

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein Remembers Rav Hutner

■ Rav Matis Greenblatt's sensitive and illuminating portrait ("Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner: The Vision Before His Eyes," Summer 2001) of our mutual *rebbe*, served both the *Rosh Yeshivah* (as we all called him) and the readers of *Jewish Action* well. On the one hand, it has enlarged the spiritual bounds of a public to whom he was, unfortunately, insufficiently known, and parts of which were distanced by his presumed *Chareidi* identity—as if his capacious soul could be so neatly categorized! On the other hand, it has deservedly enhanced his reputation as both a masterful *gadol* and a preeminent educator. Nevertheless, I believe a number of salient elements were not sufficiently noted, and I wish to fill in this lacuna, in brief.

1. The *Rosh Yeshivah* was highly sensitive to the use of language. This concerned, in part, matters of style but focused, in particular, upon nomenclature and terminology, especially as regards discrimination between *kodesh* and *chol*. On this point, he was punctilious without being pedantic, and could be fastidiously critical of those who failed to meet his standards.

2. He was very self-conscious. This is a trait which was of course encouraged by the *Musar* Movement, generally; but, upon its traditions, he imposed his personal stamp. This quality was apparently ingrained from the outset—as evidenced by a remarkable letter, penned when he was 15

(excerpts of which were quoted in his daughter's biographical sketch)—but were no doubt sharpened as he crafted the reality and the image of his spiritual self. In his presence, one often wondered whether the presumably spontaneous had not, broadly speaking, been subtly planned, after all.

3. The force of his personality was overwhelming. As such, it elicited powerful emotional responses. Of his *talmidim*, many loved him passionately, but all, in some sense, feared him. His criticism—particularly of individuals or institutions of which, on principle, he disapproved—could be devastating, his scorn, energized by a well-honed sense of humor, scathing. By the same token, his approval was generous and genuinely meaningful.

4. In a related vein, he sought, and largely attained, spiritual control. From *talmidim*, in particular, he brooked no challenge. On one occasion, when a *talmid*, by then well-established in the Torah world as a *rav*, disagreed with him with respect to a communal halachic issue, he concluded the discussion by remonstrating that he had long since concluded that he had no mortgage over the latter's mind; and he then told a confidant who had been privy to the interchange that the day had been, for him, a mini-Tisha B'av. In the public arena, likewise, he largely restricted his visible activity (it was rumored that, behind the scenes, he was more widely engaged) to a domain in which he was firmly in charge.

5. He was the *Rosh Yeshivah*, par

excellence—in many respects, the most gifted and impressive of his generation; and yet, that, I believe, in a limited sense. He effected wonders in striving to achieve his primary goal—the molding of spiritually charged *talmidei chachamim*; and he attained it through a combination of intensive personal contact and the creation of a context and a climate within which they could flourish. With respect to pure learning, however—as regards either the content of *lamdut* or its methodology or the area of *pesak*—it is my impression that his imprint was circumscribed. If we may look to his roots in Slobodka for analogues, his role was probably much closer to that of the Alter than to that of Rav Mosheh Mordecai Epstein. As I left the Mesivta at a relatively young age, it may be that my perception on this point is somewhat skewed. I am reasonably convinced, however, that it is accurate; and I think the observation is worth noting. It should, of course, be added, that his role was the result of conscious priority and not of limitations. Admirers and critics alike never questioned his credentials as a *lamdan* of the first rank.

6. Finally, I would have liked to hear more about a crucial matter which Rav Greenblatt knows far better than myself: the *Rosh Yeshivah's* spiritual odyssey. His fundamental orientation remained fairly stable throughout; and yet, he was a dynamic person, ever careful to distinguish between consistency and stagnation. As such, he underwent a measure of change, as regards both ideology and practice. The removal of Rav Kook's picture from his *sukkah*, to cite one example, was surely pregnant with significance. While some of the change was in lock-step with broader sociological developments, it surely bore his personal stamp. Fleshing out this account would be of value—particularly, inasmuch as some of the changes concern issues which currently confront and divide the community of *shomrei mitzvah*.

