



SHALOM HARTMAN INSTITUTE מכון
OF NORTH AMERICA שלום הרטמן

Boys will be Boys

Paul Nahme

Introduction and Q&A: Sarah Mulhern

- Sarah: Welcome to the second session of Judaism, #MeToo, and Ethical Leadership. A web series on how Jewish ideas can inform the current discourse on power, privilege, and sexual assault from the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. My name is Sarah Mulhern, a member of the Created Equal Research Team. A group of scholars who research issues of gender, and ethical leadership in Jewish tradition.
- Sarah: The #MeToo movement has brought increasing awareness to the sexual violence and discrimination faced by women in the workplace and beyond. Among the multitude of important questions this awareness raises, as the Created Equal Research Team we have turned our attention to the ways both positive and negative in which Jewish tradition intersects with these issues.
- Sarah: Today's webinar will be the second of a three part series of presentations resulting from our work. In our first class Dr. Elana Stein Hain discussed how we approached the traditional Jewish canon as moderns given that it was written predominantly by men for an assumed audience of men, and reflects male perspectives.
- Sarah: While this is not a new question, especially for feminist thinkers. In this #MeToo moment it gains added urgency as we consider whether and how we can turn to Jewish tradition for wisdom, and guidance in confronting the challenges #MeToo has exposed.
- Sarah: In the next two classes in this series we will examine images of masculinity and femininity in the Jewish tradition. Today Dr. Paul Nahme examines how images of the masculine in Jewish tradition have changed overtime, and explores possible ways in which this rich cultural heritage could help us to refine healthier models of manhood in light of #MeToo.
- Paul: The #MeToo movement has triggered a moment of long overdue reckoning for modern men in North America. Men can no longer avoid asking tough questions about what it is to be a man in a world that has been assumed to be masculine by definition. Rationality, subjectivity, agency, activity, decisiveness, power, all these terms that have come to determine what we consider qualities of leadership have also been unquestioningly assumed to denote a kind of masculinity.

- Paul: These attributes have also concealed a toxic underside, and now the question dominating the headlines of late is whether masculinity can be anything but toxic.
- Paul: While claims that boys will be boys invoke some timeless essence to masculinity so too do claims that masculinity is inherently toxic, violent, aggressive. It's therefore time to ask why masculinity has so long been assumed to occupy a fixed position in our culture, institutions, and histories.
- Paul: We might begin by simply asking, "Has masculinity always looked like this?" Does masculinity look the same in all cultures, and all historical periods? To try and answer such questions, I wanted to draw upon my own experience reflecting upon what I take it to mean to identify as a man, a father, a spouse, and someone who's masculinity has been shaped in large part by the study of Jewish texts, ideas, and practices.
- Paul: As someone who did not grow up with any exposure to Torah, or traditional Jewish learning. I had to imagine the kind of self, the kind of man I wanted to become, and then reflect upon this self as I had the transformative experience of studying Rabbinic texts. It turns out that I was not the only kid who experienced such a development into Jewish masculinity through Torah.
- Paul: Indeed today I want to focus on a historical example that helps me explore this sense of possibility for the selves we might want to become by looking at the issue of Volozhin, which was the premiere site of Lithuanian Torah scholarship in the 19th century. Founded in 1804 by Chaim of Volozhin who had been a student of the Vilna Gaon. The Volozhin yeshiva quickly became a magnet for young Jewish boys seeking to become modern Jewish men. The yeshiva was more than just a place to learn Talmud however, it was also a place where masculine Jewish identities were shaped, and where embodied practices were crucial to those identities.
- Paul: In other words, Torah education became a way to both learn, and unlearn habits of thinking and acting in the world. Our investigation of Volozhin today will therefore focus on the fact that it represented a way for modern Jewish men to imagine what selves they could become.
- Paul: Well the first class in our series with Dr. Elana Stein Hain showed us how rabbinic learning historically constructed a voice that was dominated by men, and thus imagined men as the primary agents of Torah. I want to gesture toward a model of selfhood, agency, and habit formation in the modern rabbinic tradition that is explicitly engaged in a project of reconstruction, re-imagination, and questioning of what it means to be a modern Jewish self.
- Paul: This self was still certainly male, but by focusing upon an image of manhood and masculinity that is founded in shy, bookish commitment, to being shaped by a traditional learning, by Torah, and by idealizing the student and studious, the Talmid Chacham as the apex of manhood we find a stark contrast to the model of manhood that values the physical public strong decisive authoritarian self assured agent of power in Christian Europe of the very same period.

