

Being Open to Therapy

Since Rabbi Helfgot's article ("Dimensions of Torment: A Young Man's Story of Surviving Depression," fall 2001) is still generating interest, I would like to share my experience. I am a young *frum* woman who decided to try therapy. It was a lifesaver.

My decision was not based on any dramatic life event, but rather on my feeling really unhappy and needing to understand why my life was turning out all wrong. I think that this is significant since my prior perception was that something "big" had to happen before I could be sure that I "needed" therapy. My knowledge of therapy came from books and magazines. No one in "real life," at home or school, ever presented it as a valid option.

Even more important was learning that it was a valid *religious* option. After agonizing for weeks over calling my college guidance office for help, I spent a Shabbat with a *limudei kodesh* [Hebrew studies] teacher from high school. We were discussing dating, and I mentioned that I didn't feel ready to get married. She asked if I had ever considered discussing my feelings with a therapist. I cannot begin to express the impact of that question. As one raised in an environment where religion governs all, I needed to hear an authority figure say that therapy was okay.

I ended up spending several years in therapy, and while the results aren't earth-shattering, I can focus on the life ahead of me instead of constantly thinking about painful experiences of the past.

**Anonymous
New York, New York**

Still Talking about Textbooks

Deborah Schechter's article

about textbooks written explicitly for yeshivot ("A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Schoolhouse," winter 2001) and Zev Stern's response prompted me to consider this issue. As a parent of young children about to enter school, I share the concerns raised about the contemporary secular values that have found their way into textbooks. As an Orthodox Jew committed to the ideal of *Torah u'Madda*, I want to be sure that my children are exposed to the best in literature, science and secular studies. I admit to not having seen the ArtScroll textbooks in question, but I can understand Mr. Stern's concerns.

Notwithstanding its achievements, ArtScroll has received well-deserved criticism for many of its publications' lack of academic scholarship, deliberate censorship in its translations and an approach to Judaism that is much more to the "right" than its mainstream market. Thus, I admit to sharing Mr. Stern's skepticism of an ArtScroll secular textbook. What works are chosen? How are they edited? Are the editors scholars in their fields?

In truth, however, the same questions can and should be asked of the secular textbooks from traditional publishers, and I fear I would not be happy with the answers there either. What Mr. Stern fails to acknowledge in his letter is that secular editors of literature, science and history textbooks also have a point of view and are rarely objective. For example, many history books used in schools today not only lack scholarly writing and editing, they are often filled with outright falsehoods, distortions and questionable interpretations of events. As Ms. Schechter points out, literature anthologies don't limit themselves to Homer, Dickens and Twain. Materials

chosen for their relevance to those reared in the MTV culture may not be relevant to day school youth. Even science books can present a point of view. Every book involves editing and that means choices—what is left out is often as significant as what is included. The big publishers are no less immune to social pressures, whether emanating from *roshei yeshivot*, Christian conservatives or secular progressives, than is ArtScroll.

In the end, as parents we must not leave our children's education solely in the hands of their teachers. Regardless of what books they get at school, my children will be encouraged to look at all of history with a critical eye, to explore great literature, and to expand their knowledge of science—all of which will enhance their growth as Torah Jews.

**Michael Rogovin
Hillcrest, New York**

Wish List for Treating Eating Disorders

I found the articles by Leah Lightman and Rina Stein to be important and informative discussions of eating disorders within the Orthodox community ("The Hidden Hunger: Eating Disorders in the Orthodox Community," and "The Perfect Anorexic: A Young Woman's Story," summer 2002). One question to consider is what comes next? Which steps would be useful to further address this serious problem? As an Orthodox psychiatrist with experience in this field, I would like to offer my suggestions, or perhaps more accurately my "wish list," to enhance prevention and treatment.

