims onward. Men live and die, and the Turtle Moves. Empires grow and crumble, and the Turtle Moves.

Gods come and go, and still the Turtle Moves. The Turtle Moves."

From the darkness came a voice, "And that is really true?"

Didactylos shrugged. "The Turtle exists. The world is a flat disc. The sun turns around it once every day, dragging its light behind it. And this will go on happening, whether you believe it is true or not. It is real. I don't know about truth. Truth is a lot more complicated than that. I don't think the Turtle gives a bugger whether it's true or not, to tell you the truth."[14]

The above scene is an excerpt from Terry Pratchett's brilliant satirical novel *Small Gods*, which takes place in his fantastical universe called Discworld. In Discworld, the earth is a flat disc that rests on the backs of four elephants, who ride atop a giant Turtle that endlessly swims through space. This particular exchange, in which fictitious philosopher Didactylos responds to questions from an urban crowd regarding the nature of belief, illustrates the distance between what people believe and reality. What people say about the world has no bearing on what actually exists. Even Didactylos recognizes the irony of his own words: the Turtle Moves whether he says so or not. It simply is not the kind of thing that can have the property of truth ascribed to it.

Philosopher Richard Rorty describes the relationship between language, truth, and the world in similar terms. He does so in his collection of essays entitled *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* to advocate for societal ethics based on the recognition that there is no "order beyond time and change which both determines the point of human existence

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[14] Pratchett, Terry. *Small Gods: A Novel of Discworld*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1992. Page 262.

and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities."[15] He wants a world in which humans function alone and in community without recourse to claims of ultimate "truth," because there is a necessary gap between our use of language and the nature of reality. In Benhabib's terms, Rorty proposes a version of discourse ethics, in which validity is generated intersubjectively and not metaphysically.

Rorty's study of language deliberately focuses on how humans speak about the world, rather than on what the world "really is." On Rorty's description, sentences in a language can be true or false, but the world—like Discworld's Turtle—simply exists. "Truth," according to Rorty, is not something that exists "out there" in the world waiting to be discovered, because sentences do not exist "out there," outside the human mind (*ibid.*, 5). To say something in the world is "true" is thus nonsensical, and debating the way the world "really" is is fruitless. In Rorty's words:

> To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth. It is to say that our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest, or "true" as a term which repays "analysis." (*ibid.*, 8)

We are better served by considering the way we *talk* about the world, the vocabularies we use to describe our experiences. That is the more interesting discussion, and every human being can contribute to it.

In practice, this means that a worthwhile conversation is not one in which claims regarding truth are up for debate. As soon as one cites "ultimate truths" like divine decree

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[15] Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Page xv.

or metaphysical philosophy as the root of one's epistemology, discourse ends, because no amount of persuasion on the part of one's interlocutor could undermine such a staunchly held belief. Most people, however, do have some sort of truth claim at the root of their worldview, and attacking truth claims outright shuts down conversation just as much as recourse to them does, since undermining the basis for someone's worldview can cause profound distress. As Rorty says, "[T]he best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things they seemed most important to look futile, obsolete, and powerless" (*ibid.*, 89). A procedure for pluralistic discourse that moves beyond the starting line should thus allow participants to bring their truth claims without humiliation, even if over the course of conversation they will come to question their initial positions.

Instead of us debating "truths," Rorty wants us to study our vocabularies, the way we speak about the world. Everyone, says Rorty, understands, constructs, and communicates their world with what Rorty names as their "final vocabulary." A person's final vocabulary is the means by which they "justify their actions, their beliefs, their lives" (*ibid.*, 73). The vocabulary one employs and the way one experiences the world reciprocally affect one another; as with Eagleton's conception of ideology, one's vocabulary must conform to the experienced world enough that it is useful, but it also constrains and organizes the way one experiences the world in return.

Different vocabularies reveal different things about the world. We recognize this, for example, in the field of physics: the theory of general relativity is useful for understanding the interaction of objects as large as planets but not for things as small as subatomic particles, while quantum mechanics has utility in the reverse. Some physicists

are searching for the elusive "theory of everything" that will unite the two, but so far no

one has discovered or developed one. General relativity and quantum physics are two

separate vocabularies, each with its own utility. One is not "closer to reality" than the

other; they simply reveal different aspects of the world. Neither does the combination of

the two "complete" the picture of reality. Rorty would rather us not think about

alternative vocabularies as "bits of a jigsaw puzzle" so much as "alternative tools" (*ibid.*,

11). Just as a new tool allows one do perform previously impossible actions, so does a

new vocabulary allow one to understand a previously unnoticed facet of the world. The

"jigsaw puzzle" conceptualization implies that there exists a "complete picture," which

we could see only if we collected all possible vocabularies, but this is a "truth"-centered

model, undesirable to Rorty. General relativity and quantum mechanics are two tools that

reveal different aspects of the universe, but simply combining the two does not give us

the "whole picture;" together they do not constitute a "theory of everything."