Let me conclude by stressing the obvious. None of the above is intend-

ed to detract one iota from the stature of a genuine *gadol*, to whom the Torah world is deeply indebted and from whom I, personally, benefited immensely. It is presented as an addendum to a portrait which can help us understand and appreciate a magisterial figure who continues both to illuminate and, in the positive sense of the term, to cast a long shadow.

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Genetic Testing for the Modern Orthodox

■ I would like to applaud the author of “Carrying a Heavy Burden” (Rose Esses, *Jewish Action*, Winter 2001) for raising the important issue of genetic testing with respect to marriage. She effectively conveys the pain and loss associated with Tay-Sachs disease. For my wife and me, however, that pain needs no confirmation. In 1983, after the birth of our fourth Tay-Sachs baby, we undertook a program to help other Jewish couples avoid the horrors we experienced.

Dor Yeshorim, the Committee for the Prevention of Jewish Genetic Diseases, was born that year. We are grateful to the author for mentioning it. The purpose of this response is to briefly describe the program and correct some misconceptions.

Dor Yeshorim tested 45 individuals in its first year in the New York area. Since then, it has tested more than 135,000 young people in the United States, Israel, Canada, and Europe. The genetic panel has expanded beyond Tay-Sachs to include other genetic diseases that (1) display similar inheritance patterns and (2) are fatal or severely disabling. More than 400 “at-risk” couples have been identified. These couples have been afforded the opportunity to avoid entering a marriage that would likely result in children afflicted with dreaded, incurable, genetic diseases.

The success of this premarital program is due to confidentiality. Using

ID numbers instead of names, couples maintain the privacy and autonomy needed to make their own choices. Even the individuals themselves are not advised of their own carrier status. This avoids stigmatization, discrimination and the burden of knowledge for carriers. Contrary to popular misconception, compatibility results are only given to the tested parties or their parents. Such sensitive genetic information is never divulged to a third party such as a *shadchan*. Couples identified as incompatible are advised of their status, and receive extensive counseling regarding the disease which they are carriers of, and the risk should they proceed with the *shidduch*. By targeting couples prior to engagement, the emotional impact of being incompatible is reduced.

Dor Yeshorim has been successful in the Chassidic and *Yeshivish* communities only after receiving the strong support of *rabbonim*, *roshei yeshivah*, principals and community leaders. Unless there is widespread embracement of the program within a community, it cannot be successful. While the Modern Orthodox community may differ in external appearance and *hashkafic* outlook from those already participating in the program, our social and psychological needs are the same. Leaders of the Modern Orthodox community should join together and contact Dor Yeshorim to expand the program. “*Kol Yisrael areivim zeh lazeh.*”

Josef Ekstein
Executive Director
Dor Yeshorim
New York, NY

More on *Mayim Achronim*

■ Though I found Rabbi Dr. Ari Zivotofsky’s article (“What’s the Truth About... *Mayim Achronim?*” Winter 2001) most revealing, especially the portion debunking the need to keep the water covered, I would like to take issue with his position relating to its application to women.

In the late ‘60s, I was privileged to study *hilchot netilat yadayim* with Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik, *zt”l*, as part of the *semichah* program at Bais Medrash L’Torah, in Skokie, Ill.

During the course of one of his brilliant lectures, he made the following comment: “My mother, *a”h*, never drank water outside of the *sukkah* and still she did not find it necessary to wash *mayim achronim*.” He then proceeded to explain why women are exempt from this practice.

We indeed find in the *rishonim* two reasons for *mayim achronim*. Either it is due to *melach sedomit* [Sodomite salt] or the presence of *zohama*, uncleanness. *Tosafot* holds that the primary reason is because of *melach sedomit*, which does not exist today. The second opinion holds that the primary reason is *zohama*, which does exist today. Reb Ahron held that the obligation to wash one’s hands in a ritual fashion due to *zohama* was only ordained prior to a *berachah deorayta* such as *nesiat kapayim* or *Birkat HaTorah*.