In order for prevention to be successful, not only must it focus on the child, adolescent or young adult, it

must include the parents as well. To flesh out a point alluded to in Ms. Lightman's article, the mothers of today's generation were themselves growing up when ideas about body image were undergoing major change. Too often, one sees that today's mothers are consciously and unconsciously brainwashed by the media's distorted ideas and then pass on these values to their daughters and sons. Thus, ongoing educational programs need to be geared toward influencing mothers.

Related to this latter point is the need, as Ms. Lightman discusses, to help young men reassess their priorities as they seek out a mate. I think one way this *might* occur is by having men participate in small interactive discussions involving influential people such as their *rabbanim*. Some may benefit by doing this in consultation with mental health professionals.

While, as noted, nutrition and health education do not necessarily prevent eating disorders, I feel they can impact on *disordered eating* patterns. However, inclusion of appropriate lectures and discussions in the curriculums of yeshivot across the Orthodox spectrum will only occur with the influence of *gedolim* as well as major organizations.

Many patients with eating disorders need a combination of nutritional, medical, psychological and psychiatric interventions. Additionally, a lot of them require long-term care. Unfortunately, there is a serious lack of affordable, comprehensive and long-term settings for the treatment of eating disorders. This is true for the general population and certainly the Orthodox community as well. The rise of managed care in the last decade has played a critical role in these deficiencies. Activism is needed to ameliorate the situation. This may involve challenging the insurance industry as well as becoming supportive of national groups attempting to effect change. Additionally, our community needs to consider developing its own treatment facilities, as it has done for other types of problems.

This "wish list" is not complete, and

certainly can be refined, but it is offered in the hopes of stimulating further discussion and action.

**Shalom Feinberg, MD
Queens, New York**

Remembering Rabbi Rosenberg

Berel Wein's article about Rabbi Alexander Rosenberg ("The Legacy of Rabbi Alexander Rosenberg," summer 2002) brought back many memories for me. I knew Rabbi Rosenberg as our rabbi in Yonkers, New York. He was only about 22 years old when he became the spiritual leader of Congregation Ohab Zedek, where he served for 47 years.

Rabbi Rosenberg was a dynamic orator of the type rarely heard today. He would start quietly, setting up a point he wanted to make, and work up to a crescendo. He concluded with a brilliant summary, neatly wrapping up his thesis—all without referring to any notes. Several generations of Bar Mitzvah boys stood before him in terror as he spoke to them (actually with great kindness).

He was an idealistic visionary, founding a "parochial school" in the early 1930s, long before it was a popular thing to do. That school lasted only a few years, but he tried again about 20 years later and the Yonkers Yeshiva ran until 1961, by which time there were other, larger schools in the area.

Although in his later years Rabbi Rosenberg spent most of his time at the OU, he continued to serve Ohab Zedek, because he felt that "a rabbi was not a rabbi unless he had a congregation." Our *shul* moved several times over the years and finally merged with a younger group. But those of us who were privileged to have known Rabbi Alexander Rosenberg will always cherish his memory.

**Nancy I. Klein
Yonkers, New York**

Aramaic in Gan Eden?

Rabbi Dr. Ari Z. Zivotofsky presents his usual thorough and fascinating

overview of a difficult subject in his article "What's the Truth about...Aramaic" (summer 2002). However, an important source has been omitted which sheds light upon Aramaic and other linguistic issues. The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 38b) tells us that Adam Harishon—the First Man—*sipeir* "spoke" in Aramaic. Rabbi Reuvein Margolios (*Margolios HaYam on Sanhedrin*) notes the use of the word *sipeir* instead of the more usual *dibeir*. He suggests that *sipeir* refers to common daily language, as opposed to *dibeir*, which refers to the use of language for sacred matters such as study or prayer.