Similarly, the final vocabulary each of *us* employs allows us to understand certain

elements of the world in particular ways, but it also limits the possible significances

something might have. However, redescribing a situation, by using a different vocabulary

to talk about it, can "make new and different things possible and important" (*ibid.*, 39).

For example, the practice of affirmative action, of prioritizing certain applicants to a

position because of their demographic characteristics, can be described such that it

appears illogical *and* such that it is an imperative. If one speaks a vocabulary of a so-

called "objective" meritocracy, then one should, logically, fill the position with the

candidate who meets the desired qualifications the best. Alternatively, one could employ

a final vocabulary that highlights how a history of segregation and oppression has created

circumstances that perpetually disadvantage entire segments of the population in the

realms of economics and education, so those individuals are highly unlikely *ever* to meet

the qualifications stipulated for the position. In that case, one easily recognizes that the

supposedly "fair" and "objective" meritocratic practice is not actually fair at all: the

procedure systematically prevents certain individuals from holding the position, thereby

perpetuating the stratification that hindered their access in the first place. The "logical"

response in such a view is to change the hiring practice.

This example illustrates the problem of recourse to "objectivity" or "logic" as a

mechanism of persuasion. Calling something "logical," according to Rorty, means no

more than claiming it coherently fits the constraints of a particular language game (*ibid.*,

49). It is a claim of legitimation within a particular speech community. Affirmative action

is "illogical" from the perspective of meritocracy, but "logical" from the perspective of

socioeconomic history. Affirmative action is thus neither "right" nor "wrong," and the

vocabulary that enables each position is also neither "true" nor "false." From this

example, we can see why Rorty wants us to think about vocabularies as tools. Each

vocabulary is a "vocabulary-for," enabling its speaker to give different aspects of a

situation more or less valence.

This example also demonstrates the utility of expanding one's final vocabulary.

Someone who speaks only the language of meritocracy will likely be entirely unaware of

how her practices might perpetuate systemic oppression; she simply does not posses the

tool (the vocabulary) to see that possibility. Now imagine another person somehow

makes her adopt the alternative vocabulary of socioeconomic history. Suddenly, she is able to see her practices in an entirely new light, able to perceive the implications of what she had thought to be a fair procedure. Perhaps she will now reevaluate her organization's process for filling positions.

Notice here that neither logic nor emotion is not the primary vehicle of persuasion. In Rorty's words, whole vocabularies are the "unit of persuasion" (*ibid.*, 78). Encountering another vocabulary has allowed an individual to expand her final vocabulary, enabling her to see the world differently. She is able now to understand how the behavior of her institution might cause inadvertent harm to others. She was not convinced on by an appeal to objectivity, logic, or emotion, but by being given a new tool with which she could understand the situation from another perspective.

Understanding others' final vocabularies thus serves many purposes. As illustrated with the above example, it allows us to understand how our behaviors and systems might be experienced by others as harmful. It also allows us to see new ways to avoid causing such pain. For Rorty, it allows us to avoid causing humiliation, the deeper kind of pain that results from being told that what one cherishes is unimportant—the very kind of pain participants in a pluralistic conversation should not fear. The capacity to suffer in these ways, Rorty says, is the "*only* social bond that is needed" between humans to motivate one to expand one's final vocabulary (*ibid.*, 91). Rorty describes his liberal ironist as someone who "just wants our *chances of being kind*, of avoiding the humiliation of others, to be expanded by redescription" (*ibid.*). Increasing our powers of redescription, increasing our ability to understand different ways of seeing the world by expanding our

final vocabularies, becomes the moral objective on this model, and it requires no recourse to divine command or metaphysical truth in order to motivate that objective. Solidarity not a matter of principle, but is *created* by "increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people" (*ibid.*, xvi).

With Rorty, we can now be more precise regarding Benhabib's idea of moral imagination. When someone develops their moral imagination to take into account another person as a concrete other, they expand their own final vocabulary to accommodate the final vocabulary of the other. Once this expansion has taken place, one can better imagine the world from the concrete other's perspective, using elements of his final vocabulary to illuminate the salient features of reality from his perspective.

