

A Torah of Fragments: An Explication of Rabbi Shimon Gershon
Rosenberg (SHaGaR)'s Hermeneutical Methodology



(photo courtesy of The Institute for the Writings of Rav Shagar)

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Introduction.

"A person cannot create something out of nothing, but he possesses a much more exciting ability, the ability to create one thing out of another thing. He creates new combinations and constructs out of the fragments and pieces of existence." -- Rav Shagar, "The Remainder of Faith" (2014)

Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg was born in Jerusalem in 1949 to two Holocaust survivors. He received the moniker “Shagar” in high school from a friend who saw his initials embroidered on his prayer shawl bag.¹ He was educated in several prominent Religious-Zionist institutions of higher learning, including *Yeshivat Kerem B’Yavneh*, *Mercaz HaRav Kook*, and, after his marriage to Miriam Ziv, *Yeshivat HaKotel*, where he also taught Talmudic studies for eight years. Shagar² often partnered with prominent Religious-Zionist contemporaries, such as Rabbi Menachem Froman and Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, with whom he founded a *yeshiva*³ named *Shefa*, and Professor Benjamin Ish-Shalom, with whom he worked at *Beit Morasha*. In 1996 he established *Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak* with his longtime study partner Rabbi Yair Dreyfus, where he served as the *Rosh Yeshiva* (headmaster) until his death in June 2007.⁴

Many biographers identify the 1973 Yom Kippur War as a turning point in Shagar’s intellectual and religious trajectory. During the war, Shagar served as a tank driver in the Golan

¹ Yair Sheleg, *Rabbi of a 'New Age'*. *Haaretz*, 11 Jan. 2005.

² For space and convention, I chose to omit the honorific “Rabbi” or its Hebrew counterpart “Rav” when referring to Shagar and many other rabbinic figures quoted in this paper. This decision was not intended to be disrespectful towards the rabbinic status of Shagar or any of his peers or predecessors, many of whom I admire personally and hold in great esteem. Furthermore, when I cite one of Shagar’s books or essays, I have ascribed it to “Shagar,” and not to “Rosenberg,” in accordance with the convention set forth by the the Institute for the Writings of Rav Shagar.

³ A *yeshiva* is a Jewish educational institution for the study of traditional texts such as the Bible and the Talmud. This concept will be addressed further in Chapter One.

⁴ For more details see *Rav Shagar: A Brief Biography* - By Rav Shimon Deutsch (Translated and Adapted by Rav Zvi Leshem). https://www.academia.edu/14199117/Rav_Shagar_A_Short_Biography. It can be found in Shagar, *Nehelakh beRagesh: Mivkhar Ma'amarim* (Hebrew: We Walk in Fervour: Selected works), eds. Maor, Z. & Deutsch, S. Efrat [Institute for the Writings of Harav Shagar] 2008.

Heights and lost several members of his unit, close friends from his youth, when his tank was hit by enemy fire. He himself suffered severe burns, nearly dying of his wounds before being rushed to the hospital. The war introduced indelible marks onto Shagar's faith in the form of uncertainty and doubt, and left him searching for answers to significant existential questions. A pursuit of personal meaning, and a corresponding religious language that would satisfy these needs, would motivate his studies for the rest of his life.⁵

What sets Shagar apart from his religious contemporaries and predecessors is the manner in which his writings are grounded in the theories and tenets of postmodernism, a mid-twentieth century movement with roots in philosophy, literature, and the arts. As a response to the unprecedented cruelty and destruction of World War II that illustrated the fallibility of various Enlightenment-era assumptions, postmodernism and its leading theorists challenged the conditions that served as the basis of knowledge. Jean-Francois Lyotard highlights the key feature of the postmodern condition as an "incredulity towards metanarratives," a skepticism towards grand ideologies with a totalizing view of history and culture.⁶ This dissolution of totalities shed light on the competing structures that act upon language and the formation of truth, fracturing coherent identities into smaller, localized truths in uneasy tension with one another. Additionally, the rise of deconstruction, the "critique of the hierarchical oppositions that have structured Western thought," illuminated the social constructs underneath the usage of

⁵ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, trans. Elie Leshem, (ed. Zohar Maor) Maggid Books, 2017. xv. An article written after his death recounts that while he was bandaged in the hospital for weeks he spoke of "'removing the bandages' covering the Torah for the current generation." Sylvetsky, Rochel. "Hundreds of Youth at Seminar in Memory of Rabbi Shagar." *Israel National News*, 19 June 2017.

⁶ Lyotard, Jean-François, and Geoff Bennington. *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*. Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010. xxiv.

language; the resulting mistrust towards words as representative of objective reality became emblematic of postmodern discourse.⁷

Though postmodernism had grown in popularity in Israel in the latter half of the twentieth century, even among the religious camp, few saw in it the radical potential that Shagar did.⁸ Having discovered postmodern philosophy in the later part of his life, coterminous with the opening of his own *yeshiva*, Shagar accepted its ubiquity among his constituency and embraced the opportunity to harness it for religious gain.⁹ Though aware of the dangers of this philosophy for traditional religious thought, Shagar relied on the precedent set by his religious forebears, especially Rabbi Kook and other earlier Hasidic masters, to “identify the divine in all things,” in a way that bolsters, rather than detracts from, their beliefs.¹⁰

Shagar’s attraction to postmodernism stems from his conviction that it could be a “salve,” a corrective for the pressing issues of the day, even those of its own design.¹¹ Over the course of his life, Shagar developed a reputation for integrating a diverse array of sources into his approach to Jewish life in conjunction with postmodernism, forging a new religious personality from his “brazen concoction of Kabbalah and psychoanalysis, Hasidism and postmodern theory.”¹² These creative syntheses, the ability to weave together European philosophers and Hasidic masters, and bring them to bear on questions of Jewish faith and practice, characterize Shagar’s unique literary style in his construction of a religious ethos for contemporary Religious-Zionism.

⁷ Jonathan Culler, *LITERARY THEORY: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 1997. 126.

⁸ For more, see Israeli scholar Baruch Cahana’s survey on the topic: Cahana, B., *Le’An Noshevet HaRuah* (Hebrew: To Where the Wind Blows), in pp. 9-38 *Akdamot* 20, Jerusalem [Bet Morasha] 2008.

⁹ Shagar, *Luhot v’Shivrei Luhot: Hagut Yehudit Nokhah Ha-Posmodernizm* (Hebrew: Tablets and Broken Tablets: Jewish Philosophy in the Presence of Postmodernism). Ed. Z. Maor, A. Brenner, N. Samet, and E. Abramovich. Alon Shvut, 2013. 428.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Leshem, Elie. “Israel’s Paradoxical Man of Faith, Deconstructed.” *The Times of Israel*, 10 July 2017.

¹² *ibid.*

While previous scholars have called attention to the radical combinations that characterize Shagar's texts, very little has been offered by way of a theoretical framework for understanding his literary productions. The innovative interpretations that pepper Shagar's writings and constitute his distinctive style raise many questions about his methodology. Which pieces of the postmodern condition are prominent and problematic enough for a religious person in Shagar's estimation to necessitate rehabilitation at his hands? More importantly, Shagar takes substantial creative license in his interpretative play, detaching fragmented sources from their origin and creating something heretofore unknown from among the plurality of meanings. To that end, which sources are fair game for this Religious-Zionist figurehead? What distance does Shagar travel with these sources by positioning them in a new location in his essays, and how does their local meaning morph as a result? Thirdly, as the Israeli news publication *Haaretz* notes, Shagar is hardly the first to subject Jewish texts and ideas to contemporary cultural criticism; what distinguishes Shagar's work is his location: "When this material originates in the *Beit Midrash* (study hall) of a *yeshiva* rather than the academic world, it seems extremely daring... That's something new."¹³ In that vein, how does Shagar's methodology affect the future of the *Beit Midrash*, the intellectual and spiritual locus of the Torah-studying community? It is these questions and more that sparked my initial interest in Shagar and constitute the guiding inquiries of this project.

The challenges of this task have much to do with the idiosyncrasies of its main subject. Shagar did not have any formal philosophical training, nor did he speak any language other than Hebrew;¹⁴ his autodidactic understanding of both postmodernism and the philosophers he cites

¹³ Seri, Noam. "So Authentic, This Daring Insight." *Haaretz*, 10 Aug. 2007.

¹⁴ Truboff, Zachary. "The Earth-Shattering Faith of Rav Shagar." *The Lehrhaus*, 10 Oct. 2017.

was mediated solely through the Hebrew language sources available to him throughout his life. Consequently, his religious philosophy is often unsystematic or pointedly uncritical, with some scholars commenting that Shagar's relationship to postmodern philosophy and culture is limited by how he "treats them as givens," where "it is not a part of his project to revise postmodern thought or to criticize its foundations."¹⁵ His treatment of postmodernism -- and the production of a fruitful religious response from within its confines -- is mediated through his acceptance of its central principles, as he understood them. As a result, any attempt to analyze the significance of Shagar's corpus must first address his knowledge of postmodernism and his perception of both its obstacles and potential for the lives of his religious contemporaries.

It is also important to bear in mind Shagar's lived experience as an inhabitant and product of predominantly Religious-Zionist spaces, and especially as a religious authority figure within them. Religious-Zionism as an ideology traces its inception to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, "Zionist" in its followers support for Jewish national self determination and "Religious" for the organization of their personal and communal lives around the precepts of the Torah -- in these ways, it differs from the Zionisms of Herzl or Ahad Ha'Am, who considered traditional Jewish practice extraneous to the dream of a sovereign Jewish state.¹⁶ It takes as its spiritual ancestor the figure Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi of British Mandate Palestine, who imbued Jewish nationalism with religious, even Messianic significance. Religious-Zionists strive to participate fully in Israeli civic life while maintaining their commitments to a lifestyle of strict observance to Jewish law; most notably, unlike the

¹⁵ Sinclair, Julian. "The Orthodox Rabbi Who Set Out to Turn Postmodernism to Jewish Gain." *Mosaic*, 15 Nov. 2017.

¹⁶ See Nehemia A. Stern, "First Flowering of Redemption: An Ethnographic Account of Contemporary Religious Zionism in Israel," PhD diss., Emory University, 2014.

Ultra-Orthodox population, they serve in the Israeli army, often after a year or more spent in *yeshiva*. The combination of these nationalistic and religious influences give rise to a hybrid identity which seeks to unite these two ideals under the banner of Religious-Zionism.

This engagement with both the general culture and the lengthy corpus of Jewish texts places tremendous constraints on the intellectual practices of its adherents. Shagar often recounted the dissonance and distress present he sensed within his own camp as his students struggled to reconcile the classic texts and ideas of Jewish tradition with what they saw in the media, in their time in the army, and in university.¹⁷ The classical modes of study ceased to provide avenues for spiritual guidance, and they closed their Talmuds in favor of philosophy, Buddhist thought, New Age mysticism, and fiction books. Consequently, Shagar formulated a radical philosophical outlook that maintained allegiance to the strict practices of traditional Judaism while confronting the perceived contradictions and challenges posed by the modern world. His teachings are in large part a response to this tension, in the form of the construction of a religious ethos for contemporary Religious-Zionism that dares to include a variety of sources, traditional and not, a novel method of study for a postmodern era.

Finally, in the years after Shagar's death, his innovative methodology has caught the eye of his contemporaries for the model it offers for Torah study in the twenty-first century. Yet with the increased propagation of his content in Hebrew and in English, aided by the Institute for the Writings of Rav Shagar, the question arises of the replicability of his model, which welcomes the inclusion of a nearly unlimited range of texts. There may be inherent limitations on *who* is permitted to engage in this radical study, and, more pointedly, *where* it must take place to be as

¹⁷ Sinclair, Julian. "The Orthodox Rabbi Who Set Out to Turn Postmodernism to Jewish Gain." *Mosaic*, 15 Nov. 2017.

religiously legitimate as those of Shagar himself. Throughout this analysis of Shagar's work, it is important to consider that the radical space for creativity he inaugurates in the Religious-Zionist *Beit Midrash* might also comprise its natural boundary, with only those who meet the standards of membership within its walls empowered to partake in this hermeneutical revolution.

Keeping the above questions and disclaimers in mind, this thesis seeks to explicate Shagar's hermeneutic methodology and its implications for the Religious-Zionist community, especially in the realm of Jewish thought and the study of the Torah. Chapter One introduces postmodernism through Shagar's autodidactic understanding, the larger cultural context for his own writings and the theoretical basis for his interpretive play. Chapter Two deconstructs a trio of Shagar's essays through the concept of *bricolage*, a literary technique drawn from Claude Levi-Strauss and Michel de Certeau. These essays will each provide one example of Shagar's playful strategies as a reader and thinker, which together will illustrate his methodology as a whole. Chapter Three will then reflect broadly on this methodology -- which Shagar refers to as *Lamdanut* (scholarship) -- vis-a-vis the overhaul of Torah study it introduces into the Religious-Zionist community.

One additional note: Shagar, private and introverted by nature, published very little during his lifetime. In the years since his death, the Institute for the Advancement of the Writings of Rav Shagar has published more than twenty volumes of his essays and sermons on a slew of topics, including Talmudic topics, Jewish holidays, and Jewish law (*halakha*). These writings are collected from unpublished documents Shagar left behind, handwritten or on his computer. The process of revision and editing necessary to make these texts fit for publishing created a gap between the historical individual Shagar and the published texts of Shagar. Consequently, it may

be preferable to speak about the “writings” of Shagar rather than his “thought.”¹⁸ The recently-begun project of translating Shagar into English, an essential step for introducing his content to a non-Israeli audience, only enlarges the linguistic and cultural distance between the man himself and the presentation of his work. Though this paper does not refrain from addressing Shagar’s “thought,” it is in line with the notion that the author can be derived from his published works, a methodological choice which can be debated outside the contours of this project. Lastly, as the process of rendering Shagar into English is only in its infancy, many citations of Shagar throughout this thesis are of my own translation, with my best efforts to note when it is otherwise.

¹⁸ I am indebted to Levi Morrow for sharing this methodological note with me. For its original source, see his paper “Science Fiction and Myth: A Combined Theoretical Framework in the Writings of Rav Shagar.” Footnote 2. Submitted to Tel Aviv University, 25 April 2018.

Chapter I. The Challenges and Opportunities of Postmodernism

While his grounding in postmodern sources was mediated solely through the translated Hebrew sources that he read, Shagar's understanding of the postmodern condition and his diagnoses of its perceived pitfalls sheds light on the theoretical foundations that motivate him in his writings.¹⁹ In this vein, a survey of several salient elements of postmodernism, as seen through Shagar's own eyes, situates Shagar as a unique figure in the realm of Jewish thought, an Orthodox rabbi grounded in the traditional texts of the Bible and the Talmud grappling with a complex academic movement that supposedly grates against classic Jewish conceptions of theology, truth, and language. The result of this encounter, as we shall see, is a body of work unlike any other.

The first part of this chapter proposes to work through some of Shagar's own reflections on postmodernism in order to present his working understanding of the postmodern condition and the radical potential therein. Part Two will then detail Shagar's account of postmodernism's unprecedented challenges to a religious Jew, centered around the concept of the Torah and its relationship to revelation and divinity. The last section explores the foundation for Shagar's proposed solutions to the obstacles of the postmodern religious consciousness, anchored in the Kabbalistic imagery of his religious heritage and its projection onto the "language games" of

¹⁹ Dr. Alan Brill of Seton Hall University names several books with which Shagar was familiar, including David Gurevitz's *Post-Modernism: Culture and Literature at the end of the 20th Century* (Dvir, 1997) and the Hebrew translation of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (Hebrew: 1999). Brill, Alan. "Judaism and Post-Modernity – Rabbi Shagar in English Translation." *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions: Notes on Jewish Theology and Spirituality*, 26 Oct. 2016. Still more work is being done to mine Shagar's writings for his familiarity with particular thinkers; see, for example, Levi Morrow's recent attempt to discern with which parts of Heidegger Shagar was acquainted: "Rav Shagar and Heidegger: Some Speculative Archaeology." *Novel Formulations*, 10 Apr. 2019.

postmodern linguistics. This exploration will lay the theoretical groundwork for the close readings of three of Shagar's essays, analyzing the intricacies of Shagar's hermeneutical style against the backdrop of both his own intellectual and spiritual tradition and the interpretive freedoms granted to him by postmodernism.