Actually, Rabbi Zivotofsky alludes to this concept briefly when he quotes (as does Rabbi Margolios) from the *Kuzari* that "Avraham's native language was Aramaic and he used Hebrew only for spiritual purposes." However, there is a larger philological and *hashkafic* issue embedded here. There is an ancient tradition (see *Responsa Chasam Sofer Even HaEzer* vol. II, no. 11) that our sages in earlier times deliberately spoke distorted versions of the language used in the countries in which they resided because of the ancient decree against using the language of the Gentiles (see *Talmud Yerushalmi Shabbat*, ch.1, *halachah* 4). Rabbi David Cohen (*Sefer Avram Yagel Yitzchak Yeranen*, Brooklyn, NY, 2000, p. 126) demonstrates that this is the source for the emergence of Ladino and Yiddish as well. These languages

Corrections

•In David Kranzler's "Orthodoxy's Finest Hour: Rescue Efforts During the Holocaust" (fall 2002), Yaakov Rosenheim was mistakenly identified on page 34 as being affiliated with the Vaad Ha-hatzala. He was president of World Agudah. The same article mentioned a planning meeting, in May 1942, for the American Jewish conference (page 35). It should have read the Biltmore Conference.

•In Sara Bedein's "Soul of a Pioneer: Chevron through the Eyes of a Settler" (summer 2002), the photograph on page 36 is of Chana Ra'anana.

served the dual purposes of allowing the Jews to have a lingua franca for mundane use (Yiddish for Ashkenazic and Ladino for Sephardic), while saving Hebrew for holy matters, simultaneously avoiding the language of the Gentiles as much as possible. Thus, beginning with Adam, the ordinary details of life were conducted in a vernacular while the holy and sublime were elevated by the sacred tongue. Aramaic is thus as ancient as Hebrew and inevitable in the scheme of a Torah view of linguistics. While it may be hard to imagine Chava calling to Adam *kum aher* [“come here” in Yiddish], our sages teach that she probably pointed out the wonders of the fresh new world with a hearty *ta chazi* [“come and see” in Aramaic].

Rabbi Yaakov Feitman
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Cedarhurst, New York

“Gadolographies” — The Real Story

As much as we may be inspired by published biographies of *gedolei Yisrael*, we certainly recognize that those that are “cookie-cutter life stories,” as Rabbi Emanuel Feldman describes them (“A Storied Life,” summer 2002), leave us hardly informed and totally uninspired. I also agree with his criteria for judging a *gadol* story: “Is it unique or ordinary?” and so on. But his submission of “the story of Joseph and his brothers” as a model for the contemporary biography raises a number of serious questions.

After his caveat, “As part of Torah, it is more than narrative,” he treats the story-line and its protagonists as though they were indeed characters in just another narrative, and asks all the right questions in that context: “One shudders to think how it would be written today. Would any contemporary religious writer dare mention that Joseph, in his youth, was concerned with his physical appearance?... Jacob’s favoring one son over another?... Would Joseph’s talebearing be omitted? Would not the story of Judah and

Tamar be excised because it might offend—as would the story of Joseph and the wife of Potifar?” etc.

But this is Torah. And only because the Author of Torah deemed it to be print-worthy is it chronicled in such critical detail. By contrast, there is absolutely no license for any contemporary author to take the lid off any family’s life, and examine the strife and apparent shortcomings of “Reb Joe and his bro”—or pick through the tensions and struggles of any *gadol* and his family. Yes, *Chazal* warn us not to favor one son over another, citing Joseph as an example. But no agenda of instruction or inspiration permits us to publicize the struggles or weaknesses of others, unless the Torah or *Chazal* have already done so. Yes, limitations of *shemiras halashon* restrict us even in regard to our reports and comments of those no longer alive.

Of even greater significance—and of utmost sensitivity—once we draw parallels between Joseph’s internecine conflicts and our own squabbles, we inevitably equate him with us. “Joseph’s talebearing... and the jealousy of the brothers” would be just another case of sibling rivalry—even though I am confident that Rabbi Feldman would never mean us to view it as anything of the sort.

My teachers and mentors constantly underscored the vast gulf that separates us from the *shevatim*, as from all personalities of *Tanach*—as no doubt did the teachers and mentors of Rabbi Feldman.