This idea is reminiscent of the "veil of ignorance," a conceptual tool developed legal philosopher John Rawls. Rawls' veil of ignorance is a hypothetical situation one adopts before making a decision with moral implications, and it involves imagining oneself independent of all the accidental aspects of one's life, such as wealth, power, occupation, relationships, physical ability, etc. One then considers whatever proposal is under discussion with the awareness that one could emerge from the debate with any particular combination of accidental characteristics. For example, a wealthy businessman who is developing an economic policy should, according to Rawls, imagine how the policy might affect him if he were a single mother living below the poverty line. Theoretically, the outcome of such deliberation would be an economic policy more fair to all it would effect, and the procedure would, as Rawls says, "nullify the effects of specific

contingencies which put men at odds and tempt them to exploit social and natural

circumstances to their own advantage."[16]

Benhabib critiques Rawls' veil of ignorance, claiming that it accounts for only the

generalized other, not the concrete other. "There is no real plurality of perspectives in the

Rawlsian original position," says Benhabib, "but only a definitional identity," and

therefore it is not a satisfactory procedure for a discourse ethics that accounts for the

individual experiences of each participant (162). Benhabib is correct insofar as the veil of

ignorance promotes hypothetical interchangeability amongst any of the involved parties

—indeed that is its point. But she also assumes that Rawls' deliberator never leaves the

veil of ignorance; rather, the veil has utility only if the deliberator imagines himself as a

different, *concrete* other. That is the mechanism by which the veil of ignorance is

designed to lead to a fairer outcome.

In other words, moral imagination is the faculty one engages when one situates

oneself behind the veil of ignorance. That said, the veil's utility is limited by the powers

of one's moral imagination, i.e. extent of one's final vocabulary. Expanding one's final

vocabulary allows one to account for a wider range of human experience, thereby

enabling one to use one's moral imagination to predict more accurately how a concrete

other might experience the effects of a given decision. The veil of ignorance is useful,

therefore, in a moment of deliberation when a course of action must be chosen, and

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[16] Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard
University Press, 1971. Page 118.

Benhabib's moral conversation should be conceived of as a mechanism allowing individuals to expand their final vocabularies.

Imagining how someone else experiences the world can only be done by acquiring the tools of the other's vocabulary. That is what makes the process one of expansion. The pluralistic conversation should thus allow participants to "step into" another vocabulary and imagine the world from that perspective. This is, of course, very threatening, because it carries the risk that one might cause *oneself* the humiliation of seeing one's own values as insignificant or inoperative. However, such destabilization of one's own final vocabulary is required for expansion, and the participant comes to see his own final vocabulary as contingent in the process.

One way to structure the conversation is to displace the risk of humiliation onto a "speaker" that cannot be humiliated, but at the same time it is a "speaker" that can represent its own vocabulary as a unit of persuasion. Rorty notes that this is why "the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principle vehicles of moral change and progress" (xvi). The media Rorty highlights invite the audience into their vocabulary, to see what the world looks like from a particular perspective; they do not argue for a position from rhetoric or logic. In the pluralistic conversation, such carefully selected media can serve as the focus of discourse, at least at the beginning, because *all* participants can equally approach a text (provided adjustments are made to account for varying levels of competence). They need not worry about humiliating the text with their own final vocabulary, thereby ending conversation, before learning the tools of the text's vocabulary. In the structured process,

participants will learn also to understand *their own* final vocabularies along the way.

Subsequently, they will be better equipped to address each other directly, having begun

the difficult process of coming to view their own vocabularies as contingent.

Literary theorist Wolfgang Iser describes this process more precisely with his

concept of a text's repertoire, i.e. all the concepts and representations a reader must share

with her text in order for communication between text and reader to occur successfully.

When elements of a text's repertoire (especially the norms it inscribes) expand or conflict

with the readers', readers can come to new understandings about their own world or,

particularly for a reader of later generations, to become "observers…to grasp a reality

that was never their own."[17] This function is the mechanism by which media's vocabulary

—its repertoire—can act as a unit of persuasion on an audience.

Because texts act on their readers in this way, facilitators of the text-centered

moral conversation ought to consider the choice of texts carefully. Ethical critic Wayne

Booth reminds readers that they have voluntary choice in determining what kinds of

literature to read, and they should make such choices in a manner sensitive to the

potential effects a work might have on them.[18] Booth is interested in "what becomes of

readers *as* they read," asking, "How do works of various kinds shape [readers'] desires

and imaginations, fostering, during the time spent reading, a life that is either rich or

impoverished, complexly attentive or neglectful, shaped or shapeless, loving or cold—

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[17] Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. Page 74.