Consequently, men who are obligated in *Birkat Hamazon mideorayta* face only one set of doubts—is the primary reason *melach sedomit* or *zohama*? If it is *zohama*, men are then obligated in *mayim achronim*. We, of course, must resort to a more stringent course when only one *safek* is found.

But, in the case of women, the Talmud concludes that it is a *safek* whether their obligation in *Birkat Hamazon* is grounded in a Torah obligation or emanates from a rabbinic imperative. If it emanates from a rabbinic imperative, Reb Ahron held that they would be exempt from *mayim achronim* even if it is due to *zohama*. Thus women face the classic *safek sefe-ka*: perhaps the primary reason is *melach sedomit*, and even if it is *zohama*, it could very well be that their obligation in *Birkat Hamazon* is of a rabbinic nature and would not require the ritual washing of *mayim achronim*.

P.S. I always wondered why “women of distinction” do not *bentch b’zimmun* when men are not present. The

Shulchan Aruch has two opinions—either it is absolutely obligatory, or it is optional (*reshut*). Shouldn't such women choose the more stringent approach, especially those who do not drink water outside of a *sukkah*?

Leon Samuel Well
Kew Gardens Hills, NY

In reading Ari Zivotofsky's article, "What's the Truth About *Mayim Achronim*?" (Winter 2001) the main point seems to be that one must wash one's hands before reciting a blessing. He says, "...blessings should not be recited if one's hands are unclean." For that reason, he writes, it is necessary to wash your hands before *bentching* since your hands are dirty from eating. But does that rule apply to everything? If I see a rainbow or lightning or hear thunder, do I have to wash my hands before saying the appropriate blessing? I find it hard to believe that this would be the case because of the delay caused by washing one's hands.

Michael Newton
Phoenix, Ariz.

Rabbi Zivotofsky Responds

I thank Rabbi Well for his interesting letter on women and *mayim achronim*, in which he shares a characteristically creative analysis from Rav Ahron Soloveichik. This is a prime example of *Torah sheba'al peh* from the luminaries of the previous generation that, without the efforts of *talmidim* such as Rabbi Well, would simply be lost forever.

Notwithstanding Rav Ahron's view, as I mentioned in my original article, the vast majority of authorities on the subject, to the best of my knowledge, ruled that women are obligated in *mayim achronim*. These include: Rav Yaakov Emden, Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rav Shlomo Chaim Hakohen Aviner, Rav Ovadia Yosef, and Rav Moshe Sternbuch (in the name of the Gra).

Regarding women's *zimmun*, Rabbi Elazar Mayer Teitz, *morah deatra* of Elizabeth, NJ, told me the following:

In 1954, when Rabbi Teitz was a student in Ponevezh, his maternal grandmother, Rebbetzin Frieda Preil, founder of N'shei Ezras Israel, visited the Sara Schneiner school in Bnei Brak. Rabbi Teitz was invited by Rebbetzin Preil to join her at the school for Friday night Shabbat dinner. At the conclusion of the meal, the girls *bentched* with a *zimmun* with Rabbi Teitz present. Rabbi Teitz also told me that his wife, a native *Yerushalmit*, attended the Spitzer girls' school, where the girls would *bentch* with a *zimmun* (there were no males present).

These stories indicate that in Eretz Yisrael in the 1950s *frum* young women routinely *bentched* with *zimmun*, at least in certain segments of the population, in both Bnei Brak and Yerushalayim.

Regarding Rabbi Well's stipulation that women form a *zimmun* only "when men are not present," I refer you to Rabbi Teitz's story as well as to my *Jewish Action* article from Fall 5760/1999 ("What's the Truth about...Women's *Zimmun*?").