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, *zt”l*, described all of those whose lives and actions are chronicled in Scriptures as *malachim*—angels, no less, far beyond our comprehension. Rabbi Aaron Kotler, *zt”l*, instructed teachers of *tinokos shel beis rabban* similarly in a lecture at a Torah Umesorah gathering, published in *Mishnas Rav Aaron*, stressing that even Eisav was of a greatness beyond our reckoning. Rabbi Gedalya Schorr, *zt”l*, focused on the nature of the prize in the battle between Joseph and his brothers as *nitzchiyus*—a key factor in the eternal destiny of the Jewish people—and Joseph’s “concern with his physical appearance” as an

expression of royal dignity, or a reflection of the ultimate manifestation of human perfection as personified by Adam and Jacob; not another case of adolescent narcissism. (Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, *zt”l*, expounds on the rivalry of Joseph and his brothers with his signature profundity in *Michtav MeEliyahu II*, pp. 219-229.)

We dare not risk belittling the like of Joseph and his brothers, by equating them with us in any fashion.

Writing a truly informative, instructive and inspiring biography of a *gadol* is a challenge—especially when one adheres to *halachah*-and-*hashkafah*-based guidelines. But the challenge has been successfully met by some gifted writers, and there’s no reason why it can’t—or shouldn’t—be met in the future.

Rabbi Nisson Wolpin, editor
The Jewish Observer
New York

Rabbi Emanuel Feldman is to be congratulated on drawing attention to the inadequacy of much of the current biographical material on *gedolim*, which permeates Torah literature. The human problems which beset ordinary mortals never seem to arise, and the *gadol* is perceived as a superhuman being whom the rest of us cannot in any way hope to emulate. As a result, the potential positive influence of *gedolim* on the behavior of Torah society is seriously curtailed. In regard to their Torah learning there is a standard recipe of precocious brilliance, enormous dedication and exemplary *middot* with little attention focused on the *specific* contribution of the particular *gadol*.

I would like to draw attention to *Ishim ve Shitot*, by Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin, *zt”l*, which first appeared 50 years ago (Tel Aviv, 5712), and could well serve as a role model. In it, Rav Zevin identified the specific contribution to the advancement of Torah of a number of *gedolim* of the previous generation.

In one chapter, he analyzes the characteristics which made Rav Chaim Soloveitchik a unique figure even in the company of other outstanding *geonim*. He relates that on one occasion when Rav Chaim was giving a *devar Torah* to a group of *talmidei chachamim*, one of

them quoted a particular Tosafot which, he claimed, contradicted what Rav Chaim had been saying. “That is not written in the Tosafot,” responded Rav Chaim. A Gemara was brought, the Tosafot was examined and indeed Rav Chaim was correct. A few moments later Rav Chaim observed, “Do you think that I know all that is written in the Tosafot and even more what is not written there? I just understood that it was *not possible* for the comment as quoted to have appeared in Tosafot.” The ability “to know what could not possibly have appeared in Tosafot,” concludes Rav Zevin, “is far greater and more striking than to remember precisely what is actually written there.”

Rav Zevin also tells us that from an early age the Rogatchover devoted his every waking moment to Torah; he allowed his hair to grow long because if he removed his yarmulke for the barber he would have to interrupt his Torah thoughts. He would perpetually engage in Torah discussions with those around him, and even on Tishah B’Av, he did not interrupt his Torah exposition. Even more surprising, when his first wife passed away, and the leaders of the Warsaw community came to be *menachem avel*, he lectured to them for hours on a variety of Torah topics. None of the visitors dared to remind him that he was in mourning, but when his uncle pointed this out to him, his reply was, “Yes, it is a sin, and when I am punished for my other sins I will certainly be punished for this. But I will willingly and lovingly accept the punishment and it will be worth accepting *malkot* for the sake of Torah.”