1. Shagar on Postmodernism

One of the clearest encapsulations of Shagar's assessment of the variegated elements of postmodernism appears in his essay "Living With Nothingness."²⁰ He acknowledges at the outset that to call postmodernism a philosophical theory is actually to misunderstand its essence; postmodernism, fundamentally, is "a mode of life and a state of consciousness," even "a cultural situation."²¹ Like Lyotard before him, Shagar opens his analysis with a depiction of the basis of postmodernism as skepticism towards grand narratives, metaphysical goals, and totalizing theories.²² The novelty of this particular cultural moment, in his estimation, is the departure from the expansive modernist teleological approach to human existence, given the "profound sense that a significant portion of the twentieth century's horrors were the distinct products of an overzealous submission to overarching ideologies," including "Nazism, fascism, communism, and Maoism," and even "capitalism."²³ No longer was there faith in a larger set of principles upon which to ground one's actions, and hope for a cohesive and harmonious identity dissolved in favor of localized, dissonant beliefs.

²⁰ Shagar, *Luchot v'Shivrei Luchot* 31-52, rendered into English in *Faith Shattered and Restored* (trans. Elie Leshem), ed. Zohar Maor (Maggid Books, 2017), 85-103.

²¹ *Faith Shattered and Restored* 85.

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid* 86.

Contained within this shift to the postmodern condition is a new understanding of truth as subjective rather than absolute, which Shagar confronts in a reliance on Foucault. Shagar concedes that in a postmodern world skeptical about the political constructs inherent to what is considered truth, there are no absolute values: “[The postmodern world] is unable to speak of absolute values because according to it there are no such values. There is no truth and there certainly is no ‘Truth.’”²⁴ This statement, challenging the certainty of any truth claim, is a radical statement for an Orthodox Jewish thinker; indeed, some have staked their claims of incompatibility between postmodernism and Orthodox Judaism on this very point.²⁵ Instead of retreating from this postmodern tenet, Shagar deepens his statement by looking to Foucault, who places truth statements within a hierarchy of power.²⁶ Truth, says Shagar, is an expression of power, and human beings are caught in a network of discourse and power relations wielding truth as leverage.²⁷ In other words, Shagar’s understanding of postmodernism disregards truth as absolute and places truth within politics, within the socially constructed, lacking any metaphysical reality. Shagar therefore takes seriously the concession of the theological to the social, from philosophy determining the validity of a particular claim to the fulfillment of that role by the social sciences.²⁸

What underlies postmodernism’s unmooring of truth from its metaphysical and theological foundation is a new understanding of language itself as having little or no connection

²⁴ Shagar, (ed. Tzurieli, O.) *Kelim Shevurim: Torah ve-Tziyonut-Datit be-Svivah Postmodernit –Derashot leMo'adei Zmanenu*, (Hebrew) Shattered Vessels: Torah and Religious-Zionism in a Postmodern Environment, Efrat [Institute for the Writings of Harav Shagar] 2004. p. 14, translated Miriam Feldmann Kaye.

²⁵ Sinclair, Julian. “The Orthodox Rabbi Who Set Out to Turn Postmodernism to Jewish Gain.” *Mosaic*, 15 Nov. 2017.

²⁶ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 88.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Shagar, *Keilim Shvurim*, 35.

to ontological reality, which Shagar further interprets through the lens of various modern philosophers. Tracing an arc from Wittgenstein's rejection of language as a representation of a single reality to Derrida and Deleuze's more radical deconstruction of language as offering no representations whatsoever, Shagar spotlights language as being subjected to the same network of power relations that characterize his Foucauldian view of truth.

To him [Wittgenstein], language, including religious language, does not express or represent, but rather utters. Its significance lies within itself, meaning that we do not use language for signification -- it does not function as a collection of symbols that stand for something outside themselves. Rather it is a skill or ability derived from the lifestyles of those who employ it, and from their lifestyles it derives its significance... [Significance] is derived from practice, from moving through reality, from what Wittgenstein called "language games."²⁹

In this passage, Shagar reveals his phenomenological approach to language, and religious language in particular. Language attains its significance through the linguistic games played by the external network of individuals who employ it, with no relation to an essential or metaphysical reality. With this, Shagar nods to another postmodern thinker, Jean Baudrillard, a champion of the position that postmodernism is characterized by language aiding and abetting reality as simulation -- a world of images and reflections of a non-existence that we believe to be real.³⁰

²⁹ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 49, quoting Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 11.

³⁰ *ibid* 126. This also hints to Shagar's affinity for science fiction -- for the connection between postmodernism, mysticism, and science fiction see *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 124, and Levi Morrow's paper "Science Fiction and Myth: A Combined Theoretical Framework in the Writings of Rav Shagar." Submitted to Tel Aviv University, April 2018.

The accuracy or exhaustion of Shagar's address of postmodernism matters less than his sheer acquaintance with the basic tenets of the movement's theories and its leading thinkers. As an Orthodox rabbi grounded firmly in the world of the Religious-Zionist *yeshiva*, Shagar's dexterity with postmodern terminology — a product of the intellectual elite of the Western academy — is unusual. Yet his deep dive into postmodernism serves an urgent purpose: Shagar takes seriously the onset of postmodernism as presenting serious obstacles to the traditional religious worldview and practice of his community, peers and students alike. He familiarizes himself with it in order to address it from the position of a religious thought leader, providing guidance to those under his purview. In his full-throated embrace of postmodernism, Shagar goes further than previous religious authorities. He regards the concession to a postmodern framework of truth and language as part and parcel of renewing a truly religious consciousness in the contemporary world, a radical exegesis of a movement that dismantles teleology, truth and language.

2. The Challenge of Postmodernism

From the perspective of traditionally minded Orthodox Jews, it is not hard to see the severe dilemmas posed by postmodernism. Orthodox theology and practice is predicated on the foundational document known as the Torah — in its most minimalist sense, the five books of Moses that constitute the Old Testament — said to be revealed to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, the seal of their covenant with God. As generations of Jewish thinkers and communities engaged with this sacred text, later joined by the other books of the Bible, the concept of “Torah” expanded in content and meaning. Most significantly, the period of early to middle antiquity in

Palestine and Babylonia gave birth to the Oral Torah, known as the Talmud, a massive collection of expositions on the laws and stories of the Old Testament that became the guidebook for lived Jewish practice.

As the commentaries and glosses on the Oral Torah grew, whole academies, called *yeshivot* (sing. *yeshiva*) developed that were dedicated to the “study of Torah,” an all-encompassing term that refers to the study of the Bible, the Talmud, and its subsequent commentaries and codices, as well as the *halakha*, the practical law. These study halls were known as *batei midrash* (sing. *beit midrash*). Over time, and especially in the context of Shagar’s own Israeli *yeshiva*, the *beit midrash* became not just the forum for the transmission of knowledge regarding classical Jewish texts, but rather the locus for the development of a student’s individual identity, his religious orientation, and his relationship to the Jewish people and the world.³¹ The “Torah” these *yeshiva* students learned grew synonymous with an exploration of a Jewish *Weltanschauung*, the values and teachings of a community grounded in these sacred texts that have universal application.³² To speak of the “Torah,” therefore, is to invoke the name of a system that is designed to reach every part of one’s life, the lens through which a religious Jew sees the world.

³¹ These houses of study were traditionally all male. In recent years, a plethora of opportunities for serious Torah study in all-female and egalitarian settings have sprung up in America and Israel, providing access to sacred texts for a population that was once forbidden from studying them.

³² My use of this term, German for “worldview,” and often utilized by Max Weber, among others, to describe the definitive ideologies of particular societies, is a bit tongue-in-cheek because the implication that there is such a thing as a cohesive Jewish worldview is exactly the modernist fabrication that postmodern theory seeks to undermine. In truth, the crisis faced by Shagar’s students is perhaps due to their skepticism with the limitations of the *yeshiva* curriculum to solely traditional sources, causing them to go outside the “Jewish” canon for content that would speak to their diverse identities and interests. For more on the relationship between postmodernism and *Weltanschauung*, see Tim Dant, “Thoroughly Modern Mannheim and the Postmodern *Weltanschauung*” *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, No 4, December 1997.

The theological roots of the adherence to the precepts and study of Torah, as depicted in its own narrativized recounting in Exodus 20, harken back to the covenant sealed with God at Sinai in a supernatural moment of revelation. This narrative is at odds with the central postulates of postmodern theory. Beyond the growing mistrust in any grand narrative that promotes a certain totalizing ideology, postmodernism undermines the authority of the Sinai episode to hold forth through time on two main fronts. As Hebrew University's Dr. Miriam Feldmann Kaye notes, the postmodern critique of a God-given text is comprised of the twin issues of cultural particularism and linguistic perspectivism.³³

...What many claimed to be [religion's] core principles – a "provable" God, and a "revelation" to humankind – may no longer be sustained according to two central principles of postmodernism which are, first, that culture determines what is believed to be true (cultural particularism), and second, that human language does not refer to anything beyond itself; it is a mere projection of human will, enmeshed in the cultural confines of a particular religious community (the problem of language).³⁴

The first tenet Feldmann Kaye mentions decries the eternity or absoluteness of a historically contingent discourse, casting aspersions on any universal truth claim rooted in a particular moment in time. Furthermore, that this discourse would endeavor to relay a metaphysical truth, speaking to in any concrete way to the nature of a transcendent being, grates against the nothingness that postmodernists suspect lies at the center of the word. The latter, inextricably linked and expanding the scope of the former, is grounded in the unreliability of language that merely simulates, rather than accurately representing reality.³⁵ The consequence for the central

³³ Feldmann Kaye, Miriam. "Provisional Jewish Theology in a Postmodern Age: A Comparative Study of Professor Tamar Ross and Harav Shagar (Shimon Gershon Rosenberg)." PhD diss., University of Haifa, 2012. 134. Feldmann Kaye's dissertation has recently been published as a book, *Jewish Theology in a Postmodern Age* (Oxford; Portland, Oregon: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2019).

³⁴ Feldmann Kaye, "Provisional Jewish Theology," 8.

³⁵ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 88.

object of revelation, the centerpiece of the Jewish national mythology, is that the Torah thus loses its significance as the revealed word of God in light of deconstructionist hermeneutics that position its meaning as an outgrowth of human will.³⁶

The sheer gravity of the postmodern problem is best illustrated through a contrast between Rav Shagar and his closest Jewish intellectual forebears, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), the paragon of Religious-Zionist thought in Israel, and his American contemporary Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the analogous figurehead for Modern Orthodoxy in the United States. While Kook opens the Torah to a modernist understanding, his commitment to an existentialist understanding of the Torah guides his interpretative process in a particular way. The most significant difference between Kook and postmodernism, as Shagar himself relates, is Kook's conviction that the Torah contains an essence that holds forth through time. It is incumbent on each generation to "communicate" this essence in contemporary terminology, enabling the fullness of the Torah to expand into modern reality.³⁷ Kook therefore sees the manifestation of the Torah (i.e. the practical law) as that which varies and develops across time, yet maintains an overall system containing the same essence revealed on Sinai.

The modern interpretative process in the study of Torah also appears in the religious thought of Rabbi Soloveitchik, who describes a system akin to the scientific process in its axiomatic precision and commitment to the elucidation of the principles that animate the natural world.

Halakhic man, well furnished with rules, judgments, and fundamental principles, draws near the world with an a priori relation. His approach begins with an ideal creation and concludes with a real one. To whom may he be compared? To a mathematician who fashions an ideal world and then uses it for the

³⁶ Feldmann Kaye, "Provisional Jewish Theology," 12.

³⁷ Shagar, *Keilim Shvurim*, 36.

purpose of establishing a relationship between it and the real world, as was explained above. The essence of the Halakha, which was received from God, consists in creating an ideal world and cognizing the relationship between that ideal world and our concrete environment in all its visible manifestations and underlying structures.³⁸

According to Soloveitchik, the sacredness of the Torah lies in its idealism, in its possession of a transcendent essence that renders it Other, creating gap between it and everyday life and demanding that Jews shoehorn their lived existence into its categories. Escaping into the ideal world of Torah, with its rigid structures and principles, is an escape from the chaos of the modern world.³⁹

While both Soloveitchik and Kook succeeded in bridging the gap between modernist perspectives and traditional sensitivities for the Jewish *yeshiva* student in the first half of the twentieth centuries, their solutions are inadequately equipped to confront the postmodern condition, which rejects any notion of essence whatsoever. Shagar takes it upon himself to reassess and reframe this idea from a postmodern viewpoint: “Essence of Torah takes on a specific form which appears as a certain demand to explain the meaning of a particular statement, or series of statements, through which (the Torah) appears as an addressee or an object of guidance. This interpretation is an external claim to the text itself and for the way in which it is approached.”⁴⁰ This non-essentialist attitude towards Torah represents a shift away from the traditional mode and even the modernist approaches of Kook or Soloveitchik, replacing them with an understanding that the meaning of the Torah is socially constituted through the play of various language games.

³⁸ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, JPS, Philadelphia, 1983, 19-20.

³⁹ Shagar, *Keilim Shvurim*, 31-32.

⁴⁰ Shagar, *Keilim Shvurim* 34, translation by Miriam Feldmann Kaye.

Shagar's engagement with a Jewish philosophy flexible enough to incorporate postmodern principles into its conception of Torah, however, is not without its pitfalls, especially for a religious thinker who must respond to the obstacles of cultural particularism and the linguistic perspectivism. This Shagar does in a radical manner with sources both in and out of the traditional Jewish canon, tempering the typical implications of postmodernist language games with the fortitude of a mystic in his unique religious approach to deconstruction and revelation.⁴¹

3. Shevira and Tikkun: New Language Games

For Shagar, though religious postmodernists use the same tools as their non-religious counterparts, the former's play with language is empty and devoid of meaning. He terms the believer's play as "positive pluralism:" a willingness of religious postmodernists to invoke the concept of *revelation* when assessing the product of language play instead of consigning themselves to uninspired interpretations, unable to arbitrate between the set.⁴² Shagar thus sidesteps the despair of confronting truth as a product of human construction by celebrating human creativity as a medium through which divinity is revealed and manifest in the world. This conviction, as he recognizes, requires a tremendous measure of faith in the inherent holiness of all things, a mystical stance which Shagar articulates throughout his writings.⁴³ With this faith-filled perspective on the ancient concept of revelation, which he uses to evade the inherent contradictions or inconsistencies of the creative process, Shagar is willing to acknowledge the

⁴¹ Shagar, *Keilim Shvurim*, 20.

⁴² Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 116. To illustrate the paralysis of the latter, Shagar invokes the image of Buridan's ass, stuck between food and water and perishing because he cannot decide which to consume first.

⁴³ For one example see Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 129.

divinity that animates each interpretative read of text and truth, revealed through its sheer status as an act of human construction.

Shagar's radical position on Jewish thought and study through the lens of postmodernism relies on both Hasidism and Kabbalah, two movements in the Jewish mystical tradition, to harness deconstruction for the formation of his religious ethos. Kabbalistic imagery is found throughout Shagar's writings and often provides for Shagar an internal precedent upon which to ground his conviction in the tremendous religious potential of postmodernism. In a move that bespeaks his tendency to project traditional imagery onto postmodern terminology (to be explored at length in the next chapter), Shagar likens deconstruction to the Kabbalistic *shevirah*, the "shattering" of primordial vessels when they could no longer hold the divine light emanating from the Infinite God. In this Kabbalistic cosmology, the vessels exploded into tiny fragments, each containing a spark of the original light, with the settling of those fragments constituting the creation of the world. In the context of Shagarian deconstruction, the analog of *shevirah* is the explosion of interpretations of text with the infinitude of linguistic play. The ultimate step in the cycle of the Kabbalists, however, is the role consigned to mankind to "fix" this broken world (*tiqqun*) by reuniting the sparks with their source.⁴⁴ This cosmic restoration, crucial to the Kabbalistic and Hasidic ethos, is identified by Shagar as the task of the interpretative process in the wake of postmodernism, assigning to his novel approach to Torah the supreme significance of being a *tiqqun* for a world rent apart by deconstruction.

Indeed, Shagar's deployment of this Kabbalistic imagery ascribes to this interpretive reconstruction no less important of a role than the creation of the world itself.

⁴⁴ For a more in-depth explanation of these terms, see Gershom G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*. New York: Schocken Books, 1965.