Mr. Newton is largely correct in his inference that "clean hands" generally are required for the recitation of any blessing. However, that does not mean that a person is always required to wash his hands before reciting a blessing. Under normal circumstances, there is a standing assumption (*chazakah*) that one's hands are clean (as opposed to *tahor*, where the presumption is that they are not).

However, during a meal this assumption does not apply. The Mishnah Berurah (181:23) quotes other *achronim* (such as Magen Avraham 181:9) who hold that a person who wants to say a *berachah* on wine or fruits during a meal must first wash his hands if his hands are dirty enough to warrant washing before reciting *Birkat Hamazon*. *Sha'ar Hatziyun* (181:32) cites the Pri Megadim as saying that this rule applies equally to any *berachah*; in other words, if one's hands are dirty from food, one must wash them before reciting any *berachah*. Thus,

according to the Pri Megadim, if one hears thunder during a meal and his hands are dirty, he would be required to wash his hands before reciting the *berachah*.

"Kosher" Textbooks: Boon or Boondoggle?

■ The Winter 2001 issue of *Jewish Action* featured an article by Deborah Schechter about the growing trend among Jewish publishing houses to publish secular textbooks for use in *yeshivot* ("A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Schoolhouse"). As a public school biology teacher and an emancipated Orthodox Jew functioning in modern American society, I find this trend disturbing.

Ms. Schechter should have been clear on whether the English literature textbooks are proper anthologies, i.e. the editors selected the material but left the authors' words intact, or whether the editors "sanitized" the authors' language.

We in this country do not have the option exercised by the Chatam Sofer, who petitioned the Austro-Hungarian emperor not to emancipate the Jews. We are emancipated whether we like it or not. Most readers of *Jewish Action* have in fact embraced emancipation. We have secured the blessings of liberty for ourselves, and desire to pass them on to our posterity. As educators, our goal should be to prepare our students for the modern world, with all its imperfections, in which they will have to function. Good literature helps achieve this goal precisely because it reflects the human condition as it is, not as we might want it to be.

A critical reading of secular literature can enhance our appreciation of the treasures of our Torah. For instance, an astute English teacher can teach Homer's *Odyssey* before Chanukkah, and use it to contrast Greek culture with our own.

While I would agree that graphic presentations of rape fantasies are inappropriate in a yeshiva curriculum, human sexuality and persistent negative stereotypes of Orthodox Jews

(and others) are realities that should be dealt with. If it is determined that none of the existing literature anthologies is suitable and new ones must be compiled to meet our needs, those works should be produced by standard publishing houses rather than companies like ArtScroll. This would make both educational and economic sense. The works would be edited by people who earn their living reviewing English literature, not Judaica, and this could only improve their quality. These textbooks could also be promoted to a wider audience. Surely non-Jewish schools, both public and private, would be interested in such high-quality texts; we are not the only ones concerned about the decline of moral values in society.

As counterproductive as it is to tailor the secular literature curriculum to our own narrow parochial perspective, it is even more disconcerting that science is next on the hit list. While literature is all about human values, natural science is not. There is only one nature, and it pays no heed to the competing value systems of those who study it. Of course modern science presents complex ethical questions that *halachah* addresses differently from secular ethics. Science teachers ought to touch on these issues, to the extent that time and curriculum allow, but this requires only Jewishly knowledgeable teachers and perhaps some supplementary handouts, not specially “kosherized” textbooks. Involved *halachic* discussions are best left to *rebbeim* knowledgeable in science.

One element of the science-Torah interface is particularly relevant here. To the believing Jew, one nature reflects one God Who governs the world with natural law and Who commanded us to master the world (Bereshit 1:28). To master the world we must understand it. This implies a positive Torah mandate to go into the world and find out what makes it tick. Without evolution, one cannot understand what makes the living world tick; I might even argue that evolution *is* what makes the living world tick. Downplaying or ignoring

evolution in a biology text does our students a disservice that far transcends condemning them to inferior performance on standardized tests and leaving them unprepared for the introductory biology course in college. Moreover, if telling students and parents that you teach the New York State biology curriculum and then teaching an expurgated course is not *gneivat da'at*, I don't know what is.