[18] Nussbaum, Martha Craven. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. Page 231.

and so forth?" (*ibid.*, 233). Such a question is useful to the facilitator of the discourse in question, because it encourages him to choose study texts that themselves inscribe a life lived according to the values of the conversation. Doing so enables the text-centered moral conversation to function on two levels: it allows participants to practice expanding their final vocabularies with minimal initial risk of humiliation, and it allows that expansion to be guided by textual vocabularies that encourage enlarged thinking, altruistic dispositions, and ironic understandings of final vocabulary.

In sum, Rorty's discourse on the contingency of language and vocabularies liberates the pluralistic discussion. Putting the expansion of participants' final vocabularies, rather than debating their truth claims, at the center of conversation theoretically allows anyone to join the conversation. It also makes the starting assumption that every starting vocabulary is equally valid, because none is "closer to the truth" than any other. Furthermore, it makes explicit that the goal of discourse is not agreement, because there is no "best" vocabulary on which to agree, but the acquisition of greater powers of redescription, i.e. of cultivating moral imagination. Rorty also allows us to make cultivating solidarity the meta-goal of the interaction, without recourse to a truth claim as to why that should be the case. In other words, the procedure of for pluralistic discourse—the moral conversation—should itself embody Rorty's liberal ironist, even if its participants do not.

A Procedure for Pluralistic Moral Conversation

Aggregating the thoughts of Eagleton, Benhabib, and Rorty allows us now to describe, in theoretical terms, a procedure for pluralistic moral conversation:

I. The conversation will facilitate a dynamic process of discernment, on the part of participants, to determine which of their differences may be the root of potential conflict. It will allow them to clarify what role ideology and ontological claims play in their disagreements, as well as to uncover the factors that differentiate one world view from another.

2. The moral conversation requires that participants adopt, at least provisionally, the principles of moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity *vis a vis* each other. Participants may challenge the principles, but only from within the discourse structure governed by them. It may be the case that some individuals cannot or will not accept the two principles even provisionally, but those individuals have chosen not to participate in kind of discourse in question.

    a. The perfect, albeit provisional, acceptance of the two principles by each and every participant represents the ideal situation. Because of the great value in bringing individuals of drastically varying persuasions together, though, the creation of various stages of discourse, at which the two principles are implemented in moderation, is a useful strategy. Apprehensive or oppositional individuals thus can have the necessary time to acclimate to behaving closer to the ideal of the principles.

3. The goal of the moral conversation is not consensus or compromise, but to establish a social fabric that enables potential validation of a state of affairs according to the universalizability test of discourse ethics. This social fabric is woven of the principles of moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity, the rules that both enable and are reinforced by the moral conversation. Therefore, participants in the moral conversation should, in order to create the desired social conditions, focus on prolonging discourse according to the two principles.

4. The moral conversation is not about determining what is "right" or "true." It is not a space for debating the validity of ideologies and experiences, but for expressing and understanding them. While participants may indeed find themselves changing their own views on one topic or another throughout the process, that is not the aim. Rather, the aim is to cultivate moral imagination —that is, the ability to imagine the world from another's particular perspective. That is the moral disposition that accompanies living according to the principles of moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity.

5. Cultivating moral imagination means expanding one's final vocabulary. The facilitator of the moral conversation should help participants recognize how one another's vocabularies highlight different aspects of the world as meaningful or as harmful. By incorporating elements others' vocabularies into one's own, one can better imagine how others experience the world.

6. Expanding one's final vocabulary involves intellectual and emotional vulnerability, because it entails that elements of one's own vocabulary might be revealed as insignificant, harmful, or inoperative. The conversation should be conducted with sensitivity to the fact that individuals may withdraw from participation if they experience humiliation, i.e. encountering the contingency of their final vocabularies before they are ready to do so. As a way to acclimate participants to expansion of final vocabulary while minimizing the fear of humiliation, moral imagination can be "practiced" on texts, while the discussion of the text runs according to the principles of moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity.

In sum, the constructed setting I envision to bring different people together, cultivate moral imagination, and build inter-communal solidarity is a conscientiously facilitated text study. By studying a text in a manner sensitive to final vocabulary, participants will learn to identify the limits of their own final vocabularies, so they can then expand them in order to imagine the world from another perspective. I hope participants will leave the conversation with a greater respect for others *as others*, and with a more developed attitude for legitimating moral judgements according to the actual or hypothetical assent of those others.