As we know, deconstruction aims to shatter all the vessels, claiming that reality in its entirety -- facts as well as metaphors and language -- is nothing but a human construct... On a kabbalistic level, we might say that this shattering of the vessels is not final, but instead purifies the vessels, allowing man to use their shards as building blocks for a new world. Truly the role of deconstruction is to dismantle the vessels and make them supple, thus opening up new pathways for inspiration and illumination.⁴⁵

From the lens of Shagar's Kabbalism, the breakage of deconstruction is purifying. It enables a novel reconstruction, creating new permutations out of reality itself.⁴⁶ The role of the religious postmodernist, as Shagar argues, is to identify the spark of divinity in each interpretation: though the world of creation exist fundamentally in the human realm, its core of divinity remains. The necessity to open oneself up to the possibility of inspiration is the difference between the emptiness of arbitrary randomness, and the belief, driven by faith, that the seemingly random choice contains a spark of revelation from which the world is created anew.

Motivated by his Kabbalistic gloss on deconstruction, Shagar regards human creativity with an unprecedented potency. Postmodernism has paved the way towards, in Shagar's words, the "freeing [of] one's consciousness to experience a variety of syntheses that were impossible prior to the postmodern crisis."⁴⁷ These syntheses are the creation of the new vessel in the Kabbalistic cosmological sequence, and the true opportunity heralded by postmodernism. Their status as a human construction does not invalidate their validity, instead elevating it in the eyes of those who, in classic Hasidic fashion, view a kernel of divine inspiration in every act of human creativity.

⁴⁵ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 128.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 129.

Grounded in this theoretical framework, this thesis now turns to specific examples of Shagar's own syntheses that constitute his idiosyncratic and unusual style. Through these close readings of Shagar's treatment of several classic ideas within the Jewish or even a larger religious palette, we will observe the tremendous interpretative creativity displayed by this religious visionary. Combining stalwarts of the *yeshiva* world with the discoveries of contemporary philosophy -- a unique synthesis driven by the boundless opportunities of postmodern interpretative play -- Shagar produces a novel read of these ideas, redeeming them from their modernist limitations in the construction of a postmodern religious ethos. It is this model, therefore, that may serve as the template for Torah study in the wake of postmodernism, Shagar's groundbreaking creativity the force that reunites the shards of deconstruction for religious Jews everywhere.

Chapter II. *Bricolage* in Three Acts

Bolstered by the postmodern understanding of language as refracted through the Kabbalistic gloss on deconstruction, Shagar's body of work rehabilitates core elements of Jewish traditional practice via a postmodern lens. His writings serve as a guidebook for the redemption of crucial elements of postmodernism from their destructive potential to Jewish religious life, a spiritual reorientation for the disenchanted Religious-Zionist. The resulting content is a series of essays and sermons dotted with unique syntheses of ideas and thinkers both from within the Jewish tradition and imported from outside of it, woven together to construct meaningful responses to the maladies and paradoxes of religious postmodernism. This chapter seeks to analyze Shagar's style and process in a close reading of three essays in which he performs these creative syntheses and redemptive interpretations.

These examples were selected for their addressing of three distinct issues Shagar recognizes as current problems for the Religious-Zionist community and essential for its spiritual health moving forward. Simultaneously, these essays boast dramatic stylistic diversity, demonstrating the range of sources from which Shagar draws and the variety of techniques he uses in conveying them to his audience. Taken all together, these three pieces provide a survey of three categories of Shagar's methodology at work. Section A will showcase Shagar's ability to attribute mystical significance to developments in philosophy. Section B will then demonstrate how he selectively interprets two geographically and temporally disparate thinkers so as to create synthetic identity around a particular topic, constructing an intellectual lineage of mystical and postmodern discourse in the process. Finally, Section C will turn to an essay containing imagery solely from within Shagar's own Jewish tradition, which demonstrates how Shagar utilizes

Jewish terminology as the launch point for his postmodern philosophical homiletics.⁴⁸ In this combination of sources and hermeneutical maneuvers, Shagar attempts to build a religious ethos from the fragments of ideas and concepts shattered by postmodernism. The result is an intellectual quilt nearly unprecedented in the Religious-Zionist community.

The theoretical framework that will guide this evaluation of Shagar's interpretive style is the concept of *bricolage*, first coined by French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in his 1966 book *Le Penséé Savage*. In this volume, Levi-Strauss introduces the idea of the mythic thinker, which he contrasts to the scientific thinker who operates linearly and innovatively. As opposed to the thinking of the scientific mind, which pushes the boundaries of extant thought in order to achieve a goal, the mythical thinker is limited to existing ideas to answer large questions, and uses as much license as they will take to read new significance into them.⁴⁹ Levi-Strauss describes the *bricoleur* as someone whose intellectual rules are to always make do with "whatever is at hand": a wide set of options but ultimately a finite one, to be mixed and matched in an effort that the newest permutation may reveal new meaning. The project of this intellectual *bricolage* yields brilliant and unforeseen results, according to Levi-Strauss, for the mythic thinker.

The French psychoanalyst and philosopher Michel de Certeau invokes Levi-Strauss's *bricolage* within a larger context of thinking about the playful games of readers, whom he gives tremendous autonomy. The reader, operating in a stage subsequent to the creative actions of the author, is empowered to impose his or her own playfulness on a collection of texts, giving them a

⁴⁸ I am grateful to the following paper of Levi Morrow's for providing some of the language for these categories: "Science Fiction and Myth: A Combined Theoretical Framework in the Writings of Rav Shagar." Tel Aviv University, submitted April 2018.

⁴⁹ Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind (Le Penséé Savage)*, trans. George Weidenfield and Nicholson Ltd. The University of Chicago Press, 2010. 14.

significance different from what the author intended amidst an “indefinite plurality of meanings.”⁵⁰ In a sense, this associative game of mix and match by the reader invokes the same culminations of the *bricoleur*'s project. The reader also, as De Certeau adds, reads *themselves* into the texts they pore over -- a deterritorialized jesting that “introduces plurality and difference into the written system of a society and of a text.”⁵¹ The intentions of the *bricoleur* reader implicitly guide the act of reading and shape the final product, in that the personal touch of the reader will be evident in what texts and tools he or she chooses to play with in this intellectual exercise and in what order they will be arranged.

Shagar himself makes explicit mention of his familiarity with this conceptual framework in his description of deconstruction and its *tiqqun*, its corrective. In his essay, “Mysticism, Postmodernism, and the New Age,” he quotes a story from Hasidic sage Rabbi Nachman of Breslov featuring a *tzaddik*, a righteous person (identified with Rabbi Nachman himself), who can fix anything.⁵² Shagar comments: “It is no accident that this *tzaddik* can only fix things, not create them out of nothing: Unable to create *ex nihilo*, created beings can only fashion new things out of the shards of the vessels, employing *bricolage*, the merging of diverse styles and available ingredients.”⁵³ This observation regarding the Hasidic tale mirrors Shagar's own work, a reflexive comment on his own intellectual and mystical activity. By attempting to coax out the parallels of a variety of sources and grounding them in one another, Shagar creates a mythic universe from the shards of textual vessels he handpicks, an endeavor on par with R' Nachman's *tzaddik* and Levi-Strauss's *bricoleur*. He then blesses the activity with the proclamation of its

⁵⁰ De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press, 1988. 169.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁵² Kaplan, Aryeh, editor. *Rabbi Nachman's Stories: the Stories of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov*. Breslov Research Inst., 1983. 485-489. Cited in *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 128.

⁵³ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 128.

divine inspiration, the aforementioned “faith-filled pluralism” necessary to prevent postmodern language games from falling into the abyss of nihilism. In this way, he sanctions his *bricolage* as religiously legitimate, a life-vest for the Religious-Zionist community stricken by the pitfalls of postmodernism.

In the following sections, this thesis will utilize both Levi-Strauss and De Certeau to understand Shagar’s literary output. As Levi-Strauss describes, *bricolage* begins with a predetermined set of texts, appropriate for a figure like Shagar who, focused as he is on renewing the spiritual relevance of Jewish canonical texts, is committed to operating within a set textual framework. What makes Shagar’s set of texts unique, however, is his inclusion of postmodern thinkers alongside the canonical texts of the Talmud and Hasidism, or simply on their own merit. He then begins to play with all texts within his *bricolage* to end in a compromise of all the data points within a particular orbit. In the following three examples, Levi-Strauss and De Certeau will be an important rubric by which to comprehend and evaluate Shagar’s hermeneutical innovations. These results of these examinations will clarify Shagar’s readings -- and playful misreadings -- of a variety of sources within the construction of his postmodern religious ethos.

A. Lacan and Faith

In *Luchot v’Shivrei Luchot*, an anthology of his essays on religious life in the wake of postmodernism, Shagar addresses the topic of faith (Hebrew: *emunah* / אמונה), a word with a rich history and function in the traditional Jewish imagination. In its Biblical context, *emunah* is used to describe Abraham’s affective state vis-a-vis the promise made to him by God that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars: “And he believed in the Lord, and He counted it

to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:4). Abraham’s trusting posture is a reliance on God to keep divine promises in return for obeying God’s command; God, in turn, is numerous described in the Old Testament as trustworthy.⁵⁴

Shagar is not the first Jewish thinker to reread *emunah* in contemporary terms. Maimonides, a medieval Jewish thinker who wove Aristotelian philosophy into Jewish religious discourse, transformed the phrase from its relational context to a doctrinal one,⁵⁵ in order to articulate thirteen concrete principles of Jewish dogma oriented around the notion of perfect or complete *emunah*, including the belief in God’s existence and eternity, the divinely revealed and perfect nature of the Torah, and the coming of the Messiah.⁵⁶ Though Maimonides’ principles were met with great opposition, individually and as an established set, the term *emunah* came to stand for an expression of Jewish theology that continues today, with many Orthodox Jews reciting the thirteen Maimonidean principles each morning as a *credo*.⁵⁷ In light of the robust historical grappling with the term, Shagar is merely one of many Jewish thinkers to consider the properties of *emunah* in a renewed contexts; the multivalence of descriptions of *emunah* across Jewish history speaks to the centrality of faith as an articulation of the relationship between a transcendent deity and the material world.

⁵⁴ Cf. Deuteronomy 32:4 “‘*el ‘emuna*,” Psalms 89:3, 100:5, 119:90. Perry, Edmund. “The Meaning of ‘Emuna in the Old Testament.” *Journal of Bible and Religion*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1953, pp. 252–256. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1457965.

⁵⁵ It is interesting to consider this shift in light of Martin Buber’s distinction in *Two Types of Faith*, of Jewish *emunah* from what he terms the *pistis* of the Christians, describing the faith of the former as a relationship of unconditional trust as opposed to acknowledged fact or doctrine. I acknowledge there is a certain anachronism here, given Maimonides’ Islamic environment and Buber’s Protestant one. See Blau, Joseph L. Reviewed Works: Two Types of Faith by Martin Buber; The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidim by Martin Buber. *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1955, pp. 83–84. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4465313.

⁵⁶ Kellner, Menachem Marc. “Rabbi Isaac Abravenel on Maimonides’ Principles of Faith.” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1980, pp. 343–356. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23258661.

⁵⁷ Shapiro, Marc B. “Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles: The Last Word in Jewish Theology?” *The Torah U-Madda Journal*, vol. 4, 1993, pp. 188. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40914883.

With the changes to the conditions of possibility for faith in a postmodern era, however, Shagar endeavors to articulate an understanding of *emunah* in a theological and theoretical maneuvering emblematic of his creativity as a *bricoleur*. This takes place in the form of a unique reading of Lacanian psychoanalytic terminology and an application of this gloss to the arena of faith. He first problematizes *emunah* by articulating his definition of providence, that behind seemingly random sequences of life events is divinity. Providence is central to religious existence in an Orthodox Jewish context, including what it means to pray, to suffer, or to repent.

⁵⁸ Shagar neatly summarizes his position on the contours of providence in the following passage:

Providence is the ability to see the inner sense and logic of all events. The things that happen to us come together. The individual details create a story or a work of art. Practically speaking, this is how the Torah is revealed in the world. A person in the unfortunately rare state of providence merits understanding the meaning of his life, saving him from a sense of happenstance (*mikriyut*). ...This state feels similar to falling in love, when every event feels sharp and clear. Providence is essentially this sharpness.⁵⁹

Providence is demonstrated by one's willingness to see the hidden patterns in the unfolding universe that come together to form the story of one's life. This version of providence is a retroactive reflection on the events of the past and present, where providence "depends on our interpretation of what happened, on constructing a narrative that finds God's wisdom in the various events."⁶⁰ Faith demands submission to the understanding that each moment bears tremendous significance, with God at the center of it all.

⁵⁸ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 27-28.

⁵⁹ Shagar, *Shiurim al Likkutei Moharan* [Hebrew: Lectures on *Likkutei Moharan*] Ed. Netanel Lederberg. Alon Shvut: Va'ad Kitvei ha-Rav Shagar and Michlelet Yerushalayim, Vol. 1. 2012, Vol. 2. 2015. 13. Translation by Levi Morrow.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

This dynamic of providence, however, is in tension with modernity, where natural law systematizes the events of the universe and reduces them to their scientific causalities, leaving no room for a belief in God's hand guiding an ever-unfolding universe. In the social sciences, faith was demoted to a set of neuroses (Freud) or an opiate of the masses (Marx), and the trajectory of mankind was reduced to its historical, social, or psychological circumstances.⁶¹ Surprisingly, Shagar accepts the validity of these processes, recognizing their deep entrenchment in the current status quo in the way they “inform our worldviews, the deepest most hidden preconceptions of our personalities.”⁶² Furthermore, Shagar refuses to compartmentalize science and faith into separate domains of worldly phenomena and individual morality, as Soloveitchik and Leibowitz, modernist thinkers *par excellence*, do. Yet he is committed to maintaining a traditional faith, and is thus compelled to devise an intellectual and spiritual position whereby these two outlooks can coexist, setting the stage for a radical act of *bricolage* that will address the problem of traditional providence amidst the postmodern condition.

To articulate his approach to this harmony of science and faith, Shagar posits the existence of two worlds, both “ontologically real” and existing in parallel, akin to the multiple universes of science fiction. These two worlds will house the believers who are committed to living fully in the matrix of scientific causation, including their own historical and social conditioning, while maintaining traditional beliefs. In order to anchor his vision, however, he requires a mystical system that allows for several dimensions that exist side by side.⁶³ Curiously, Shagar then turns to postmodernism, which he believes enables the postulation of multiple

⁶¹ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 25-26.

⁶² *ibid* 26.

⁶³ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 29.

worlds, to systematize his mystical explanation of the intertwining of the realms of science and faith.

Indeed, rather than deriving his lynchpin from Kabbalistic or Hasidic sources, Shagar turns to French philosopher Jacques Lacan, a father of postmodernism, to give his *emunah* postmodern approval.⁶⁴ Shagar explicitly draws on Lacanian terminology with the invocation of the idea of the Real, the undifferentiated, prelinguistic world that stands outside of the Symbolic Order, a domain of language, differences, and laws.⁶⁵ He then maps the worlds of science and faith onto the relationship between the Symbolic and the Real, two distinct realms yet inextricably, even mystically linked: “Faith, in light of Lacan’s terminology, can thus be described as being rooted in the Real, in the prelinguistic, where the subject is yet to be differentiated from the object; in other words, it is rooted in the mystical. And truly, my faith is mystical; it is a wordless, letterless faith.”⁶⁶ With this move, Shagar locates his faith in the Lacanian Real, rendering it individualized, undifferentiated, and outside language. Using Lacanian terminology as the blueprint of his mystical belief system, Shagar frames the discourse around faith as something not divorced from reality, unlike the presumptions of the modernist dichotomies, but rather as situated deep within it on an unconscious level.

In practice, this framework helps Shagar locate the traditional notion of providence in the suggestion that one simply analyze of the patterns of one’s own life for hints of divinity. He states:

⁶⁴ Notably, Shagar displays an awareness that this is an account of his personal faith, not a blueprint for a communal one. This grates against the dominant discourse in the Religious-Zionist community today, which see faith as entirely collective. See *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 22.

⁶⁵ The editors of this essay cite Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996). It is unclear whether Shagar was actually familiar with this volume or came into acquaintance with Lacanian terminology from other sources or even in more informal ways.

⁶⁶ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 33.