Paul: My hope is that this alternative model of manhood and masculinity might tell us something about the fluidity and changeability of masculinity, prompting us to look to such resources as a way of actively participating in a cultural shift in how men might imagine masculinity today. The model of habit forming and changeable selfhood might allow for new ways of mapping allyship with Jewish women, and might allow for ways that Jewish masculinity could help us detox the more potent elements of modern western masculinity.

Paul: I want to suggest that by reframing our discussion of masculinity within the context of modern rabbinic thought we gain access to different kinds of masculinity, and so my claim is the following. We have inherited an image of masculinity in our society that assumes boys will be boys, and that men are just this way, unchanging, and fixed. I want to suggest there are resources in the Jewish tradition that can help us rethink masculinity and male responsibility by emphasizing habit formation, changeability, and the unlearning of old habits, the learning of new ones.

Paul: Before I move into our case study of the issue of Volozhin however, I want to clarify that Jewish masculinity is still masculinity for better and for worse. This means that while different from European Christian masculinities, Jewish masculinity nevertheless contributes to a certain kind of patriarchy, in other words I don't mean that somehow we can be more idealistic about Jewish men than we can be about other men.

Paul: I'm not interested in apologetics, rather, Judaism has its own varieties of patriarchy that I am not trying to avoid. The limitations of Torah study as Daniel Boyarin has noted, and this is on your source sheet, has facilitated one such form of patriarchy, but identities are complex, and they're always more complicated than a single category could ever contain. More than a man, or more than Jewish could ever fully contain.

Paul: We enact identities in what we say, and in what we do, as well as in how we imagine ourselves. This is what scholars refer to as gender performativity. Now I want to be clear, performance doesn't mean that it's fake, or fictive. Rather it describes the social, and psychological factors that contribute to a masculine, or feminine identity, or even a mix of the two, and how we live up to those, or fail to live up to those ideas and expectations.

Paul: To be clear again, performance is not fake. We perform all sorts of learned behaviors, like rituals, manners, customs, and social settings, or specialized skills like shooting a free throw, or riding a bike. For this, and a good description please see Dr. Sarah Imhoff's citation on number two on your handout.

Paul: The historical fact is that Jewish masculinity, and ideals of Jewish manhood have evolved differently from those of European Christian masculinity and manhood. This story is not unique to the modern period. Already in medieval Christian polemics against Jews we find references to the Jews' castration, menstruation, being empty vessels, waiting to be filled with symbolic meaning, and capable of producing meaning for themselves.

Paul: In the modern period Jews were likened to a third sex, and were associated with hysteria, anxiety, and sickness. While the increasing racialization of Jews in the 19th century led a greater essentializing of Jewishness as a biological trait, and so inescapable, so too were Jews increasingly perceived as falling outside the limits of what constituted proper healthy, and physically fit masculinity in Europe. In some ways this perception of Jews was due to the fact that Jews were not present in European society in the ways that Christian men were.

Paul: For example, while Jewish men were excluded many of the gilded crafts and professions due to their inability to apprentice to Christians, many Jewish women were also actively engaged in commercial life, thus contributing to the notion that Jewish men were weak, effeminate, and sickly. In the 19th century with the rise of the Talmudic academies in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia, and the increasing access to these institutions for young Jewish boys and men, a more popularized view of Jewish men emerged.