Zev Stern, Ph.D.
Brooklyn, NY

Deborah Schechter Responds

Many of Dr. Stern's comments fall into the “preconceived judgment” category. Dr. Stern has made unsubstantiated assumptions about many things, including the level of expertise of the contributors to the textbook projects, “our own narrow parochial perspective,” and what will or will not be included in a biology textbook that has not yet even been written!

The assumption that our community does not possess high-level professionals who can attain the same level of expertise as employees of “standard publishing houses,” is unfounded, denigrating, and self-defeating. Assuming that the literary anthologies that have been published to date have overstepped the bounds accepted by the academic community is erroneous. Dr. Stern's right to question is not being challenged, but rather, he is invited to view the anthologies created under the purview of this editor to judge for himself whether any “mortal sin” has been committed.

It is clear that Dr. Stern does not yet share the belief, held by many, that the time has finally come to take a stand against those aspects of “emancipation” that do indeed threaten to topple the cornerstones of our value structure. While it is true, as this writer stated in her *Jewish Action* article, that our children must be prepared to eventually deal with the outside world, the operative word here is *eventually*. To the degree that it is possible, our children should be allowed to retain their innocence during their impressionable years.

Dr. Stern is entitled to his perspective, but he himself admits “that graphic presentations of rape fantasies are inappropriate.” The very reason it has been deemed necessary to undertake such costly textbook projects is precisely because such selections are becoming more and more ubiquitous. It appears then, that the issue is not so much one of philosophy as of degree. Ironically, Dr. Stern is not as far removed from the position espoused in the *Jewish Action* article as he thinks. Once the issue of appropriateness or inappropriateness merits attention, the flag of “censorship” has been hoisted, even in “emancipated” circles.

Rather than criticizing solid, professionally lauded publications, and publishers whose motives are genuine and sincere (see *Ten Da'at*, February 2001, review of *Implications of Literature, Explorer Level*), wouldn't it be more productive if we all joined together to educate our youngsters on the highest possible level, in an appropriate manner? This writer has engaged in dialogues with several high-level executives in the textbook publishing industry who, since they serve the mainstream population, have no recourse but to publish material that reflects secular society's changing lifestyles. On a personal level, most of these executives of “standard publishing houses” have demonstrated respect for what we are doing, and have offered encouragement and assistance. Surely our community should be doing no less.

Ed. note: After publishing an article on Harry Potter, the Jewish Action office was flooded with letters. Presented below is a sampling of views expressed by our readers.

Debating Harry Potter

■ The juxtaposition of articles in *Jewish Action* Winter 2001 was fascinating. In one (“Under the Spell of Harry Potter”), Yaffa Ganz explains that the Harry Potter books leave her feeling “ambivalent and uncomfort-

able” because they deal with the “World of Magic.” Yet in the immediately preceding article (“Of Bookworms and Bookends: A Look at the Jewish Children’s Book Market,” by C.B. Weinfeld), Ms. Ganz is quoted as saying that one of the inspirations for her Savta Simcha books (which I loved as a child) was Mary Poppins.

Mary Poppins, like Harry Potter, lived in a world of magic, “a world where God seemingly does not even exist.” What exactly makes Harry Potter different from *Mary Poppins*, or *The Wizard of Oz*, or the countless other fantasy books that most of us read when we were children, apparently without any lasting damage to our souls?

Leah Suslovich
Brooklyn, NY

I doubt Yaffa Ganz would have felt compelled to remind us that Mendel the Mouse can’t really talk or that there are no children as small as K’tonton. Certainly, part of good *chinuch* is supervising our children’s reading habits. But if reading fairy tales shakes a child’s *emunah* in the absolute dominion of the *Ribbono Shel Olam*, it seems that there is a fundamental problem with the child’s belief structure that will not be resolved by simply denying him access to secular fiction.