My contention is that providence is evident not in everyday reality, but rather on the level of the Real. Instead of offering a competing model of cause and effect, providence operates on the hermeneutical level, requiring me to ascribe meaning to the things that happen to me. However, what removes any vestige of subjective interpretation from it is the level of the Real, where there is no external reality that I, as a subject, interpret, where reality and I are one. Everything that occurs in the world is a revelation of God that expresses something.⁶⁷

By ascribing the source of providence to the undifferentiated realm of the Real, Shagar believes he escapes the critique of subjectivity that emerges when one offers personal interpretations of the ebb and flow to their lives. As he explains, the interpretative process is less like that of a political pundit than of one experiencing revelation: the answer occurs to the believer in the form of a quiet epiphany.⁶⁸ This process also eschews scientific evaluation, as it operates within the Real rather than the rigid categorizations of the Symbolic Order. In this way, he is able to affirm the desire to live fully within the scientific-causal world while maintaining fealty to the world of providence and higher meaning, aided by the plurality of languages and perspectives of Lacanian postmodernism that allow him to exist in both realms simultaneously.⁶⁹

Rather than evaluate the soundness of Shagar's philosophical move, the question for analysis in this thesis is one of evaluating the distance traveled between the origins of Lacan's paradigms and their new function in what Professor Gayatri Spivak would say is Shagar's *strategic misreading*.⁷⁰ Indeed, Shagar's process reads similarly to De Certeau's claim that the reader/poacher "invents in texts something different from what they intended" by "detach[ing]

⁶⁷ *ibid* 35.

⁶⁸ *ibid* 36.

⁶⁹ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 35.

⁷⁰ This phrase is lifted from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman," in *Displacement: Derrida and After*, ed. Mark Krupnick. *Bloomington: Indiana University Press*, 1983.

them from their lost or accessory origins.”⁷¹ Shalom Carmy notes that Shagar’s approach does not turn on establishing an exacting copy of Lacan’s theories but to use Lacanian words to provide a theoretical basis for Shagar’s vital insights in repairing faith in a postmodern world.⁷² It is thus crucial to dissect what in Lacanian paradigms excites Shagar to use it in his virtuosic *bricolage* to treat faith, as opposed to drawing on the mysticism that exists within his own tradition.

To contextualize this strategic move, it is useful to explore Shagar’s utilization of Lacan in his other essays on faith, most notably in *B’Tsel HaEmunah* (In the Shadow of Faith [2011]), a collection of essays for the holiday of *Sukkot*, where he again grapples with the tension between providence and free will.⁷³ Shagar presents the *Sukkah*, the Jewish temporary dwelling built in honor of the holiday, as a symbolic representation of a space wherein the Symbolic Order is suspended. This move, says Shagar, creates room for faith, which he theorizes with the Lacanian metaphor of the letter that “always reaches its destination,” a phrase lifted from the final line of Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter.’” In the essay, Lacan discusses Poe’s short story of the same name, which describes the eponymous letter, first located in the Queen’s possession, stolen by her Minister and then by a third character, Dupin.⁷⁴ As the letter changes hands again and again, Lacan suggests that its content takes on “a degree of autonomy: it determines characters’ positions, reversing in succession who can see, who cannot, and who takes advantage

⁷¹ De Certeau, Michel. "Reading as Poaching." *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven F. Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. 165-176.

⁷² Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 201.

⁷³ See Shagar, *B’Tsel Ha-Emunah* (Hebrew: In the Shadow of Faith: Homilies and Articles for the Holiday of Sukkot (ed. Yishai Mevorah). Alon Shvut, 2011.

⁷⁴ Jacques Lacan, "Le seminaire sur 'La Lettre volée'" from *Ecrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), pp. 11-61, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman as "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" in "French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis", *Yale French Studies*, No. 48 (1972)

of the conjuncture thus constituted.”⁷⁵ The letter, which for Lacan represents the pure signifier, embodies the capriciousness of language and the fluidity of its significance within the linguistic and social structure. Its significance is dependent on its position in the structure, defying any attempt to project a teleological lens onto its ultimate significance. Lacan’s closing statement regarding the letter reaching its destination, therefore, is an ironic, even nihilistic one: he concludes that “...the sender, we tell you, receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form,” indicating that the destination to which the letter arrives -- its meaning, i.e. the sender’s meaning, in the world -- is modulated by the changing idiosyncrasies of its recipients, unanchored, non-linear, and constantly in flux.

Shagar’s citation of this anti-teleological metaphor in a discussion of providence, therefore, is rather surprising. More startling is his conclusion that this framework actually indicates a high measure of faith, asking, “How do you explain this utter faith, which shocked even Derrida?”⁷⁶ Shagar views in this metaphor not a concession to the ever-fluctuating nature of destiny, but rather a conviction in its representation of God’s plan unfolding in the world, manifest through from the arbitrary reality of *any* destiny, or “destination.” He explains:

The letter reaches its destination, not because it has a fixed address... but because the destination reached is always its destination... the real letter is not the message we are supposed to carry but our being itself.⁷⁷

Shagar turns the Lacanian irony on its head by challenging the believer to extract meaning from the caprices of life. The power of faith rests in the willingness of the individual to engage in the

⁷⁵ Fink, Bruce, *Reading seminars I and II : Lacan's return to Freud: seminar I, Freud's papers on technique, seminar II, The ego in Freud's theory and in the technique of psychoanalysis* (edited by Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus). Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. 173.

⁷⁶ Shagar, *B'Tsel HaEmunah*, 76. Trans. Levi Morrow.

⁷⁷ *ibid* 77.

hermeneutical process, to ascribe meaning to one's destination by addressing the letter to *oneself*, thereby determining its contents.

Conspicuous here is the influence of philosopher Slavoj Žižek on Shagar's reading of Lacan, whose book Shagar explicitly cites as the source for his Lacanian framework.⁷⁸ Behind Shagar's novel conception of providence, where no element or event of life is left outside of the bounds of interpretation, lies Žižek's gloss on Lacan's letter. As Žižek describes, "I don't recognize myself in it because I'm its addressee, I become its addressee the moment I recognize myself in it."⁷⁹ Žižek invigorates the Lacanian a novel understanding of the relationship between the Symbolic Order and the Real: the moment the letter reaches its destination, i.e. when one ventures to interpret the vicissitudes of one's own life, is one of revelation and understanding; what was previously a series of different, unconnected events becomes visible on the level of undifferentiated unity. It is Žižek's Lacan to whom Shagar holds fast, understanding faith as a practice of radical *self-acceptance*. Seeing oneself in one's destiny constitutes acceptance of the notion of "I am what I am," essential to the faith-building process because only the acceptance of one's identity can facilitate "an encounter with the Real."⁸⁰

In this light, the importance of the Real to Shagar in the original exhibit is thrown into sharper relief. For Shagar, the level of the Real is the domain in which the dualities that separates the individual from the world are overcome, thus enabling the radical interpretation that undergirds the internalization of providence through one's encounter with oneself. Shagar invokes the Real because he believes it to be "the life substance in its mucous palpitation."⁸¹ It is

⁷⁸ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 32, footnote 32.

⁷⁹ Žižek, Slavoj. *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. Routledge, 2001. 12.

⁸⁰ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 33.

⁸¹ Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 22.

a level of consciousness, inherent to reality, in which Shagar can situate his reworking of providence as manifest through the interpretation of the individual. Importantly, however, Shagar is also committed to living in the scientific-causal world, and he finds an appropriate analog in Lacan's Symbolic Order. The Symbolic Order, a matrix of power relations and differences, represents the scientific understanding of the world, wherein events happen one after another for strictly causal reasons, with no destination other than the domino effect of the initial event rippling outward arbitrarily. Shagar, reading Lacan through Žižek, presents a novel understanding of the relationship between the Symbolic Order and the Real: the moment the letter reaches its destination, i.e. when one ventures to interpret the vicissitudes of one's own life, is one of revelation and understanding, and what was previously a series of different, unconnected events becomes visible on the level of undifferentiated unity.⁸²

Žižek's concession that this reading goes beyond the scope that Lacan himself would have admitted only dramatizes the act of *bricolage* committed by Shagar in "My Faith."⁸³ Shagar grounds his discourse of faith in the concept of the Real, absorbing the interplay between the two realms of the Symbolic and the Real into his desired two-world approach. Galvanized by his Žižek-inspired understanding of Lacan's letter and its implications for a providential understanding of the world, he poaches it from its original context and transforms it into the lynchpin of his theological system. He infuses Lacanian terminology with the mysticism of the

⁸² This analysis of Shagar's use of Lacan is supported by the reflections on the same topic by Dr. Admiel Kosman of the University of Potsdam, a student of Shagar's. He comments that "Shagar makes his supreme-religious move, and argues that man truly finds God only in retrospect, after the letter has arrived – even if it arrived in a totally arbitrary manner – whereupon he can turn himself into the letter's true destination.... one could certainly say that once the "letter" has already reached us (its destination) – we can (and this, Shagar believes, is the true springboard of faith) transform the letter into a prism through which we can observe the concealed God!" See Kosman, "A Letter in Search of a Destination," *Haaretz*, February 27, 2015.

⁸³ Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 22-23. "Such a reading, however, leads beyond Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" which stays within the confines of the "structuralist" problematic of a senseless "mechanical" symbolic order regulating the subject's innermost self-experience."

Hasidim, aligning the two-world approach he reads into the relationship between the Symbolic and the Real with the teachings of the Maharal of Prague and R' Shneur Zalman of Liadi.⁸⁴ Strikingly, however, it is not those Hasidic teachings that anchor Shagar's faith but those of Lacan, albeit altered and glossed. By orienting his redeemed faith around an encounter with the Real, Shagar injects spiritual significance to the psychoanalytic work of Lacan. With this work of *bricolage*, knowledge and acceptance of the Real becomes an integral part of faith in the wake of postmodernism, a theoretical twist on a traditional concept for a new era.

B. The Prayers of R' Nachman and Derrida

The previous section explored Shagar in his attribution of mystical significance to philosophical developments, engaging with a thinker from “outside” the traditional yeshiva discourse and folding the ideas into a religious framework. Here we will turn to a secondary aspect of Shagar's writings, namely his putting disparate sources in conversation with each other in treating a particular topic, and their subsequent reinterpretation in light of their juxtaposition. In De Certeau's terms, this strategy is emblematic of reading as *poaching*, whereby the reader combines the fragments of various texts and creates something new from their interaction.⁸⁵ This section will delve into his creativity in the weaving together of various sources, both traditional and academic, in his claim that each addresses the same problem and poses the same solution for its respective milieu, and thus for Shagar's audience as well. By framing these sources in this way, Shagar constructs an intellectual and spiritual lineage between thinkers across time and

⁸⁴ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 30.

⁸⁵ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 169.

space and presents a solution to a postmodern issue grounded in both the symbols of the *yeshiva* and in the theory of the academy.

The essay chosen for a close reading here is Shagar's "Praying without Hoping," which appears at the end of *She'arit HaEmunah* (Remnants of Faith: Postmodern Homilies for the Jewish Holidays [2014]). This book is an anthology of eleven essays regarding religiosity in a postmodern era, a topic of frequent focus throughout some of Shagar's earlier volumes like *Keilim Shvurim* (Broken Vessels [2004]) and *Luchot v'Shivrei Luchot* (Tablets and Broken Tablets [2013]). The impetus behind these essays is Shagar's regard for postmodernism as the source of the tremendous obstacles facing religious people while simultaneously constituting the avenue for their redemption. Postmodernism, according to Shagar, contains within it the mechanisms to overcome itself, the hidden spark of divinity within the broken shards of the world.

It is in this essay that Shagar tackles the question of prayer in a postmodern world. As prominent as providence is in the traditional Jewish religious consciousness, prayer, too, reflects the contemporary understanding of the relationship between humanity and God and the possibility of communication therein. Importantly, the episodes of prayer that permeate the Jewish collective memory boast a litany of *answered* prayers. A Mishnaic formula for the proper insertions to one's prayer on a communally-declared fast day reads:

To the first blessing he shall say [in addition], "May he who answered Abraham on Mount Moriah answer you, and listen to your cry on this day. Blessed art thou, O Lord, Redeemer of Israel!" To the second he shall say, "May he who answered our ancestors on the Red Sea answer you, and listen favourably this day to your cry. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who rememberest all things forgotten!" ... To the sixth he shall say, "May he who answered Jonah in the entrails of the fish answer you, and listen to your cry on this day. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who answerest

in the time of distress!" To the seventh he shall say, "May he who answered David, and his son Solomon, in Jerusalem answer you, and listen to your cry on this day."⁸⁶

The list of Biblical heroes whose prayers were answered serves as a model and inspiration for one's continued engagement in prayer: just as God intervened in the world for these ancestors, perhaps there is a chance God will engage in current affairs as well. Modern Jewish thinkers reframed this quest for intervention in terms of a yearning for immanence and intimacy. For Rabbi Kook, prayer was a means to "deepen our feelings of holiness and our sense of closeness to God," through an "exalted sense of Divine immediacy."⁸⁷ The American thinker Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that "to pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain the sense of the mystery that animates all beings.... The main ends of prayer are to move God, to let Him participate in our lives, and to interest ourselves in Him."⁸⁸ For these modern Jewish theologians, prayer is the sacred link between the transcendent divine and the mortal realm. It is, in essence, an articulation of *hope*, that the present reality may be elevated through attunement to the holy mystery of the world.

Yet in a postmodern world, when language breaks down, prayer shatters along with it. Initially posited by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*, language cannot refer to something outside the linguistic sphere it constitutes and reifies.⁸⁹ It is constrained to its own bounded system, extending only to the limitations of the wordplay available within itself. In the postmodern world, the Wittgensteinian understanding of language broadened to an insuperable chasm between the word as a "signifier" and its relationship to any

⁸⁶ Mishnah Taanit 2:4 (translation Sefaria.org).

⁸⁷ Kook, *Orot Hakodesh* III (*Mosad HaRav Kook*: 1920) 227. Cited by Brill, Alan. "Prayer Without Hoping." *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions: Notes on Jewish Theology and Spirituality*, 17 Oct. 2017.

⁸⁸ Heschel, Abraham Joshua, "Prayer," *The Review of Religion*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (January, 1945), pp. 153-168.

⁸⁹ Feldmann Kaye, "Provisional Jewish Theology," 88-89.

metaphysical substance, the “signified.”⁹⁰ Postmodernism sees language as merely the construct of a communally agreed-upon reality, and that reality only -- with no connection to anything higher. Postmodern semiotician Jean Baudrillard describes this phenomenon of language as a “simulation,” that words have become detached from any objective essence.⁹¹ Prayer, then, couched as it is in human language, is untethered from any ontological reality and stripped of its ability to point to metaphysical truth, i.e. communicate with God. Postmodernism dispossesses any modicum of hope from the language of prayer, the gap between the signifier and the signified proving insurmountable.

Shagar attempts to build a theoretical foundation for continued engagement with prayer in the postmodern era out of the writings of Hasidic master Rabbi Nachman of Breslov and French philosopher Jacques Derrida, two prominent figures in the study of religion. The intellectual domains of these two thinkers, at first blush, seem unrelated: R’ Nachman (1772-1810), an early Hasidic master from Ukraine, works entirely from traditional Jewish sources, most notably the Bible and the teachings of the Kabbalah; Derrida, the Algerian linguist and philosopher, represents the theory of the postmodern epoch. Fusing the teachings of these two thinkers together, despite their geographic and temporal differences, Shagar modifies the thrust of each through a virtuosic act of *bricolage*, constructing a mystical approach to prayer in the postmodern era composed of both postmodern and traditional elements.⁹²

⁹⁰ “Signifier and signified” -- these terms in structuralist semiotics were first posited by de Saussure and Levi-Strauss, later to be taken up by Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, et al. Feldmann Kaye, “Provisional Jewish Theology,” 94, footnote 289.

⁹¹ See Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁹² Feldmann Kaye, “Provisional Jewish Theology,” 95.