Paul: All of Poland, the region of Jewish traditionalism was considered effeminate. The pursuit of study rather than physical activity only in further fueled the claim that Jews could not be real men. This is itself interestingly demonstrates a piece of evidence about the history of gender identity however, that is, Jews reviewed as exhibiting something other than masculinity. Whether it was effeminate, a prototype of homosexuality, what they did made them seem other to Christian men.

Paul: Christian men, and in the later 19th century we're talking about French or German men, or other secularizing images of national, and political identity and power began to define their own masculinities in terms of the capacity for physical strength, activity, and adventure. In Germany and those countries that were within German influence this meant that the growing popularity of the youth movements where groups of young men would hike, camp, recite German myth and poetry together, altogether that construed an image of male society, sociality, and physical virility that could only be embodied in collective homosocial contexts.

Paul: Jewish men, if they wanted to be real men, therefore needed to disendow the image of the studious, and bookish Jew at the center of European polemic. The yeshiva bokher was not a real man. If white European manhood in its most ideal expression represented power, domination, assertiveness, physical prowess, and authority. Jewish masculinity in the same period represents this questioning bookishness, uncertainty, those are the virtues of Jewish manhood.

Paul: Other Jewish men were routinely characterized therefore as physically deformed, and shallow, and incapable of real labor. The feminization of Jewish men also presented an opportunity for Jewish men to actively shape their own ideals of manhood. While some sought to imitate and mimic European forms of manhood, I propose we now look at an example of how Jewish masculinity changed in another way, and ask whether it could change yet again in such a manner.

Paul: That is, I want to turn to the case of masculinity as cultivated in the ideal of the 19th century yeshiva. So far we've seen that at least two types of masculinity might've been available to modern Jews. The assertive, decisive, physically strong man, that mimicry of

a European man, who should assert independence, and disown the past, and the indoor possibly menstruating weakling, who is hesitant, shy, and doubtful. Reliant upon women to do the real work of commerce, and beholden to Christian male authority otherwise.

Paul: While the latter represents a caricature of the yeshiva bokher, who's hand limply grasps a handshake, and who's voice mumbles in accompanying a downward glance. We should ask what kind of self was really imagined in the yeshiva. When we turn to first person accounts of students who spent time in the yeshiva of Volozhin we find something a little striking. The yeshiva was considered the epicenter of a modern, scientific, and manly Judaism. Indeed the yeshiva was something of a site of rebellion as the Hebrew writer Zalman Epstein writes "There were always a great number of students who lived in the big cities who dressed in European fashion, and were cultivated with good manners and opinions, and their membership served the good of the many other students in the sense that they modeled the moral development, and manners of an intellectual."

Paul: The yeshiva was where one learned how to become an intellectual, a fashionable European, a gentleman, and the virtues displayed by such a Jew were those of the scholar. Thus, Epstein recounts, "We studied Torah, Gemarah, and the medieval commentaries not out of a fear of heaven, and not because it is a mitzvah, but rather because it was something real, science, knowledge, the matter of greatest value, and the most primary aspect of Jewish life, and they can find so much satisfaction in it. They studied with desire, and regularity, and they delighted in the war of Torah, and the broad sea of Talmud that streams, and flows, and inundated in every direction without beginning, and without end. The student was no longer zealous or obsessive, dim, inclined toward excessive piety. This was already a force revealed, open, and alive, and prepared for development, and progress. This was no longer the archaic, and rigid power of the old Jewish street which neither thunder nor lightning could move covered with a layer of mud as though no life remained. Ein patur."