I suspect that these two amazingly graphic stories would be unacceptable to present-day biographers. It would be argued that to suggest that an outstanding *gaon* like Rav Chaim was not familiar with every Tosafot in Shas is unproductive. And how does one reveal that a *gadol* like the Rogatchover contravened laws in the *Shulchan Aruch*?

Professor Cyril Domb
Bar-Ilan University (RA)
Ramat-Gan, Israel

Kudos to Rabbi Feldman for opening the door to public conversation regarding the *gedolei Yisrael* biography genre.

I personally know many people, myself included, who have been deflated and confused by the “instant *tzaddik*” myth perpetuated in these biographies. I believe that while these authors may have been well intentioned, some of their own subjects would have been dumbfounded by the Pollyannaish treatment of their life stories.

Yet, I know of a number of recent works that have done more justice to the challenges and emotions of the great Torah leaders of our past. The biographies of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch and Rav Eliyahu Dessler have attempted to show their human struggles as well as their ultimate triumphs.

However, more needs to be done to teach our future generation that greatness has always been achieved by growing from our failures.

Rabbi Yonason D. Schick,
headmaster
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Dallas, Texas

Rabbi Feldman, you are a brave man! In our age of closeted opinions it is rare for a known rabbi to air views which many think, but few state publicly.

The “gadolography” industry can only thrive if the publishers distance themselves from books of real value. Sadly, it is an undisputed fact that today it is becoming more difficult to sell Torah-orientated literature to the general public beyond the ultra-Orthodox community. The proliferation of “gadolographies is behind the veiled skepticism felt by most on entering a Jewish bookshop.

Several years ago, I funded the translation into English of “*Malachim Kebenei Adam*” on the life of Rav Kook. Subsequently, I was told that this translation, by the late illustrious translator Charles Wengrow, was antiquated. This did not ring true. Wengrow had translated the biographies of Rav Meir Shapiro (*A Blaze in the Darkening Gloom*, New York, 1994) and Rav Aryeh Levine (*A*

Tzaddik in our Time, New York, 1989), both of which were reissued numerous times. What was the truth? With a stutter, a stammer but no shame I was told, “How can you sell Rav Kook in Boro Park?”

This is the crux of the tragedy. Fearing rabbinical disapproval, the publishers appoint themselves as the censors and conscience of their unsuspecting readers. If our daily newspaper followed the same strategy we would all read only fiction.

Martin Stern
Jerusalem, Israel
Rabbi Feldman responds

The responses to my essay indicate that a nerve was touched. The debate can only help raise the level of Orthodox biographies. As I indicated, some biographies have indeed been rigorous and perceptive, but these are not the majority.

Professor Domb, Rabbi Schick and Martin Stern all make significant points that amplify the issues involved, and I appreciate their kind words. The bulk of my response, however, will be devoted to Rabbi Wolpin, who raises the classic issue of how to read and interpret a Torah text.

I have no disagreement with Rabbi Wolpin on the major parameters of this subject. In fact, the ideas that Torah is not mere literature and that our patriarchs are not to be treated with the limiting measuring rods of ordinary mortals are the very concepts I tried to teach my congregants though decades of sermons—and they constitute a major theme in my 1986 book, *The Biblical Echo*. No less than five essays in that book are devoted to the profound layers of meaning within the Joseph narrative, and I believe that Rabbi Wolpin would not take issue with any of them. In addition, I recall vividly Rav Aharon Kotler’s comments on how to study and teach the Torah; they had a seminal influence on my rabbinate and writing. In fact, my *Jewish Action* essay repeatedly states that the Joseph narrative “is more than a mere story,” that its “multi-layered structure illuminates and instructs in

ways that we cannot fathom,” and that “to view it as mere literature would be to denigrate it.” It is therefore painful to me that, despite all this, the article seems to have given a different impression.

Perhaps our disagreement lies in our respective readings of the well-known dictum of the Sages that “*ein mikra yotzei midei peshuto*—a verse does not lose its simple meaning” (*Shabbat* 63a). This means that although every word of Torah contains *shivim panim* (70 aspects) and *nun sha'arei binah* (50 gates of wisdom), the narratives of the Torah are also true on their elementary level. Furthermore, they are not only true on this level, they are Torah—meaning “teaching”—on this level as well.