In placing these disparate thinkers together, Shagar poaches from their writings not just to solve the problem of prayer in the postmodern world, but to assert that these thinkers themselves explicitly saw these issues with prayer in their own times. At the outset of this essay, Shagar offers a concise reflection on his understanding of their shared position of the nature of prayer: “Both Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav and Jacques Derrida taught that prayer, as well as faith, are only possible through absolute renunciation, praying without hope or future.”⁹³ To support the construction of this identity, Shagar cites R’ Nachman’s position that “it is improper to describe and call to God with attributes and praises and words and letters,” knowing as he does the fallibility of language in its endeavor to describe the divine.⁹⁴ As for Derrida, Shagar writes that prayer cannot defragment the space between man and God, that prayer is, in Derrida’s opinion, “hollow and mechanistic speech.”⁹⁵ Putting these thinkers together, Shagar writes that it is “Rebbe Nachman and Derrida [who] perhaps expressed better than others did the gap, the *différance* between the word and what we expect to accomplish. The empty space that is the source of the structural contradictions of reality itself.”⁹⁶ The connection Shagar highlights here is the shared recognition of the futility of prayer, unable to reach God through the insuperable void between the mortal and divine spheres. This cosmic distance is essentially the gap between the signifier and the signified, emblematic of language’s inability to make contact with a realm outside of itself.⁹⁷ In this manner, Shagar thus creates an philosophical patchwork across time

⁹³ Shagar, *She'arit HaEmunah* 41. Trans. Levi Morrow.

⁹⁴ Nachman of Breslov, *Likutei Moharan*, I 15:5.

⁹⁵ Shagar, *Luchot v'Shivrei Luchot*, 237.

⁹⁶ *Ibid* 43.

⁹⁷ Shagar calls this the Real, collapsing the Real into the self with the assertion that “If I understand God as something that exists outside of me, I have strayed from the Real. Yet, in truth, [Lacanian] psychological reduction of faith is possible when raised to the Lacanian Real.” *She'arit HaEmunah* 44.

and space, poaching both R' Nachman's Kabbalistic claims and Derrida's linguistic ones to align them together in a centuries-long intellectual lineage of recognition of the obstacles to prayer.

The answer to the breakdown of prayer in a postmodern world is the despair that emerges from acknowledging the chasm, which Shagar identifies in both R' Nachman and Derrida. Shagar relates that both thinkers acknowledge the impossibility of prayer, yet pursue the potential for a mode of prayer devoid of hope, as they are each unwilling to forsake prayer altogether. Shagar quotes Derrida as asking:

Is it possible to pray without hope, not just without any request, but while renouncing all hope? If we agree that this prayer, pure prayer, cleansed of all hope, is possible, would that not mean that the prayer's essence is connected to this despair, to this lack of hope? [...] I can imagine a response to this terrifying doubt: even then, at the moment when I pray without hope, there is hope within the prayer. I hope, minimally, that someone takes part in my prayer, or that someone hears my prayer, or someone understands my hopelessness and despair. Thus, despite everything, there is still hope and future. But perhaps not. Perhaps not. At least perhaps.⁹⁸

Derrida queries the potential of a prayer without hope, which, paradoxically, is validated by the despair of the pray-er. He envisions that at the moment one reckons with the limits of one's own prayer, one is actually recognized for one's despair and therefore heard. Shagar offers a parallel quote from the teachings of R' Nachman:

It requires you to affirm two opposites, Aught (*Yesh*) and Naught (*Ayin*). The empty space comes from the contraction (*Tsimtsum*), as if God had removed himself from that space, as if there was no divinity there, otherwise it would not be empty [...]. But in the absolute truth, there must be divinity there despite this [...] and

⁹⁸ David Shapiro and Michal Govrin, "Body of Prayer: Written Words, Voices," ed. Kim Shkapich. New York: Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture of the Cooper Union, 2001. Based on talk by David Shapiro, Michal Govrin, and Jacques Derrida recorded October 14, 1998, Chanin School of Architecture of the Cooper Union. Translated: Michal Govrin (Tel Aviv: Mekhon Mofet Vekav Adom Keheh/Hakibuts Hame'uhad, 2013). 87. Quoted in *She'arit HaEmunah* 42.

therefore it is impossible to understand the idea of the void until the future yet to come.⁹⁹

R' Nachman suggests that between the extent of human language and the divine realm exists some divinity -- not simply empty space -- thus accessible to individuals at prayer. While these two sentiments read quite differently, Shagar blends them together to affirm a commitment to prayer despite its inherent limitations: "Even though both of them recognize the impossibility of prayer, Rebbe Nachman and Derrida do the opposite - they pray. ...Derrida and Rebbe Nachman ask if the Naught cannot also be Aught?"¹⁰⁰ Shagar melds these two quotations together around the same inquiry, outside of any other writing each thinker produced, and proclaims the convergence of their conclusions regarding prayer. According to Shagar, both R' Nachman and Derrida pray by understanding that their despair at the ineffectuality of their prayer is actually the source of its success.

For Shagar, the essence of prayer ultimately lies in the complete surrender of its utterer, which, just as in the Lacanian rereading of faith, returns the onus to the individual. Unlike the classic notion of the self-sacrifice (*mesirut nefesh*) of traditional prayer, in which a person places God above themselves in a nullification of the will, prayer in the postmodern era demands total self-renunciation.¹⁰¹ It requires the individual's abandonment of the will to transcend, of the hope that prayer will reach the divine. The result, then, is a prayer offered into the void, one that can only be met by the sheer grace of God. Shagar again quotes both R' Nachman and Derrida to support this claim. God is "present for us in our calling to him. This is the grace of God," says R' Nachman,¹⁰² with Shagar's citation of Derrida echoing, "Self-acceptance, giving up on

⁹⁹ Nahman of Breslov, *Lekutei Moharan*, I 64:1.

¹⁰⁰ *She'arit HaEmunah* 42.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid* 41.

¹⁰² Rebbe Nahman, *Lekutei Moharan*, I 15:5

transcendence, ‘is not true or false. It is, word for word, prayer.’”¹⁰³ Liberated from the constraints of language through this radical self-acceptance, the pray-er flings the prayer into the void, stripped of any expectation yet filled with a new hope, in the form of the possibility that someone could hear the prayer. The sheer existence of this possibility -- the “perhaps” -- is what solidifies the prayer’s reality.¹⁰⁴ Shagar is not certain that his prayer will be answered, but his conviction that his prayer will *perhaps* be heard is enough to overcome its impossibility, reliant entirely on the grace of God, who may possibly hear it.¹⁰⁵ Guided by the twin influences of R’ Nachman and Derrida, Shagar thus presents his formula for prayer in the postmodern era.

Shagar’s usage of R’ Nachman and Derrida and the novel content generated from their artificial conversation with each other exemplifies his creative style of *bricolage*. The most explicit example of the features of this *bricolage* is the identity Shagar constructs between the Kabbalistic and postmodern perceptions of the void between God and man. He asserts that the Kabbalistic void (Hebrew: *Halal HaPanui*, lit. “the empty space”) is congruent to the gap between the signifier and the signified in postmodern linguistics. Rooted in Kabbalistic cosmology, the *Halal HaPanui* describes that God, as it were, contracted Godself to make room for the rest of creation. The mystical concept acts as an explanation for the existence of a finite, mortal world while acknowledging the infinitude of God, who created it and exists in some relation to it. The *Halal HaPanui* was a favorite trope of R’ Nachman’s, who teaches:

¹⁰³ Jacques Derrida, cited in Govrin, *Setirah Petuḥah*. Quoted in *She’arit HaEmunah* 44.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ The question becomes, of course, what shape a response from God would take, even if Shagar would be satisfied with the mere act of flinging a prayer into the void. Dr. Courtney Bender presents several answers in her 2008 article, whereby prayer has potent psychological effects, such as the calming of the mind to better feel God’s presence and contemplate divine will, or the more metaphysical practice of being able to channel divine energy. The focus of her study was on a conception of God as immanent and non-anthropomorphic; the projection of this framework onto the transcendent God of the Kabbalists may yield different results. Courtney Bender, “How Does God Answer Back?” *ScienceDirect*, Poetics 36 (2008), 480.

There needs to be a separation, so to speak, between the filling and the surrounding. If not, then all would be one. However, through the empty space, from where God contracted his divinity, so to speak, and in which God created all of Creation, the void has come to encompass the world, and God surrounds all worlds, surrounding even the void [...] and in the middle appears the void from where God withdrew his divinity, so to speak.¹⁰⁶

This intermediate domain, in R' Nachman's view, protects the distinction between the divine realm and the mortal world. The *Halal HaPanui* acts as a void that functions as the upper limit of human activity and understanding of God.

Shagar sees in this gap a parallel lesson to that of Derrida and other postmodernists: “[The idea of prayer] is one that touches on an additional shared element of their thought: the position of the “empty space... In the *Halal HaPanui* there are no letters, which is exactly the well known *differance* of Derrida: the inability of words to represent.”¹⁰⁷ Feldmann Kaye suggests that Shagar treats the *Halal Panui* as an “instigator of the dissolution of linguistic polarities,” in his “Kabbalistic-postmodern case for rallying the epistemological quagmire of the problem of language.”¹⁰⁸ By equating the *Halal HaPanui* with *differance*, Shagar identifies the locus of the failure of both Kabbalistic and postmodern prayer, setting the stage for the prayer to perhaps be answered by an absent, yet gracious God: “God is peeking through the slits of *differance*, between the gap between signifier and signified.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Rebbe Nachman, *Lekutei Moharan*, I 64:2.

¹⁰⁷ Shagar, *Luchot v'Shivrei Luchot*, 239. *Differance* is a French term coined by Derrida in his writings on deconstruction, a pun on the variant meaning of *differer* as both “to differ” and “to defer.” It refers to the forces that differentiate one word from another, creating the oppositions that undergird common discourse, as well as the constant deferral of significance, as words can only be defined in relation to one another in an infinite chain of the construction of meaning. See Jacques Derrida, “*Differance*” (trans Alan Bass), *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1982, 3-27.

¹⁰⁸ Feldmann Kaye, “Provisional Jewish Theology,” 107.

¹⁰⁹ Shagar, *Luchot v'Shivrei Luchot*, 237.

Another prominent act of creative integration in Shagar's framework on prayer is the alignment of the Kabbalistic *Ayin* and the postmodernist's Nothing, or No-thing. *Ayin* is closely linked to the concept of the *Ein-Sof*, the Infinite, that which was before the creation of the world (the *Yesh*). In this way, it bears the characteristics of being beyond or nullifying the category of "existence," the naming of the empirical qualities of God that postmodernism challenges.¹¹⁰ *Ayin* represents the absence of the essence of language posited by the deconstructivists, its unmooredness from any metaphysical signification, the Nothing at its core. Yet the thrust of Shagar's gloss is that whereas this anti-metaphysical position often leads to nihilistic materialism, he ultimately views it as a release from the onus of empiricism and expectation in language, paving the way for a novel opportunity for prayer. He writes, "Someone once said that the mystic and atheist say the same thing: 'Nothing.' The difference is that the mystic says it with a capital 'N,' with a feeling of tremendous freedom that breaks him loose from the constraints of reality. Meanwhile the atheist says it as a depressed and 'terrifying possibility.'"¹¹¹ Similar to Shagar's treatment of the *Halal HaPanui*, the *Ayin* represents the territory outside of a world bound by language and empiricism. Yet Shagar is guided by R' Nachman who believes that "in the absolute truth, there must be divinity there [in the negative space, the *Ayin*] despite this [the contraction of God from it]."¹¹² This source is what directs Shagar's mystical gloss on deconstruction, his conviction that both R' Nachman and Derrida ask if the Naught, the *Ayin*,

¹¹⁰ Feldmann Kaye, "Provisional Jewish Theology," 104. Shagar draws a conceptual line back to Maimonides' negative theology, suggesting that it serves as "the basis for deconstruction." Though Maimonides certainly wrote about the inability of human language to capture the essence of God, it is important to recognize the active construction of this genealogy as an act of *bricolage* itself. For more on the connection between Maimonides and Derrida, see Micah Goodman, "Maimonides and the Book That Changed Judaism: Secrets of 'The Guide for the Perplexed'" (trans. Yedidya Sinclair). *University of Nebraska Press / Jewish Publication Society*, 2015.

¹¹¹ Ibid 43.

¹¹² R' Nahman of Breslov, *Lekutei Moharan*, I 64:1.

could perhaps serve as a receptacle for the Aught. Shagar posits that in the absence of language, nothing (or, rather, Nothing) exists -- and thus boundless and infinite opportunities arise, the essence of the “perhaps” that qualifies Shagar’s prayer.¹¹³

The confrontation with the postmodern Nothing, viewed through the mystical eyes of R’ Nachman, yields a release from the limitations of language and secures the opportunity to pray, its sheer possibility the condition of its existence and the font of its hope.¹¹⁴ Rather than merely collapsing of two terms into each other, this action represents an infusion of mysticism into the postmodern discourse, a spiritual gloss on its apparent nihilism. Indeed, Shagar’s synthesis transforms his writers in the process: R’ Nachman becomes a postmodern theorist and Derrida a mystic *par excellence*.

The choice of these specific thinkers in particular for his multi-colored *bricolage* is not without intention. Shagar’s affinity for R’ Nachman appears in countless expositions of R’ Nachman’s magnum opus in the form of a two-volume work called “Lectures on *Likkutei Moharan*,”¹¹⁵ in which Shagar applies his knowledge of existentialism, anthropology, and literature, among other disciplines, to explicate Nachman’s mysterious teachings.¹¹⁶ Beyond the personal connection, Shagar views this revival of R’ Nachman’s teachings as imperative in renewing the role traditional Jewish texts play in the spiritual life of contemporary Jews, “to enable my students to feel the life-changing power that lies in the Torah. My efforts are aimed at

¹¹³ “Without language nothing exists...so boundless and infinite opportunities arise for us, which are also tautological and justify themselves as they occur, and so possibilities are open for representation of the essence of the proof.” Shagar, (eds. Maor, Z. & Deutsch, S.) *Nehelakh beRagesh: Mivkhar Ma’amarim* (Hebrew) *We Walk in Fervour: Selected works*, Efrat [Institute for the Writings of Harav Shagar] 2008. 178-190.

¹¹⁴ Feldmann Kaye also presents a similar analysis of R’ Nachman’s Shtika as apophaticism, using silence to overcome the limits of representation. See “Provisional Jewish Theology,” 99.

¹¹⁵ Shagar, *Shiurim al Likkutei Moharan* [Hebrew: *Lectures on Likkutei Moharan*] Ed. Netanel Lederberg. Alon Shvut: Va’ad Kitvei ha-Rav Shagar and Michlelet Yerushalayim, Vol. 1. 2012, Vol. 2. 2015.

¹¹⁶ See the last chapter of volume two, “Rebbe Nachman would have said,” in which Shagar details his spiritual connection with R’ Nachman and R’ Nachman’s influences on his own religious path. 467-78.

finding the proper ‘language’ that will allow the translation of the words of our Sages and the Rishonim [medieval Jewish authorities] into an idiom that can be understood in our post-modern world.”¹¹⁷ By bringing R’ Nachman to bear on postmodernism, Shagar revives a commitment to the images and texts of well-known, if not always appreciated, Jewish thinkers as potent fodder for spiritual guidance.¹¹⁸

While his reliance on R’ Nachman is unsurprising, Shagar’s depiction of Derrida as a mystic who engages in prayer, however, is rather unexpected. Shagar himself concedes that Derrida was loathe to claim any positive association with mysticism, citing a 1986 radio interview:

Anyway, fortunately or unfortunately for me, whichever you prefer, I am no mystic and there is no mystical element in my work. In fact, my work is the deconstruction of values established by mystics.... It’s just that personally I’m not a mystic; I also doubt whether anything written by me is touched with mysticism.

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Despite Derrida’s explicit claims to the contrary, Shagar persists with his deployment of this figure in his spiritual guidebook. Regardless of what deconstruction represented for Derrida himself, Shagar perceives in deconstruction a passage to mysticism that “is not just possible, but is, perhaps, obvious.”¹²⁰ This is a prime example of Shagar’s *bricolage* for the way he detaches the quintessential deconstructivist from his work and reworks it for mystical purposes, framing him as one who, though he himself may have not prayed, provides fodder and intention for

¹¹⁷ Shagar, *The Human and the Infinite: Discourses on the Meaning of Penitence*, trans. Naftali Moses (Efrat: Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak, 2004), 6.

¹¹⁸ Feldmann Kaye also suggests examining Tzur, Avichai, pp.122-125 Akdamot 21 for a discussion on how Shagar appropriates R’ Nachman’s thought for his own purposes. MFK 97, footnote 299.

¹¹⁹ Cited in Gidon Efrat, *The Jewish Derrida* (trans. Peretz Kidron). Syracuse University Press, 2001. 62. Later cited in *She’arit HaEmunah*, 43.

¹²⁰ Shagar, *She’arit HaEmunah* 43.

inspiration for his creative juxtaposition of Derrida to R' Nachman on the basis of their shared mysticism.