Paul: The new, the bold, and the impassioned sense of studying Torah gave the modern Jewish man something to strive after. This was a thirst for something real. Science, knowledge, the greatest value, and the most primary aspect of Jewish life as Epstein says. Studying became an invigorating exercise. The struggle became a "War of Torah", and the labor of studying from the early morning hours into the middle of the night exerted the body. Thus, as the Rosh Yeshiva of Volozhin between the years 1852 and 1863 Rabbi Joseph Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik, great grandfather of Rabbi Yosef Dov Ber Soloveitchik known to many American Jews as the Rav described in his own works Torah study is the following, "Anyone who tastes the sweetness of Torah in labor and ambient perspiration in their youth will not depart the worlds even when he grows old, and if you encounter one student who's countenance slips from focus upon God, you should know for certain that even in his youth his Torah was only from his words, and not from his labor. Not an exertion, only in word upon his lips, and because of this he will lose it."

Paul: What's striking about this passage I think is the interrelated elements of body and mind. The act of learning, an intellectual pursuit, is described in emphatically physical terms. There's something about the experience of Torah that disembodies, and embodies all at the same time.

Paul: I want to focus on this duality of the disembodiment of a physical self, and the embodiment of a new, more holy self, for it is here I think where we find some of the resources we can use to think about different kinds of masculinity and what they could look like.

Paul: Embodiment can represent a certain kind of grounded certainty. The claim that the nature we are given is unchanging and fixed might represent just such an embodiment, and certain fixed and independent, but to disembody that nature, this would seem to denote uncertainty, hesitation, lacking fixity, and thus dependent. Consider therefore that the shy, quiet, bookish masculinity of the yeshiva that was a label of reproof for many Jews and non-Jews in the 19th century leads to an idea of masculinity that is emphatically dependent, that is, rather than self-assertive, self sufficient manhood. The student of the yeshiva was introduced to a world of doubt, questioning, criticism, and uncertainty.

Paul: From the earliest conceptual texts on Talmudic, and halachic discussions in the modern canon of rabbinic thinkers, those known as the Acharonim, we find attempts to map the importance of what we don't know rather than what we do.

Paul: For example, Aryeh Leib HaCohen Heller who's works, the Ketzot Hachoshen and Shev Shmaytza set out to deal with difficult halachic concepts in the sphere of ritual purity and the sacrificial cult, and then in civic and evidentiary laws, respectively. We see an example where Heller opens his Shev Shmaytza with a startling question, how can one speak of legal uncertainty, safek, when we are discussing a set of laws based in revealed texts, that is, the Torah. Shouldn't this mean that we know something with certainty? What does it really mean to locate uncertainty about something that is explicitly stated in the Torah?

Paul: Heller's works, which would become staples upon the yeshiva's bookshelves modeled a scholarship, and infused a general ethos in the yeshiva where questioning, prodding, raising challenges and difficulties to assertions of certainty was the norm. The Talmid Chacham cannot be said to have sufficient knowledge of either the Torah, or his own self rather he is dependent upon Torah, and it is only through study that he can embody this better self.

Paul: The nature of the self is therefore dependent on the process of cultivating that uncertainty, and raising doubts, or sfeikot, and relying on something other than oneself.

Paul: To illustrate the dependent nature of this self I want us to now turn to the longer citation on your source sheet from the Beis Halevi this is from the responsa of the Beis Halevi, and one of the sermons in particular. Where he writes the following, "And it is written as Kohelet says that God made man upright, but they sought for many accountings. It has already been explained in Rav Chaim of Volozhin's Nefesh HaChaim the meaning of this text. That at the time of creation Adam Ha-Rishon was created upright, and the draw toward, and desire for evil was not in his nature, or arising from his being." So, in other words, evil wasn't something that was part of the nature that God created in man, it was something else, outside. "Rather," Back in the text. "Adam was given choice, and the possibility to choose evil, but the desire and draw towards evil

were not in his nature at all, only temptation, and incitement coming from outside of his body. Thus the serpent came upon him from outside to incite him to sin." So now the serpent is kind of identified as being the arbiter of evil.

Paul: "And it is said that when the snake came upon Eve he placed corruption within her, and that the corruption was then internalized by Adam until the desire for transgression entered into the nature of man. Arising from out of his own being he had a material force inclining him to evil." So here there's a transformation, nature has changed. Something's happened, and that's a very noteworthy moment. I want us to let that sink in.