What occurred in the Biblical narratives on the visible, “macro” level is true in accordance with how Torah *Shebeal Peh* explains it. In this view, the forefathers were spiritual giants who were never motivated by mundane or ordinary concerns—as the simple meaning of the text might occasionally lead us to believe. Nevertheless, the simple meaning of the text informs us that, at least on some elementary level, these spiritual giants also had certain mundane concerns. For if this were not so on a “micro” level, then the Torah would not have permitted the simple meaning of the verse to have given this impression—since *ein mikra yotzei midei peshuto*.

This explains why the Sages derive from the Joseph story that one should not pay excessive attention (*mesalseh*) to one’s hairstyle—basing themselves on the verse that Joseph acted like a youngster (*vehu na'ar*); or that a father should not favor one child over another—which is based on the special cloak which Yaakov gave his son Joseph. (See *Midrash Rabbah* 84 and many other commentaries on the text.) There are many other *midrashim* in which moral lessons are derived from the simple meaning of texts, even though the verses have more profound messages underlying them. This is

because there are layers and layers of meaning to each Biblical verse, from the simplest to the most profound and mysterious. But one of these layers is the simple meaning of the text. Thus, although the principals in the Joseph narrative behave in a way that is deeper than meets the eye, there nevertheless exists a valid layer that, in fact, merely meets the eye. That is to say, if the simple meaning of the text gives the surface impression of mundane human behavior, then that suggests that at some level, albeit a level perhaps indiscernible to anyone but God, mundane human behavior must have been at play. I would suggest, for example, that Radak’s portrayal of Yitzchak’s relationship with Esau, or Ramban’s reading of the relationship of Avraham and Sarah in the Avimelech episode, or the relationship of Yitzchak and Rivkah, are reflections of the view that “a verse does not lose its simple meaning.”

It is thus evident that we can indeed take the Torah as our model in writing biographies of great Jews. If the Torah teaches us that our forefathers were not perfect creatures (albeit on a micro level) then we, too, in presenting the life stories of contemporary great Jews—who are certainly not of the stature of our Biblical giants—should not feel it necessary to conceal any shortcomings if this helps instruct and inspire. My point was that by suggesting that our greatest contemporary leaders emerged as perfect creatures from the womb and remained perfect all their lives, the readership was being discouraged rather than uplifted—as Rabbi Schick points out in his letter—and that only the most naive reader would take these biographies seriously.

Rabbi Wolpin’s concerns about halachic constraints of *lashon hara* are well placed. It is a classic issue in *halachah* whether such constraints apply to incidents and facts that are well known, and where the clear intent is to instruct readers and not to denigrate the subject. And if, in fact, halachic constraints prevent us from relating the crucial inner struggles and

conflicts that might have been present in the lives of today’s great Jews, perhaps we should consider finding a name other than “biographies” with which to label a genre which has the noble purpose of uplifting and inspiring, but—because it cannot relate the entire, balanced story of a life—will not succeed in uplifting and inspiring.

The issue is certainly not clear-cut. One recalls Rav Yitzchak Hutner’s famous comment in his *Iggerot Ukesavim* in which he complains that in dealing with the lives of our great people, “the impression makes it seem as if they issued from the Hand of their Creator in their full stature and stance.... But who knows about their struggles, their failures, their falls and their regressions....” (For an insightful and invaluable discussion of the problems of dealing with the lives of our greatest people, see the Foreword to Rabbi Nathan Kamenetsky’s newly published work, *Making of a Godol*. This magnum opus is required reading for anyone interested in the Jewish religious history of the last 100 years.)

The issues raised by Rabbi Wolpin require much more space for a definitive discussion, but I am grateful to him for having brought to my attention the need to make at least this small clarification. **JA**