Shoshana M. Schwartz
Riverdale, NY

Poor Harry Potter; he’s truly a victim of his own popularity. First the fundamentalist Christians attack him for consorting with the devil. If they’d bothered to read the books, they’d know that Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, like any proper British boarding school, holds an annual Christmas dinner for students who don’t return home for the holiday. Hardly Satanic stuff that.

Then Yaffa Ganz takes a swat at him for his lack of Jewish values. Excuse me? First of all, we’ve established that

he celebrates another religion’s major holiday, so we could hardly expect Jewish values. But we don’t find Jewish values in Tom Sawyer and I haven’t read any recent articles in *Jewish Action* calling to ban books about mischievous scamps who don’t obey their aunts.

As for evil magic in the book, there is nothing in Harry Potter that hasn’t already appeared in some form in *The Wizard of Oz*, *Peter Pan* or even the Mary Poppins series that Ganz herself has borrowed from to create her Savta Simcha character. Ganz’s real subtext is not Harry Potter at all. Take her arguments to their logical extension, and she would have us ban all secular children’s books—a position that we in the Modern Orthodox community soundly reject.

Nadine Bonner
Philadelphia, Pa.

I read Yaffa Ganz’s article, “Under the Spell of Harry Potter,” while basking in the afterglow of the third successful Harry Potter Night that I coordinated for my *talmidim* at the SAR (Salanter Akiba Riverdale) Academy. It was a curious counterpoint to read of Ms. Ganz’s ambivalence about the place of such literature in a Jewish home after swapping spells and “snaring snitches” with the same students to whom I normally teach Gemara, Chumash and Navi. Such programs, as well as my sixth grade Harry Potter Writing Club, have reaffirmed my conviction that J. K. Rowling’s themes and characters are a windfall for educators, in general, and Jewish educators in particular. Let me explain.

In terms of general educational opportunities, not only will Harry Potter get kids to read—he’ll get them to write, as well. For two years, my *talmidim* have written their own chapters of the “next” volume in the series, devoting lunch periods to constructively critiquing each other’s works in progress. At each Harry Potter evening, a trip to the movie was followed by a program of activities, ranging from a fair, with booths modeled after the Hogwarts classes, to a Harry Potter Jeopardy game, to a Quidditch

tournament, adapted to a gymnasium setting. The children themselves composed the Jeopardy, designed the booths, played the Quidditch, and even baked the pumpkin pies for dessert. They combined science, drama, sports, literature, and numerous hobbies, thoroughly enjoying process and product.

So much for general educational value. But is it good for the Jews?

The most blatantly Jewish activity I have tried is an essay contest. The topics have been: Harry Potter and Judaism, and Lessons of Life I Have Learned from Harry Potter. In the former category, *talmidim* have uncovered parallels to events and personalities in Tanach, discussed the struggle of Good vs. Evil, and analyzed whether the prohibition of *kishuf* should stop one from reading the novels.

Personally, I am much more interested in the latter topic, whose broad ramifications also underscore my differences with Ms. Ganz. Harry Potter, you see, teaches our children what goals are important in life and how to pursue them, and what forces are corrosive to the spiritual personality and how to combat them.

Through Harry and his friends, young readers learn how to choose friends and how to be a loyal friend oneself (*Keneh lecha chaver; David V’Yehonatan*), and about positive teacher-student relationships (*banim-eilu talmidim*).

But it goes much deeper. One theme which runs through all the novels is Harry’s learning to cope with the loss of his parents. In order to meet this challenge, Harry must will himself to find happiness in his predominantly unhappy past, and suffuse himself with joy, despite the looming presence of evil. What rabbi, during recent crises in Israel, has not had to teach this lesson to his *kehillah*—that Jews rejoice despite circumstances, not because of them? Harry must let go of the past in order to pursue his future. Might this not be just the counsel a *rav* might offer an unhealthily guilt ridden *avek*?