Paul: Thus we no longer need to speak of outside temptation, and from this we can also interpret the words of Midrash Rabbah on the verse, "Behold, man has become as one of us, to know good and evil." In Genesis 3:22, and the rabbis interpreted this in the midrash that is, "Like a snail who's garment is part of its body for in the beginning there were two separate powers. In his nature," That is the Adam Ha-Rishon's nature. "There was desire, and longing for good, and evil was outside of him." So in other words they were separate powers, meaning one inside Adam, and one outside.

Paul: After the sin, the two forces joined together as one, and both good and evil were internalized in man's being, and this is why he interpreted ... Why the rabbis interpreted like a garment that is part of his body.

Paul: A number of things are worth pointing out in this text. First, the evil inclination, the Yetzer HaRah is considered something external to Adam. Adam is someone with choice who acts upon choice, and chooses to enact either good or evil indeed rather than it being part of his essence. Secondly, the evil inclination enters into Adams nature and corrupts him, and shows us something profound, namely, nature changes through action. Rav Soloveitchik is telling us that the action of sinning can change human nature, anthropologically this means that human beings become who they are by acting. Human nature is performed, but of the example of Adam Ha-Rishon is whereby sin leads to a corruption of the self, what about the act of Torah study? This activity, which strictly speaking characterizes the kind of Jewish masculinity derided in modern Europe can affect a transformation of what it means to exhibit perhaps the toxic corrupting quality of internalized sin.

Paul: Indeed this is what Soloveichik also tells us, that the human body can become holy once again through the activity of Torah study, and this is what he says. The reason for this is on your handout. The reason for this is that the Talmid Chacham is not considered the vessel of holiness, but in the essence of holiness as it can be explained from Or HaChaim that the parchment upon which the Sefer Torah is written is not a vessel of holiness, but the essence of holiness. Etzem HaKedusha. Similarly the body of the Talmid Chacham becomes the parchment of the oral Torah, as it is written in Proverbs, "Write them upon the tablet of your heart." The Talmid Chacham is considered under the aspect of the essence of holiness, and so it is said that anyone who accepts upon themselves the yolk of Torah also divests themselves of the yolk of other things.

Paul: For as soon as he accepts upon himself the yolk of Torah his body is sanctified in holiness of Torah. This is only the case with someone who learns Torah for its own sake. Lishma. The student who toils in the labor of Torah study no longer uses the act of study as an instrument of holiness, Tashmishei Kedusha, but it aims to embody the essence of holiness itself.

Paul: As Soloveichik writes such a Talmid Chacham experiences a spiritual transformation. The very body of the student becomes sanctified, such that the holiness of the Torah falls into being as the body of the student, as he writes, "Etzem hakedusha chal alav b'gufo". I believe that Soloveichik is offering a theory here of performed, and embodied holiness. A theory of the self transform through the disciplined, habit forming act of study.

Paul: The student studying the holy Torah comes to embody the essence of holiness as his self. While this conception of Torah lishma is well known it deserves a moment of pause in order to consider its implications. As an act for its own sake it is a performance of a new self. It is transformative not by performing mitzvot, but by habituating oneself to dwell in holiness. Study for its own sake is not for the sake of any other observance or ritual therefore. The Talmid Chacham who embodies holiness as the object he studies provides, I think, an account of a modern Jewish self. A self who's human activity of habituation helps to sanctify the world.

Paul: Holiness therefore is the self he imagines himself to be. The embodiment of holiness like the act of thinking the oral Torah renders the very project of the yeshiva one in which a new Jewish masculinity was embodied, and performed, and so I ask, what kind of self can we imagine on this basis?

Paul: The language of embodiment that Soloveichik uses of ambient perspiration, of toiling, the labor, the intensity of the length of time one would study would seem to denote an embodiment, an act of being physically there. Certain, and that nature, that sort of natural body that's grounded in the world would seem to be perhaps fixed and unchanging, but then to think about the disembodied quality of thinking. Right? To be with ideas, and concepts, not here in this world, but maybe in a book, maybe it's surpassing time.