Although Shagar's usage of Derrida can be traced to his lack of primary source material, many more commentators suggest a similar mystical read, even as Derrida dismissed his own theistic proclivities.¹²⁶ Sanford Drob claims that "there is much in Derrida that is Kabbalistic, and given Derrida's approving references to Kabbalistic ideas... it is hard to understand the force behind his disclaimer."¹²⁷ John Caputo, a Catholic scholar of postmodernism and religion, re-reads Derridean deconstruction for its theology as well.¹²⁸ These secondary sources, with which there is no evidence to suggest Shagar's familiarity, provide contemporary support for Shagar's deployment of Derrida in his own writings on prayer.

Even today, there remains a lack of consensus among scholars regarding Derrida, his complex intellectual legacy resisting any reductionist attempts. Gil Anidjar responds to Ofrat's project directly in his introduction to Derrida's *Acts of Religion*, writing:

It is therefore permissible to doubt the possibility of localizing him, of claiming or reclaiming him for a postcoloniality, be it Arab, Jewish, African, or other. Thus to speak of "Derrida the Jew" as Gideon Ofrat has, for example, while following an already well established tradition, or of "Derrida the Algerian" "the French philosopher" or even the "Arab Jew" would perhaps not be wrong. It would however indicate an all too hasty reading, the persistence

¹²⁶ Caputo mentions that Derrida once stated that he "rightly passes for an atheist," a subversion of the definition of atheism that constitutes the thrust of his position on deconstruction and religion. Gutting, Gary. "Deconstructing God." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 9 Mar. 2014.

¹²⁷ Drob, S., *Kabbalah and Postmodernism: A Dialogue*, New York [Peter Lang] 2009, 20. Cited in MFK 98, footnote 302.

¹²⁸ One salient quote from a volume which deals at length with Derrida's theology and supposed prayer: "The prayers and tears of Jacques Derrida, the dream he dreams of something impossible, that is a dream and a prayer and a passion for the future, l'avenir, his faith in what is to come. He implores what is to come, he prays and weeps that justice come. He has faith in something incoming, hope for a justice to come, love for the gift of the expenditure without reserve... For all of this he weeps and sighs, sending up a little deconstructive supplication, praying with all the passion of his little postmodern prayer, viens, with regular, religious repetition. *Oui, oui.*" Caputo, John D. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida : Religion Without Religion*. Indiana University Press, 1997. 329.

of a referential moment -- “the autobiographical” -- that testifies to its unreadability.¹²⁹

Anidjar’s warning serves as valuable commentary for the contemplation of Shagar’s *bricolage* in this instance. The understanding of “reading as poaching” may extend not only to the textual output of a particular author, but to the author himself as well, fixating on one particular element of his identity as a guide for the process of interpreting the text. Following Ofrat and Govrin, Shagar expands Derrida’s Jewishness to the extent of his depiction as a mystic fully engaged in prayer, a fitting analog to R’ Nachman. As Anidjar suggests, this read may not be as *wrong* as it is hasty and overly autobiographical; such a read, however, may be the prerogative of, or at least constitutive of, the postmodern *bricoleur*.

In light of his treatment of R’ Nachman and Derrida and their relationship to prayer, Shagar cements his belief in the power of postmodernism to cultivate a novel, more elevated religiosity and morality.¹³⁰ Combining a stalwart of his own religious tradition with a contemporary theorist, Shagar confronts the challenges of postmodernism and constructs an avenue for prayer that, in his estimation, offers a stronger foundation for true engagement with the divine.¹³¹ His synthetic *bricolage* is transformative of both the thinkers he deploys and the religious practice he describes. Like in his essay on Lacan and faith, he reinterprets fragments of Derrida and R’ Nachman, putting them in conversation with each other for purposes of his own and rerouting the new meaning born from their juxtaposition through the context of prayer in the postmodern era. His novel gloss on prayer thus presents postmodernism as the harbinger of the

¹²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion* (ed. Gil Anidjar). Routledge 2002. 35.

¹³⁰ Shagar, *Luchot v’Shivrei Luchot*, 240.

¹³¹ It is interesting to consider the question of why Shagar chooses to provide a joint basis for his writing, rather than anchor his position in either one of the figures. Perhaps that he wants to redeem R’ Nachman in a new generation by reading him through Derrida, and sanctify Derrida by aligning him with a Hasidic master such that Derrida’s Jewishness is spotlighted and thus his applicability to prayer?

redemption of religiosity in a new age, the generation of a new Torah from the depths of the *Halal HaPanui*.¹³²

C. The Hanukkah Candle and Translation

Whereas the previous sections detail the range of Shagar's creativity apparent in both the inclusion of general philosophy into particular Jewish questions, and the combination of Hasidic and postmodern figureheads to create new, applicable thought for the *yeshiva* setting, his upheaval of classical Jewish imagery itself to confront questions of postmodernism warrants attention. In the style of the European Hasidic masters, Shagar often takes an idea or image from within the Biblical or rabbinic tradition and projects its details onto a contemporary issue, with the relationship between the elements of the original context a source of inspiration for the present day. Through the lens of postmodern hermeneutics, Shagar's methodology suggests that to address current predicaments one need not look further than the central images of one's own tradition. Examining Shagar's reinterpretation of the Jewish tradition as it relates to postmodernism will illuminate his devotion to his own intellectual and religious heritage, as well as his affirmation of the play possible within the confines of traditional Jewish sources -- an implicit nod to the eternity of the tradition, its infinite layers of meaning interpreted anew for each generation.

For Shagar, as well as for the Hasidic masters who preceded him, the Jewish holidays offer a cluster of texts and images ripe for interpretation, a context already discussed in regard to prayer and the holiday of Booths. Many of Shagar's lectures and essays are presented in the form

¹³² Shagar, *Luchot v'Shivrei Luchot*, 240.

of homilies for various holiday seasons, including the Days of Awe (*Al Kapot HaMan'ul*, 2004), *Sukkot* (*BeTzel HaEmunah*, 2004), *Purim* (*Pur Hu HaGoral*, 2005) and Passover (*Zeman Shel Herut*, 2011). The themes of each holiday provide Shagar a springboard to present his ruminations on a wide spectrum of contemporary issues, postmodernism and its offshoots prominent among them. Furthermore, Shagar is intent on providing fodder for the religious intellectual of his community to “seek out ways that will help him fill [the holidays] with real, religious meaning, and bring him into deep contact with the foundation of his existence.”¹³³ The Jewish holidays represent an opportunity to generate intense reflection, and Shagar works to frame their religious significance in a way that will provoke a new understanding of oneself and the world.

Shagar’s essay on Hanukkah and his interpretation of the holiday images is emblematic of his masterful play. Titled “On Translation and Living in Multiple Worlds,” the essay was offered as a sermon for the holiday and later published in *She’arit HaEmunah* (2014), and is an amalgam of material from two chapters of Shagar’s book on Hanukkah, *LeHa’ir et HaP’tachim* (2014).¹³⁴ His use of traditional symbols as a mechanism for thinking through contemporary conversations set up the concrete elements of the holiday as metaphors for a religious posture in the postmodern era.

The essay turns on what Shagar perceives is the growing disenchantment of the Religious-Zionist youth regarding the relationship between tradition and modernity in the wake

¹³³ Shagar, *Pur Hu HaGoral*, 8. Trans. Levi Morrow.

¹³⁴ The translation of this essay was done by Levi Morrow and Alan Brill; all subsequent citations of it in this chapter are of their translation.

of postmodernism.¹³⁵ Orthodox Judaism, he writes, with its commitment to the unchanging and eternal Torah and Halakha, is at odds with the principles of modernity, constantly in flux and bringing with it a whole host of new tools with which to understand the world and derive meaning from it. The enterprise of reconciling the two is effectively an effort to unite opposites.

¹³⁶ Shagar sees the Religious-Zionist community as located at the intersection of these two ideals, in a constant struggle between seemingly polar opposites of modernity and an eternal Torah. Religious-Zionist students learn in *yeshiva*, but also in university; they read Hasidism and modern fiction; they have roots in the Jewish tradition and are enveloped by secular culture.¹³⁷ Holding these polarities at once, the Religious-Zionist identity is an exercise in the integration of multiple worlds, in a manner that eschews typical religious definitions.

Further complicating the issue is Shagar's demonstration of the dissolution of prior attempts to reconcile this tension with the onset of postmodernism. Shagar notes several prominent modern Jewish thinkers who have striven to merge Orthodoxy and modernity, including Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's *Torah im Derech Eretz*, ("Torah with worldly involvement"), Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook's sanctification of the material world, Yeshayahu Leibowitz's compartmentalization approach, and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's dialectic between compartmentalization and harmony.¹³⁸ Yet Shagar contends that all of these attempts at reconciliation are no longer relevant: "The present-day problem is not the integration of

¹³⁵ I acknowledge the confusing slippage between "modernity" and "postmodernism." By modernity I mean the contemporary era, the progression of time and the introduction of new ideas, and not the movement of modernism to which I refer to elsewhere. Postmodernism is the same network of ideas to which I have been referring throughout.

¹³⁶ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 42.

¹³⁷ Levi Morrow, "'I have Integrated Modern Ideas into Hasidic Trains of Thought': Autobiographical Aspects of Rav Shagar's Introductions." Submitted to Tel Aviv University, 2014.

¹³⁸ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 42-43. For a detailed exposition by Shagar on these topics, see Shagar, *BaYom HaHu: Derashot u'Ma'amarim l'moadei Iyyar* (Hebrew: On That Day: Homilies and Articles for the Holidays of the Month of *Iyyar*) ed. Y. Mevorah. [Institute for the Writings of Harav Shagar] 2012. 244-65.

modernity and Orthodoxy, but rather the fact that in our postmodern world, both have been rendered obsolete.”¹³⁹ Shagar understands Orthodoxy as a reactionary move to modernity; as the allure of modernity crumbles and postmodernism commences, the modern syntheses are no longer compelling. Neither are the efforts to compartmentalize one domain from another, a process which demands painful self-denial. In a world where “the grand narratives of both modernity and Orthodoxy have all lost their power” -- a classic postmodern trope applied to the Religious-Zionist reality -- Shagar seizes onto the concept that new religious language is necessary.¹⁴⁰

To anchor his solution to the tensions of postmodernity and Religious-Zionism, Shagar turns not to a philosopher nor a theologian, but to the themes and symbols of the holiday of Hanukkah. Shagar understands Hanukkah as a holiday which has long served to represent the “complex tension between the contact of Torah with [other] wisdoms and cultures.”¹⁴¹ Hanukkah has its historical roots in the skirmishes of early antiquity between the Judeans and their Greek overlords, culminating in the Hasmonean reclamation of the Temple in Jerusalem and the relighting of the sacred candelabra. The memory of this victory serves as the foundation for an eight-day winter holiday, during which candles are ceremoniously lit to commemorate the miraculous restoration of light to the Temple. For later commentators, the physical fighting between Greeks and Judeans came to symbolize the clash between Greek wisdom, i.e. philosophy, or other sources of “external” knowledge, and Jewish wisdom, the lessons of the Torah and its “internal” proliferations.¹⁴² It is in line with this interpretative tradition that Shagar

¹³⁹ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 43.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Shagar, *She'arit HaEmunah: Derashot Postmoderniyot le-mo'ade Yiśra'el* (Hebrew: The Remainder of Faith: Postmodern Sermons on Jewish Holidays). Resling; Tel Aviv; 2014. 87.

¹⁴² Shagar, *She'arit HaEmunah*, 88.

projects his current dilemma of reconciliation of Judaism and modernity onto the elements of Hanukkah, determined to eke out inspiration for the postmodern age from the symbolic relationships between the Hellenistic Greek wisdom and the wisdom of the Torah.

Specifically, Shagar dwells on the particular legal language which the rabbis of the Talmud use dictate the commemorative lamp ought to be lit. The Babylonian Talmud relates: “The Sages taught: it is a mitzvah to place the Hanukkah lamp at the entrance to one’s house on the outside.”¹⁴³ The lamp is located at exactly the nexus of the inside of the home and the outside world, the meeting point between the intimate Jewish space and the darkness of the Greek culture. Shagar wonders:

Is it a candle of strife, accompanied by the sounds of the war songs of the sons of light against the sons of darkness, coming to drive away the darkness and remove the black by way of light and fire? Alternatively, perhaps the candle, to a certain degree, relies on the darkness around it, which in truth is specifically shining from the outside into the inside of the home?¹⁴⁴

Shagar reads the Talmudic passage for its symbolic significance for the individual who finds himself enmeshed in two worlds. The candle illuminates all that is around it, not for strife, but as a spotlight. Shagar suggests that the candle stands for a more organic dynamic between darkness and light, between Jewish philosophy and modernity.

To ground this interpretation, Shagar turns to a rabbinic gloss of the Biblical figures Japheth and Shem, the supposed progenitors of Greece and Judaism respectively. On the verse “God shall expand Japheth (*yafet*) and he will dwell in the tents of Shem,”¹⁴⁵ the Talmud sees a secondary Hebrew word echoed in the name Japheth: “The beauty (*yafiyuto*) of Japheth will be

¹⁴³ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Shabbat* 21b. Trans. Sefaria.org.

¹⁴⁴ Shagar, *She'arit HaEmunah*, 89.

¹⁴⁵ Genesis 9:27.

in the tents of Shem.”¹⁴⁶ Shagar understands from this comment that Japheth will participate in the intimate Jewish spaces represented by the “tents of Shem,” a figure whose descendants include Abraham.¹⁴⁷ In other words, Greek wisdom and culture will enter and suffuse internal Jewish discourse. As such, rather than polarizing Greek and Jewish influences, compartmentalized or modified in uneasy tension, Shagar utilizes a rabbinic gloss to present a vision of a complex conglomerate of the two.

Juxtaposing the gloss on Biblical imagery with the innovative postmodern symbology of the Hanukkah candles, Shagar presents the candle as representing the act of *translation* between the outside world and inside the home. The candle has an essential function in its location as a facilitator between two languages rather than as a separator of cultures. This position stands in opposition to Kook, who believed in the compartmentalization of Greek language (i.e. the tools of the Western academy) as distinct from Greek content (i.e. culture), and thus interpreted the rabbinic gloss to mean that when Western intellectualism serves as the container for the light of Torah, the Torah is clarified and advanced.¹⁴⁸ Shagar rejects the detachment of form from content, claiming that the medium has an undeniable effect on the content itself. With his playful usage of the rabbinic interpretation of Japheth and Shem, he projects this understanding onto the Talmudic sages as well. In this way, much like his transformation of Lacan, R’ Nachman, and Derrida, he recasts the Talmudic rabbis into postmodern exegetes with his *bricolage*.

Shagar then continues his guidebook for the Religious-Zionist by licensing freedom of creative interpretation within the realm of the Torah. He describes that the candle and the

¹⁴⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Megillah* 9b.

¹⁴⁷ Shagar, *She'arit HaEmunah*, 98.

¹⁴⁸ Cited in Tsvi Neriah, *Mo'adei Hara'ayah: Hagim Uzmanim Behaguto Ube'orah Hayav Shel Maran Harav Avraham Yits'hak Hakohen Kook Zatsal* (Jerusalem: Moriah Publishing, 1982), 183. The Hegelian foundation of this gloss is noted by Shagar as well.

individual are one and the same: it is the duty of the religious individual who encounters the beauty of the Greeks to translate the Greek language into their own language, an internal language of holiness and intimacy, the language of the original covenant.¹⁴⁹ Importantly, the holy language undergoes a change as a result of its encounter with this translation: a new formulation is created as the strange language is absorbed into extant religious terminology, and the latter receives new and unexpected meaning as the language of translation completes the holy language through the assimilation of new elements.¹⁵⁰ The language of translation thus occupies a sacred position between the holy language and the external one, exactly as the Hanukkah candle “stand[s] between the interior of the house and the outside world.”¹⁵¹ The illumination, then, is mutual; Japheth and Shem in each other’s tents, sharing equally in the other’s beauty.