Harry is troubled when he discovers that he and the evil Voldemort have many traits in common. Dumbledore, Hogwarts's headmaster, helps Harry realize that the true difference between him and Voldemort is in their choices. A real *musar schmuess*—except that it takes place in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and the name of God is never invoked.

Ay, there's the rub. What does a Jewish parent or educator do with lessons like these that might have come straight from *Pirkei Avot*, but instead arise from the study of literature, even literature whose wrapper purports to be the world of magic? Ms. Ganz is "ambivalent and uncomfortable." I say: Go with it! Let kids absorb the lessons, as well as the meta-lesson that we can learn *avodat Hashem* from everything we encounter (*Bechol derachecha daei hu*). *Musar* can just as surely come from the tip of Harry Potter's wand as from the contents of Savta Simcha's bag. If you feel it necessary, discuss the issue of witchcraft with your children, from a halachic and *hashkafic* standpoint. Personally, when I read Harry Potter, I don't see witchcraft—I see an English boarding school with some bells and whistles to make it fun to read about. Not one of my students has come away with a belief in the efficacy of magic, any more than they have been misled by the talking animals of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

I conclude with a final lesson drawn from Harry Potter by Talia Lavin, one of my seventh grade students. Citing Dumbledore's words to Harry about Voldemort, "You've delayed him, Harry. If others keep delaying him forever and ever, he'll never come back," she writes: "And if we Jews keep fighting back, in our stubborn, foolish, wonderfully stiff-necked crabby way, we will continue forever and ever."

Savta Simcha couldn't have put it better.

Rabbi Moshe Rosenberg
Congregation Etz Chaim of Kew
Gardens Hills
Kew Garden Hills, NY

Jewish Action should be commended for an earnest attempt to tackle the complex and multifaceted issues raised by the adventures of Harry Potter. Few are as qualified as Yaffa Ganz to assess the potential impact of this series, especially upon young minds. Predictably, she does so with sensitivity and grace, sobriety and wit, and those most elusive of qualities—fairness and balance.

Personally, I do not agree with all of Ms. Ganz's conclusions, but that is of little import. I admire her courage in addressing such a delicate subject and eloquently affirming that, ultimately, we must seek in Judaism the reference frame through which to evaluate everything in the world around us. After all, if we believe that everything derives from a single, divine Source, then everything is relevant to Judaism, and Judaism is relevant to everything.

The motto of the so-called Enlightenment was "Be a Jew in your home, and a human being when you go outside." That dichotomy should forever revolt us. A Jew is a Jew every moment and in every pursuit. Thank you, Ms. Ganz and *Jewish Action*, for articulately testifying to this truth.

Rabbi Chaim Eisen
Yeshivat Hakotel
Jerusalem, Israel

Yaffa Ganz Responds

I was surprised at the vehemence of some of the responses to my article. I tried to air a serious issue and instead, I seemed to have set off loud alarms. Gracious (as Savta Simcha would say), is it forbidden to question a contemporary literary phenomenon nowadays? One wonders why Harry should be immune to criticism. Maybe it's some magic spell he learned at Hogwarts!

Leah Suslovich asks: What's the difference between Harry Potter and other fantasy books? The simplest answer is not so much the story as the setting. Harry may come under the category of fantasy, but he's also very real. So lifelike, in fact, that the reader can hardly help but identify with him, and by extension, with the world of magic.

Fantasy is something else altogether. Everyone plays "Let's pretend." Is magic just another form of pretending? Magic derives from ancient, long-standing pagan beliefs. Witches, wizards, devils and Satanic cults are still alive and kicking today (try an internet search). Practicing witchcraft and other such activities are not only prohibited *deorayta*, they are punishable by *death*! Why feed these things to our kids as entertainment?