Paul: That could also lead to a notion that somehow ideas could be uncertain, or we could hesitate about them. They're not fixed. If you're only thinking about yourself in the ether maybe you're unsure about yourself. Consider therefore that the shy, quiet, bookish masculinity of the yeshiva that was a label or reproof for many Jews and non-Jews in the 19th century leads to an idea of masculinity that is emphatically dependent, because its both embodied and disembodied at the same time. It's playing with the physical labor of studying, and then being carried off by those ideas of Torah.

Paul: That is rather than a self assertive, self sufficient man the student of the yeshiva was introduced to a world of uncertainty, doubt, questioning, and criticism.

Paul: The holiness of Torah study, as I mentioned, transforms the body, so we should ask, can this counteract the toxic transformation of nature that Adam's sin affected? This is the

question bringing us back to where we started. Does masculinity need to be this way? According to Soloveichik the answer is no, that is our case study of Volozhin reveals an example of the changing forms of masculinity in modern Judaism.

Paul: Jewish men derided as otherwise than manly performed a new, dependent kind of masculinity, and by performing this masculinity Jewish men imagined themselves differently. Rather than assert themselves as rational, secular, self sufficient, or independent agents in search of material physical power, they turned inward to study, to questioning, to cultivating their uncertainty. What this demonstrates is that a model of masculinity that is not content with itself, not willing to claim finality, completion, or perfection is very much a resource in the Jewish rabbinic tradition.

Paul: We find in the Talmid Chacham the pursuit of an experience, and an ideal. The transformative act of studying Torah in itself. This is not an argument about Jewish legal observance. It is not a claim that mitzvot will lead to moral selves or the like, rather it's an argument about a specific process of self reflection, and recognizing our dependencies.

Paul: The students of Torah, those who labor in this avodah, in this action, this labor, strive to divest themselves of the yolk of other things. To suspend the selves they once were. They seek to labor, remake, and perform their bodies as holy entities.

Paul: What I take from this is not a story about a specific path to creating a model masculinity, but it shows that we can always imagine ourselves better. Men must cultivate this sense of self reflection, lishma, for its own sake. Rather than adopt specific policies that react to injustices men need to be habituating themselves to change, and to learning how to change.

Paul: The transformative experience of Torah study for its own sake shows that the act of struggling with uncertainty, of asking oneself to be vulnerable, to give up the privilege of being sure of oneself, and to put oneself into question opens up the possibility of imagining men as precarious agents. Indeed it asks men to entertain the possibility of feeling dependent on others, upon women, upon Torah, upon community, upon God, upon the world around us.

Paul: In short, it asks men to start habituating themselves to a different kind of masculinity. One that is vulnerable, dependent, and remains a work in progress, an open question.

Sarah: What are the ideals of masculinity? Paul has offered that a culture's vision of manhood is not static, but rather can change overtime. This opens the possibility that we may choose to actively shape these images as a culture, a community, and as individuals. Paul suggests that this process can happen through a willingness for people of all genders, but especially men to be vulnerable, and to engage in reflective practice. As Paul taught, the yeshiva movement of eastern Europe offers both a different model of masculine virtue than the one we experience in contemporary American culture, and a model for how a person can go about shaping themselves, and how institutions can go

about shaping their students in pursuit of a particular model of what it means to be a so called good Jewish man.

Sarah:

In closing we wish to offer you some questions for further consideration. What shapes our vision of what being a good Jewish man means today? What happens if there is a gap between what being a good Jewish man has come to mean, and what we believe it should mean? What are the interventions necessary to shift our paradigms on this important question, and finally what kinds of responsibility do different people bear in this project? What steps may we take as men or as people of other genders? As parents, employers, citizens, as educators? We hope that this class will be a first step in the important work of asking these questions as a community.