Shagar’s interpretation of the Hanukkah candle, an isolated exposition characteristic of *bricolage*, is notable for its departure from a lengthy Jewish tradition of distrust, if not outright rejection, of the tools of the non-Jewish world. In many Talmudic passages, the Greek language is regarded with distaste and smacks of idolatry: One account relates that the day the Torah was translated into Greek is compared to the day the golden calf was constructed; another reports that when Rabbi Joshua was asked if a person may teach his son Greek, the response was “One can teach it at a time that isn’t day or night, as it is written [in Joshua 1:8], ‘And you will meditate in it day and night,’” implying that any time spent with Greek would detract from one’s study of Torah.¹⁵² R’ Nachman, perhaps in response to the onset of the Enlightenment, shares this contempt of external influences: “Someone who, God forbid, learns books of research and

¹⁴⁹ The idea of translation presented in this essay has its roots in R’ Nachman, further underscoring the prominence of this figure in Shagar’s thought.

¹⁵⁰ Shagar, *She’arit HaEmunah*, 98.

¹⁵¹ *ibid* 95.

¹⁵² Tractate Sofrim 1:7; Jerusalem Talmud Peah 3a. Translation from Sefaria.org.

philosophy introduces doubts and heresy into his heart [...] therefore we do not find any person who was made fitting and God-fearing by books of research.”¹⁵³ Even Rabbi Kook’s method of applying Greek tools to Jewish wisdom indicates a disinterest in the Greek content itself, filtered out to salvage the functionality of its receptacle; this dissociation between form and content is itself noteworthy for its departure from the traditional Jewish mode, yet is unacceptable to Shagar for its compartmentalization. Only Shagar, inspired by his innovative gloss on the Hanukkah candle and its presence outside the home, recognizes the potential (and necessity) of incorporating Greek wisdom into a vibrant religiosity, especially in a postmodern world. In this instance, the selective reading of his *bricolage* is a courageous stance that extracts new significance from an ancient holiday against the previous interpretive tradition. Shagar is not the first Jewish thinker to utilize Hanukkah for its spiritual resonance, nor is he even the first to deploy the featured candle as a guiding metaphor;¹⁵⁴ nevertheless, his radical creativity here is highlighted by his usage of the hermeneutical tools of his own tradition in constructing a bold and innovative response to contemporary issues like postmodernism.

In practice, Shagar’s Hanukkah candle is a template for experimentation between various forms and content in the language of one’s spiritual identity. His inspiration in this mode is, once again, R’ Nachman, who Shagar recounts as employing folk stories with kings and giants and fantastic lands.¹⁵⁵ That these stories have no identifiable Jewish or even religious characteristics

¹⁵³ R’ Nachman, *Sihot Haran* #5. Cited in Shagar, *She’arit HaEmunah*, 91.

¹⁵⁴ See Shagar, *LeHair Et HaPetachim* 53-56. The essay “Screen for the Spirit, Garment for the Soul” is a discussion of R’ Schneur Zalman of Liadi’s interpretation of the candles of Hanukkah, whereby he distinguishes between two different types of light emanating from both the oil and the wick of the candle: one representing the soul and the other representing the commandments, and the relationship therein.

¹⁵⁵ Shagar, *She’arit HaEmunah*, 97. See also Shagar, “*Mevo Lesipurei Ma’asiyot*,” in *HaHayyim Kega’agua: Keriot Hadashot Besipurei Ma’asiyot Shel R’ Naḥman Mibreslav*, ed. Ro’i Horen (Jerusalem: Yediot Sefarim, 2010), 11-31.

is of little concern; simply their treatment at the hands of the religious leader is sufficient to render them of religious significance, this process of translation expanding and transforming the holy language. As for Shagar and his constituency, Shagar notes that the encounter with various forms of “Greek language,” such as the media, literature and academia, occurs long before one arrives in the *yeshiva* and has become an integral part of the Religious-Zionist identity (over against the Haredi identity, for example)... For this reason, he seeks a “substantial religious-spiritual-Jewish alternative” that will reflect his audience’s full involvement in the general culture without hesitation. The lesson of the Hanukkah candle and its call for translation motivates Shagar to develop a new religiosity with a higher “capacity for integrations and combinations.”¹⁵⁶

The affirmation of the potential for holiness of these combinations is arguably what marks Shagar’s break from his Orthodox predecessors, with a corresponding effect for his students. Alan Brill contends:

Unlike Modern Orthodoxy, Rav Shagar followers can, and do, study the Yoga Sutras, Derrida, Spinoza, and Talmud criticism in the *beit midrash* as part of the *Yeshiva* seder or they can study film making or critical Bible in the University. They have changed the study hall and the religious life. They have gone places that Modern Orthodoxy never went.¹⁵⁷

Just as the Hanukkah candle lights both the home and the darkness of the external world, Shagar’s ethic of translation promises to include the disparate elements of the Religious Zionist’s identity, both recognizably Jewish and not, through a sort of spiritual fusion. The Yoga Sutras

¹⁵⁶ Shagar, *She’arit HaEmunah*, 100.

¹⁵⁷ Brill, Alan. “Rav Shagar and Secular Studies: On Translation and Living in Multiple Worlds.” *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions: Notes on Jewish Theology and Spirituality*. 4 December 2017.

and Spinoza are guaranteed their place in the study hall alongside the Talmud and the Kabbalah; neither overlooked in the holy language of the Religious Zionist community.

Importantly, however, not everyone is capable of producing that translation. In the language of R' Nachman, only the *tzaddik*, the perfectly righteous person, is authorized to translate; the laity must remain within the naivete of the holy language, lest they apply it inappropriately and prevent its spiritual renewal. In that vein, it is possible to imagine Shagar himself as fulfilling the role of that same *tzaddik* for his postmodern constituency: in an effort to provide suitable fodder for the spiritual inspiration of his community, Shagar dives headlong into the project of translation -- what we have heretofore referred to as his *bricolage*, in its myriad forms. Yet though postmodernism certainly democratizes playful interpretation, it begs the question of authority and authorization, of who is of sufficient *tzaddik* status to be granted access to this model and who is not recognized as legitimate in their own attempts at *bricolage*. These are questions we will address in the following chapter in a reflection on the model Shagar introduces to the study of Torah and its replicability for subsequent generations of those who struggle with postmodernism and religious life.

Viewed together, these three essays provide a useful guide to three general categories of Shagar's *Lamdanut*, Hebrew for methodology. The first example explored Shagar's mystical usage of academic philosophy to solve religious problems of postmodernity, in his anchoring of faith in the psychoanalytic terminology of Jacques Lacan. The second highlighted Shagar's creativity in weaving disparate sources together around a common theme, constructing an intellectual and spiritual lineage whereby R' Nachman and Derrida, and the Kabbalistic and postmodern imagery they deploy, converge to present a novel understanding of prayer in the

postmodern era. The last examined Shagar's delocalization of aspects of his own tradition through his essay on Hanukkah. Shagarian hermeneutics is thus shown to be an amalgam of mysticism, philosophy, and traditional Jewish imagery, woven together in a construction of unique syntheses through selective and creative readings of a variety of genres. These examples provide the foundation on which to understand the religious innovation ushered into the Religious-Zionist community by his *Lamdanut*, which is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter III: A Revolution in the *Beit Midrash*

Shagar's *Lamdanut*, as evidenced in the previous chapter, is a colorful patchwork of mysticism, philosophy, a deep immersion in traditional Jewish sources, and the creativity of a master *bricoleur*. Intended for disoriented Religious-Zionist youth, this *Lamdanut* was incorporated into Shagar's *yeshiva* as a method of approaching crucial questions of Jewish faith and practice in the wake of postmodernism. This chapter seeks to assess the *Lamdanut* explicated in the previous chapter as part of a larger conversation about the radical shift Shagar introduces to the realm of Torah study, the *Beit Midrash*, and its relationship to the construction of identity in the postmodern era.

To understand the authority and audacity wielded by Shagar to sustain this enterprise, it is important to locate Shagar within the course of Jewish intellectual history. One place to start is the lineage of Hasidic masters from whom he draws his inspiration for his content and style. Shagar views himself as the candle of the Hanukkah essay, R' Nachman's translator-*tzaddik*, spiritually fortified enough to wade into the domain of worldly culture and render it in the holy language for his followers. He acknowledges as much in the introduction to *Pur Hu HaGoral*, writing, "It is necessary to translate the Hasidic sermons to 'the language of our times.' ... I have integrated modern ideas into Hasidic trains of thought, in order to translate these Hasidic ideas for us and our world."¹⁵⁸ In light of this self-declaration, it is possible to view all of Shagar's writings as Hasidic sermons for the contemporary era, translated into the vernacular by drawing on the sources of popular discourse.

¹⁵⁸ Shagar, *Pur Hu HaGoral*, 8.

In other words, Shagar is aligned with “Neo-Hasidism,” a contemporary movement which maintains allegiance to Hasidic discourse, its homilies and parables, while not restricting its focus to Hasidic texts alone, infusing all elements of religious life with an “ethos of inwardness, joy, and a unitive vision of God.”¹⁵⁹ Nicham Ross writes that

the term “Neo” serves here as an important qualifier, infusing the term “Hasidism” with additional content and suggesting some type of amalgam between elements of original Hasidism and additional modern components. It comes to indicate not only that the Neo-Hasid is not a Hasid but also that he does not want to hide or abandon his alternate identity as a modern. His enthusiasm for Hasidism is conducted from an external modern point of view. This interest does not totally disappear even at the height of his pro-Hasidic activity.¹⁶⁰

The multiple identities of a Neo-Hasidic thinker, according to Ross, map on well to Shagar’s Religious-Zionist affiliation, committed to a spiritual renewal on par with early Hasidism that draws from both traditional sources and modern ones. Shagar is the vehicle through which modern ideas are integrated into a religious language, applying Hasidic hermeneutics (the translation and the *bricolage*) to a wide range of texts and thinkers. His tendency to anchor his homilies in Jewish holidays or Talmudic passage is indicative of his Neo-Hasidic style; even when he is translating non-Jewish sources into a religious language he reveals his indebtedness to his Hasidic predecessors. Just as R’ Nachman utilized the medium of folkloric stories to deliver his teachings, Shagar is willing to use “films, stories, postmodernism, psychoanalysis, and anything else needed to wake people up for the needed teaching of Torah.”¹⁶¹ As he writes,

¹⁵⁹ Ariel Evan Mayse, “The Development of Neo-Hasidism: Echoes and Repercussions Part I: Introduction, Hillel Zeitlin, and Martin Buber.” *The Lehrhaus*, 12 Mar. 2019.

¹⁶⁰ Nicham Ross. “Early Neo-Hasidism: A Religious or a Secular Phenomenon?” *Spectrum: A Journal of Renewal Spirituality*. Volume 4, Number 1, Spring-Summer, 2008. 35.

¹⁶¹ Brill, Alan. “Rav Shagar and Secular Studies: On Translation and Living in Multiple Worlds.”

“We have no choice but to translate if we want to turn the Torah we learn into a Torah of life.”¹⁶²

The revolution of the Hasidic masters was the injection of vibrancy and life into the verses of the tradition; Shagar inherits that mode and develops it for a postmodern world, expanding the range of possible sources of holiness with his commitment to translating more and more into the holy discourse.

On the other hand, in addition to his neo-Hasidic tendencies, Shagar is further emboldened in his interpretive license by the very tenets and challenges of the postmodernism to which he endeavors to respond. Deconstruction did away with the notion of any essence of a text, with a “right” or “wrong” interpretation; as such, the multivocality and multi-layeredness of any given text lends itself to an infinite set of interpretations, guided by the caprices and prejudices of the interpreter. Shagar worries, however, that this shift is susceptible to an overly humanistic act of interpretation, where “even the interpretive act could become a forceful and destructive act, according to which the text is destroyed to the field of meaning of the interpreter.”¹⁶³

To combat this impulse, Shagar eschews the expected nihilistic end of postmodern language games by activating its spiritual potential. Feldmann Kaye asserts that Shagar’s central innovation is the application of Hasidic and Kabbalistic hermeneutic methodology to textual interpretation, thus overcoming postmodernist pitfalls.¹⁶⁴ The signature characteristic of Kabbalistic techniques, according to Dr. Shaul Magid, is how “scriptural and rabbinic referents are lifted out of their context to become independent symbols, only to return later as a hypertext

¹⁶² Shagar, *Shiurim al Likkutei Moharan*, I:19. Cited in Brill, “Rav Shagar and Secular Studies: On Translation and Living in Multiple Worlds.”

¹⁶³ Shagar, *BeTorato Yehgeh* (2010), 43-44.

¹⁶⁴ Feldmann Kaye, “Provisional Jewish Theology,” 160.

used to uncover elements of scripture heretofore concealed.”¹⁶⁵ It is the second stage of this process that rescues postmodern bricolage from the nihilism of its detachment. The conviction that the final product will constitute authentic revelation leads to a creative process which is “not merely an interpretative game, but, simultaneously is generative of the divine.”¹⁶⁶ The language games of postmodern hermeneutics, in Shagar’s view, contain within them a kernel of divinity; this is the essence of his “positive pluralism,” shedding the paralysis or nihilism that may result from the infinite language games at one’s fingertips.

In light of these twin foundations, Shagar exists at the nexus of neo-Hasidism and postmodernism. The mutual influence of these two hermeneutical styles enables nearly unlimited interpretive creativity, especially in the realm of possible intertexts through which to read. It is thus that Shagar can draw on Lacan to answer questions of faith, or reframe disparate philosophical voices to create a shared conversation around prayer, or even extract a lesson on wisdom from a quirk of Jewish practice. In the wide-open world of texts presented by postmodern hermeneutics, infused with spiritual relevance by the legacy of the Hasidim, Shagar’s *Lamdanut* offers guidance for those Religious-Zionists perplexed by postmodernism and the other challenges of contemporary life.

Having positioned Shagar within the scope of Jewish intellectual history, the question of most importance becomes the implications of the massive change his *Lamdanut* introduces to the project of Torah study in the twenty-first century. The three moments of Shagarian bricolage presented in chapter two demonstrate how Shagar, blending Neo-Hasidism and postmodernism,

¹⁶⁵ Shaul Magid, *God's Voice from the Void: Old and New Studies in Bratslav Hasidism*, Albany [State University of New York Press] 2002. 17.

¹⁶⁶ Feldmann Kaye, “Provisional Jewish Theology,” 163.

offers a new modality to the study of Torah -- an exercise which, as mentioned in chapter one, is representative of engagement with Jewish philosophy writ large and the avenue for the development of individual identity. A closer look at Shagar's reflections on the crisis surrounding the study of Torah in the postmodern world reveals the impetus and inspiration for his revolutionary methodology, which prizes individual inspiration and meaning over all else in the study of Torah. Furthermore, the origins of this *Lamdanut* are identified in the makeup of the Talmud itself, a structure in which Shagar grounds his philosophy of bricolage. Lastly, in order to successfully embrace outside influences as part of one's own religious self-construction, the process must be implemented in the proper manner. Shagar names the appropriate forum for his *Lamdanut* as the *Beit Midrash*, transforming the location of the study of traditional texts into a radical space of creation for those who are deeply entrenched within its walls. Yet this methodology is not without its limits: by drawing the boundaries of his *Lamdanut* around the walls of the *Beit Midrash*, Shagar limits it to only those who embody the ideals of that space, a condition which may inhibit the transmission of his style to future generations.

The purpose of Shagarian *Lamdanut* must be understood in context of Shagar's sensitivity to the crisis of his students in relation to the study of traditional Jewish texts. In his volume *BeTorato Yehgeh*, Shagar expounds on the failure of the study of the Talmud, the cornerstone of the religious curriculum in many traditional *yeshivot*, to provide spiritual inspiration for his Religious-Zionist students. The community is in dire straits in its relationship to Talmud study, he says, due to the growing distance between the content and style of the learning and the lived experience of the student constituency.¹⁶⁷ Rabbi Yair Dreyfus, the

¹⁶⁷ Shagar, *BeTorato Yehgeh*, 13.

co-founder of *Yeshivat Siach Yitzhak* and longtime study partner of Shagar's, describes the predicament as being "due primarily to the gap between the Religious Zionist youths lifestyle and the ideology and motivation underlying the Haredi method of Gemara study which is implemented in Religious Zionist yeshiva high schools and Hesder Yeshivot."¹⁶⁸ The Haredi method to which he refers in this comment is the Brisker style popularized by the Gaon of Vilna and Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin and currently dominant in Orthodox intellectual circles, whereby the Torah is perceived to be a self-contained, autonomous system -- a "closed circuit."¹⁶⁹ Shagar contends that this system is inherently alienating, because it demands an objective and formalistic, even scientific discourse.¹⁷⁰ It rejects any attempt to reach for historical, sociological, or psychological explanations; such is its conviction that the system relies exclusively on its own internal language.¹⁷¹ Dreyfus highlights out the obvious connection between the Brisker methodology and the closeted lifestyle of Haredi communities.¹⁷² For Religious-Zionist circles, however, who do not seclude themselves from worldly influences in the same way, the Brisker approach to Talmud fails to provide spiritual significance, lacking as it does a reflection of the lived experience of its students.