IV. Conclusion

A Matter of Faith

> "When His cluster (*agudato*) [is one], He will establish it upon the Land" (Amos 9:6). In the nature of things, when a man picks up a cluster (*agudah*) of reeds, can he possibly break them at one time? But if he picked up one by one, then even a child can break them. Thus you find that Israel cannot be redeemed until they are one cluster (*agudah achat*), as it is said, "In those days the house of Judah shall walk with the House of Israel, and together [in one cluster] they shall come out of the land of the north" (Jeremiah 3:18). (*Tanhuma B*, *Nitzavim* §4)[19]

The above midrash imbues an image of *k'lal Yisrael* united as an *agudah achat* with eschatological meaning. By defining the unification of the Jewish people as a prerequisite for redemption, this text seems to accept the idea that actual unity is a messianic vision. Just as an entire society perfectly established upon the principles of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity is a utopian ideal, so too is a *k'lal Yisrael* truly united as an *agudah achat* that operates according to those principles. We may never reach the point at which all those who identify as members of the Jewish people experience the collective as united, and in fact any eventual claim that we have attained the ideal probably indicates that, at that moment, some dissenting voice has been silenced or ignored. That is why Jewish pluralism is best understood as an active *process* by which individuals and groups navigate relationships with one another, not a state of affairs that could ever be "reached." We ought to relate to the goal of establishing the

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[19] Translation from: Bialik and Ravnitzki, *The Book of Legends*, 345.

Jewish *agudah achat* ironically, recognizing its ultimate unfeasibility while having faith

in its power to motivate us to interact with one another across communal and ideological

boundaries.

The ideal of *agudah achat* is a valuable concept to maintain because when we

interact across divisions, we lay the foundations for a more altruistic, more morally

imaginative collective. Both the group and its members are better off in such an

arrangement, as the above midrash's image of a bundle of reeds illustrates. Not only is

the collective stronger by virtue of the many contingents that compose it, but so is each

part protected and strengthened by the others with which it gathers.

We can cultivate the faculties that enable such affiliation, i.e. the expansion of our

final vocabularies, in conscientiously constructed spaces aimed at that goal, but the work

of nurturing moral imagination need not be limited to them. In his discussion of culture,

Matthieu Ricard says:

> Knowing that emulation, inspiration, and the power of
> living examples—the noble aspects of conformity—are
> both the framework that ensures the stability and continuity
> of cultures, and the motivating force behind their
> transformation and expansion, it falls upon us to embody,
> in our being and our behavior, the altruism we want to
> encourage: the messenger must be the message. (*Altruism*,
> 181)

Jewish leaders ought to consider all the potential contexts in which they can invite their

communities to view their own vocabularies ironically, to imagine the experience of

others from within the others' vocabulary, or simply to keep the vision of a more altruistic

world present. While we may turn to the specially facilitated moral conversation for its

utility for nurturing moral imagination in a focused manner, we can also construct our communities such that they model, whenever possible, a society infused with moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity. Leaders should exhibit the process of expanding their own final vocabularies, and they can thereby be the messengers embodying their message.

Though the values and procedures delineated in this paper could be applied to any diverse body, the Jewish people is uniquely suited to the promotion of a pluralistic collective. David Hartman's covenant theology offers Jews a way to feel dignity in their limited faculties, without universalizing their beliefs over all of human experience. His epistemological framework for the particularity of revelation helps us resist claims to ultimate, certain truth. In other words, Hartman's philosophy can be taught in such a way that it helps one relate to one's final vocabulary with a degree of ironism.

Additionally, Hartman's ideal educational system, centered on rabbinic and talmudic discourse, nurtures intellectual humility and acclimates students to the existence of multiple streams of thought within one tradition. The corpus of literature Hartman idealizes reflects the pluralistic *agudah achat*, because it is unified by virtue of its variation. This makes multi-vocal Jewish texts (or sets of texts that inscribe conflicting ideologies) particularly well suited to the kind of text-centered discourse that cultivates moral imagination. Using Jewish literature in such a setting harmonizes subject matter and process: one learns to respect others' vocabularies while one studies vocabularies in conflict.

When we engage in the work of expanding our final vocabularies, we nurture our capacities to imagine the world from the perspective of another. We become more sensitive to the actions that cause others suffering, and then we can modify our own behavior to avoid causing them pain. We also learn to recognize the systems that limit others' freedom, and we can then begin to address the systemic injustices that prevent our society from functioning according to the principles of moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity. The work that lays the foundations upon which such drastic societal changes can be made is the same work of building a pluralistic, altruistic *agudah achat* for the Jewish people. This ideal may be messianic for *k'lal Yisrael* and utopian for the wider world, but even though it tarries, it is an ideal worth our faith.

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