The "belief structure" which Shoshana Schwartz refers to is in a state of continuous development and lots of things can affect it. A teen's (or an adult's) *emunah* is not a stable, finished product. That's why we have to work so hard to educate our children. One needn't deny them access to secular fiction, but why fill their minds and hearts with the occult? Would you fill them with fantasies of sex? If Harry Potter were a poorly written, boring book, perhaps reading it wouldn't make much of an impression, but it's a *good* read and it grabs hold of the reader's mind. And *anything* that "grabs" a kid's mind—good or bad—should command the attention of the parents.

By the way, everyone knows that Mendel the Mouse can talk and K'tonton is the size of a thumb! Everyone also knows they aren't real.

Nadine Bonner feels that since we've "established" that Hogwarts celebrates another religion's major holiday (its annual Christmas dinner), we shouldn't be looking there for Jewish values. But *no* religion exists at Hogwarts. Christmas was originally a pagan holiday and Halloween (still a bona fide pagan celebration) is the big night of the year at Hogwarts. Not that I'm looking for Jewish values at a school of wizardry. I'm just questioning the propriety of inviting Jewish children into the world of magic.

And yes, Tom Sawyer *is* a mischievous scamp but unlike Harry, he is not in the thrall of the occult.

Ms. Bonner is absolutely correct in one point. If you take my arguments to

their logical conclusion, all secular children's books must be carefully reviewed, *although not necessarily rejected*. In the reviewing process, parents may come to different conclusions, depending upon their general attitude to outside culture. So long as we remain within halachic parameters, there is room for everyone to find his own place.

Rabbi Moshe Rosenberg sounds like a gifted and enthusiastic educator and I have no doubt that he manages to extract all sorts of positive lessons from Harry Potter. Nonetheless I take exception to several points he made.

He may view Hogwarts as "an English boarding school with some bells and whistles to make it fun" but that's not what the author created. And she wrote it oh-so-well. Kids are hooked. Adults too. Does all this bring us closer to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu?* Christianity boasts many fine (Jewish-based) values and *middot* too, but would you go to church to learn them? If we want our children to become a "*mamlechet kohanim*" and a "*goy kadosh*," why lead them through forbidden, foreign fields to reach God's mountain?

Ours is a complex and imperfect world. We do not wish to close ourselves off from the world, so we must pick and choose. Often the "choosing" is done for us without our permission. Our kids see and hear all sorts of things we would rather they do without. We then have no choice but to make the best of an imperfect situation. If this is what Rabbi Rosenberg is trying to do, I applaud him for it. But we need not *embrace* Harry nor view him as an inspirational "wind-fall" for Torah. When Harry turns to God and prays, perhaps he'll be a more suitable role model for our kids. Meanwhile, perhaps our precious day school time can be enriched with creative activities based on sources closer to home. I'm sure someone like Rabbi Rosenberg can make them both exciting and instructive.

Last, I am gratified that Rabbi Eisen found my comments to be of value, even if he does not agree with all of my "conclusions." Actually, I didn't think I *came* to any conclusions. I simply tried

to make the point that the books present a serious question which deserves our attention. May we all choose wisely and be blessed to see our children continue in the hallowed paths of Torah. **JA**

Corrections

•Rabbi Yitzchok Breitowitz's article "Finding God 9-5," (Spring 2002) was originally delivered as a lecture on behalf of Shalsholet, an organization dedicated to increasing communal awareness of and involvement in *shidduchim*. Shalsholet encourages everyone to get involved in this very important *mitzvah*.

•The review of *Mr. Batt's Way*, by Miriam Batt Halpern ("Books," Spring 2002), omitted publication information. The book was self-published. It can be ordered, free, from Rabbi Ahron Batt, battaa@netvision.net.il or from Avi Katz, avikatz@aol.com. A voluntary contribution can be made to the Batt Book Fund to help defray costs (send to Avi Katz, 1460 Hudson Rd., Teaneck, NJ 07666).

•In "A Spring Blessing: The *Berachah* on Blossoming Trees" (Spring 2002) credit for photography was omitted. Photos: Jack Hazut-Israelimage.