For Shagar, the exercise of learning Talmud is more than the Brisker scholar's goal of "expos[ing] the metaphysical insights of the Halakha through scholarly brilliance."¹⁷³ It is rather part and parcel of the process of establishing a covenant with God, complete with the intimacy and pleasure of a healthy relationship. Shagar even utilizes domestic terminology to describe the

¹⁶⁸ Yair Dreyfuss, "Torah Study for Contemporary Times: Conservatism or Revolution?" *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (SUMMER 2012). 32.

¹⁶⁹ Shagar, *BeTorato Yehgeh*, 73.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid* 92.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid* 93-94.

¹⁷² Dreyfuss, "Torah Study for Contemporary Times: Conservatism or Revolution?" 35.

¹⁷³ *ibid* 35.

bond between a Jewish person and the Torah. The function of Torah study in our time, in Shagar's estimation, has less to do with sheer hours spent excavating the deepest corners of the system, but rather "but whether or not the Torah becomes one's home, the core of his existence, and the basis of his cultural world."¹⁷⁴ The project Shagar undertakes, therefore, is to generate for his students

a pedagogical method fitting for them – an approach that would know how to internalize traditional methods of study, but will also know how to open up to new methods of study, all without damaging the original sense of Torah study as a covenant with God, which thus "connects" the students with the Torah in a real, existential manner.¹⁷⁵

Shagarian Talmud study is a process of translation between ancient text and contemporary reader, as well as a translation between classical methodology and non-religious fields of inquiry.¹⁷⁶ There is a certain "at home-ness" (*beitiyut*) that Shagar strives to inject into his teaching of Torah with his efforts to translate across multiple worlds, knowing as he does the consequences if it does not speak to the variety of languages spoken by the Religious Zionist individual. The product is less important than the personal experience of learning in this way; in Shagar's words, "the essence is not the content, but the color and the melody."¹⁷⁷

It is for this reason that Shagar appeals to a postmodern conception of text and Halakhah, wherein meaning is not fixed at the outset like it is in the essentialist thinking of modern philosophers like Rabbis Kook or Soloveitchik. In Kook's existentialism, the fullness of the Torah infuses meaning into the empty reality of modernity, the way the light of the Hanukkah

¹⁷⁴ Ibid 33

¹⁷⁵ Shagar, *Shuvi Nafshi: Hesed Oh Herut – Kovetz Prakei Teshuvah* (Hebrew: My Soul Will Return: Freedom or Liberty? Collection of Writings on Repentance), Efrat [Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak] 2000. 15.

¹⁷⁶ Morrow, Levi. "I have Integrated Modern Ideas into Hasidic Trains of Thought": Autobiographical Aspects of Rav Shagar's Introductions." 2014.

¹⁷⁷ Shagar, *Keilum Shvurim* 32.

candle illuminates the dark world. By contrast, the postmodern read empties the language of the text of any predetermined meaning, and because of that is able to create real socialization among the community of interpreters. Shagar writes that Torah becomes an absolute object continually in flux, where its existence “does not rest on the assumption of a foundation that creates meaning for those who seek it, but they are implicitly implied as a later effect of language games which decorate themselves only thanks to claims of meaningful explanations.”¹⁷⁸ Shagar uses postmodern theory to legitimize the understanding of the text as an amalgam of language games, a supersynthetic conversation comprised of different genres, not just abstract concepts.¹⁷⁹

The very structure of the Talmud lends support to Shagar’s postmodern approach to the study of Torah. Shagar notes that the Talmud is akin to Wittgenstein’s metaphor of language as an ancient city: it possesses multiple layers that evolve over the course of several generations and contains a variety voices that do not lend themselves to a cohesive, totalizing position.¹⁸⁰ While the modernist idealism of the Brisker method attempts to distill a grand narrative of knowledge out of the multivocality of the text, Shagar relies on postmodernism to elevate the recognition of the Talmud as drawing on claims from many different worlds to advance its claims.¹⁸¹ He poignantly comments that “the Talmud responds well to the postmodern concept of *bricolage*, the same puzzle that its parts ride up on one another and do not create a coherent and organized picture.”¹⁸² If one refrains from looking at it with a Brisker lens, the Talmud powerfully represents the postmodern notion of the multiple genres and language games that comprise any given text.

¹⁷⁸ *ibid* 34.

¹⁷⁹ *ibid* 43.

¹⁸⁰ *ibid*.

¹⁸¹ Shagar, *Betorato Yehgeh*, 191. Translation mine.

¹⁸² *ibid* 192. Translation mine.

Having explored in the previous chapters of this essay several examples of Shagar's *bricolage* as it applies to topics outside of explicit Talmud study, it is clear that Shagar's approach to the study of the Talmud writ large is the basis for his overall philosophical style in his *Lamdanut*. The *bricolage* that he commends the Talmud for exhibiting, and his exhortation to appreciate the multiplicity of voices that populate the text, serves as a model for his own unique methodology as he confronts the challenge of devising spiritually relevant content for the Religious-Zionist community. It is thus that Shagar is empowered to bring in Lacan to bear on questions of faith, or to put R' Nachman and Derrida in conversation with one another, for this strategic move echoes the combinations of genres and dialogues across generations that the Talmud itself displays. He reaches outside the internal language of the traditional Jewish sources, while remaining firmly anchored in them, creating a kaleidoscopic array of ideas that reflects the myriad intellectual pillars of the Religious-Zionist community. Through this act of translation, deploying sources that play a role in communal discourse and carry personal influence as well, Shagar thus demonstrates how to generate Torah study that has existential significance for a particular time and place, which he deems constitutive of authentic revelation.

Nevertheless, the question of the inherent legitimacy and replicability of Shagar's model lingers. Dr. Tamar Ross of Bar-Ilan University, who herself has written extensively on postmodern theology, delineates the necessary conditions of further engagement with postmodernism following Shagar's example:

Postmodern language theory can redeem modern Orthodoxy from its counter-productive attachment to naive objectivism.... Initial recognition of this promise has been articulated by the late Rabbi Shagar, an unconventional Religious-Zionist Rosh Yeshiva in Israel ... But (as Shagar would have been the first to admit), if this unexpected expression of enchantment with postmodernism is to fulfill its promise, it must also be fortified by the discipline of

immersion in the rich legacy of tradition and the rigorous cultural-linguistic construct that it provides for formulating our religious belief.¹⁸³

Ross's comment speaks to the necessary limits of Shagarian methodology, which, from the earlier description, seems to lend itself to infinite play, a lifetime of interpretive language games available to anyone looking to sanction their engagement with extra-Talmudic spiritual exploration. Underneath this comment, however, is the drawing of a boundary around who is empowered to engage in this type of play. Ross is open to the ability of external points of view entering into one's religious calculus, yet warns that it must take place in the correct manner, provided one is immersed in the Jewish tradition and its particular linguistic constructs.

Consequently, Shagar's approach to interpretation and revelation utterly transforms the space of the *Beit Midrash*, the study hall. As mentioned above, Shagar understands that this process of *bricolage* may be construed as language game unto itself, made up of all its own rules, thus casting aspersions on the validity of its results due to the malleability and inherent emptiness of Torah.¹⁸⁴ The activity of learning Torah, therefore, demands specific contextual conditions in order to legitimize the interpretive process and its subsequent revelations. The physical space, as well as the social and spiritual motivation, that undergirds this creative exercise is found in the *Beit Midrash*. As Feldmann Kaye writes, "Indeed the *Beit Midrash* is the context in which *Lamdanut* must be situated in order for revelatory qualities to be present. So long as the physical space serves as an 'enclave', *Lamdanut* can take on an ontological dimension, the hermeneutics of which has much in common with versions of continental

¹⁸³ Tamar Ross, "Religious Belief in a Postmodern age," in *Tamar Ross: Constructing Faith*. (Ed:Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes. Brill, 2016. 184.

¹⁸⁴ Shagar, *Betorato Yehegeh*, 188. "It is possible to 'dress up' Lamdanut in postmodern garb... It is possible to present Lamdanut as a language game, made up of all its own rules."

postmodernism, not least that of Derrida.”¹⁸⁵ She invokes a comparison between the *Beit Midrash* for Shagar and Derrida’s hospitality, where both create the possibility of openness, expectation, and receipt of a gift -- the gift of revelation.¹⁸⁶ Therefore, the sheer act of entering the *Beit Midrash*, thereby leaving the modernist environment and entering into a space of sanctioned *bricolage*, is that which qualifies the endeavor from the outset. The community, represented in the public space of the *Beit Midrash*, is the true incubator of textual and experiential interpretation, a key element of Shagar’s hermeneutical approach.¹⁸⁷

Yet the established “community” of the *Beit Midrash* serves as the upper limit of authorization for this radical hermeneutical approach. By drawing the boundaries of his methodology around the walls of the *Beit Midrash*, Shagar asserts the only people who can pursue it fully are those who are similarly anchored by Jewish law and in a traditionally-defined community of scholars -- more often than not, a set that only includes Orthodox men with rabbinic ordination. In doing so, he effectively claims the capacity for new excavations of the Torah for his own Religious-Zionist community, in an uncomfortable ethnocentric move, and limits the impact of his own teachings to his specific community. Shagar’s Torah may have become the truth for his male adolescent Religious-Zionist students, but it may not hold water for those outside of that society, both the Hareidi communities to the right and the secular or progressive communities on the left, or even for the adults or women that constitute the larger Religious-Zionist demographic. For all the work Shagar has done to revolutionize the *Beit Midrash* for his yeshiva students, his approach is limited to those who walk within its walls, its greatest advantage the mark of its finitude.

¹⁸⁵ Feldmann Kaye, “Provisional Jewish Theology,” 144.

¹⁸⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *ibid* 169.

This altered model of a *Beit Midrash* and its accompanying critique has been compounded in recent years as Shagar's stylistic innovations have reached an English-speaking audience with the translation of many of his essays on postmodernism into the anthology *Faith Shattered and Restored* (2017). Orthodoxy, a modern movement predicated on the synthesis between tradition and modernity (*Torah U'Madda*), is in need of a reinvigorated engagement with the elements of the latter. As Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz articulates, Modern Orthodox leadership has "frozen its conception of religiously permissible *Madda* at that with which the Rav [Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik] engaged at the University of Berlin in the 1920s (or, perhaps, with that with which Rav Aharon Lichtenstein engaged at the Harvard of the 1950s)."¹⁸⁸ With his hermeneutical creativity, Shagar gives permission to reopen the conversation around what is allowed into the *Beit Midrash*, and what type of *Madda* may be a source of spiritual inspiration. Brill writes, somewhat hyperbolically, of the changes to the Talmud curriculum in American day schools if Shagar's methodology were to be fully embraced: "If one applied his ideas to a United States day school, then one would change one's school to go headlong into Hasidut, Agadah, Kafka, yoga, and Franz Rosenzweig for a month instead of Talmud and halakhah.... Then, after that month, return to Talmud but bring questions of 21st [sic] century meaning and values to the Talmud study."¹⁸⁹ In this way, Shagarian *Lamdanut* predicts the same change to American *batei midrash* that has been initiated in the Israeli ones under his own supervision, centered around bringing the pursuit of personal meaning to the study of traditional Jewish texts.

¹⁸⁸ Rivka Press Schwartz, "What Are We So Afraid Of?: The Challenge of Torah U'Madda For Our Time." *Tacit Knowledge*, 5 Jan. 2017.

¹⁸⁹ Alan Brill, "Rav Shagar and Secular Studies: On Translation and Living in Multiple Worlds." *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions: Notes on Jewish Theology and Spirituality*. 4 December 2017.

Still, the particularist limitations hold true in America as in Israel. Shagar is explicit that his approach is distinct from Conservative or Reform Judaism; his faith and practice is self-identified as Orthodox,¹⁹⁰ and lambasts progressive movements for venturing outside the “halakhic language game” that constitutes the legal system.¹⁹¹ He even goes so far as to claim that “Non-Orthodox denominations cannot produce Jewish religious leaders, Torah luminaries, who confirm to the definition of Judaism to which my colleagues and I subscribe and in which we believe.”¹⁹² Shagar does not trust those who do not share his commitments to Jewish practice and lifestyle to participate in the creation of new forms of knowledge. As a result, he limits the extension of his *Lamdanut* to Orthodox houses of study, for only they are sufficiently entrenched in the tradition to imbue their radical interpretations with the requisite faith.

This note is not to disparage Shagar’s model entirely; indeed, there is much exploration and engagement still available within this group of leaders, with many positive effects for the members of the community that look to them to produce inspirational material. But this overall delineation is hardly necessary, and in that vein it is important to regard Shagar’s ideological choice of limiting his play to the population and physical space of the *Beit Midrash* as his building in an intellectual safety valve for his hermeneutics, enabling only those who are most steeped within and committed to the tradition and its hallowed spaces to sink their teeth into non-traditional material. In this way it has much in common with a larger pattern present in the history of esotericism, which enables radical creativity in its engagement with text and tradition but only coming from a secluded place with a high barrier of entry (the *Beit Midrash*) and only at

¹⁹⁰ Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 38.

¹⁹¹ *ibid* 55.

¹⁹² *ibid* 56.

the hands of a community of scholars traditionally defined (male Orthodox *yeshiva* students and teachers).

In summation, Shagarian *Lamdanut* combines postmodern deconstructivist techniques of *bricolage* and intertextual translation with the faith-filled hermeneutics of the Kabbalists and the Hasidim. The uniqueness of Shagar's methodology lies in this synchronization of exoteric and esoteric styles of study, constructing an approach to Torah suffused with covenantal intimacy and personal investment, and which is reflective of the multivocality of the Religious-Zionist consciousness.¹⁹³ Just as the Talmud is comprised of many genres and conversations across time and space, the development of a religious ethos in a postmodern era should encompass the same diversity. With his *Lamdanut*, Shagar is the hermeneutical master who deftly weaves them together to create a blueprint for the religious life of his Religious-Zionist constituency, anchored in the physical space of the *Beit Midrash* that serves as the backdrop for his radical creativity. All those wishing to partake in this methodology themselves must first demonstrate their compliance with the standards of the *Beit Midrash* and their familiarity with its hallowed texts; only then may they engage in the *bricolage* that epitomizes Shagarian *Lamdanut*, the conduit of the next iteration of the revelation of the divine Torah.

¹⁹³ Feldmann Kaye suggests that this is a strategy which Shagar may have learned from R' Nachman himself and thus reason for his affinity towards this legendary figure. Feldmann Kaye, "Provisional Jewish Theology," 161.

Conclusion: The Future of Shagar Post-Postmodernism

With his innovative methodology, Shagar has taken his place as the champion of religious Jewish thought in the postmodern era, dedicating numerous volumes of homilies and essays to postmodern readings of Jewish practice and holidays, Biblical and Talmudic verses, and issues of religion and state in the land of Israel. The erudition present in his corpus led his student Julian Sinclair to declare in 2017 that Shagar's writings will continue to be read "long after the historical moment of postmodernism has passed."¹⁹⁴ Sinclair qualifies his comment with an assertion that he is speaking of a distant future, noting that "that moment is still very much with us." Yet according to others, it seems that the moment of postmodernism has indeed passed, supplanted by cultural movements known alternatively as digimodernism, metamodernism, or even post-postmodernism.¹⁹⁵ Shagar's postmodern reconciliations face the same fate that he accords to modernists like Leibowitz or Kook: prescient for their time, but no longer able to motivate and inspire.

The model of Shagarian *Lamdanut*, however, contains an essential mechanism that will enable it to extend beyond the temporal limitations of postmodernism. The operative question for those who enter a Shagarian *Beit Midrash* is not what this set of texts may offer to the postmodern consciousness. Instead, it revolves around the fundamental encounter with the text at the hands of the individual who challenges it to speak to her as a religious person, as a member of a community, as a spiritual seeker.¹⁹⁶ In this way, Shagar opens the door for a successor who may extract the mystical meaning from the post-postmodern moment, infusing the next

¹⁹⁴ Sinclair, Julian. "The Orthodox Rabbi Who Set Out to Turn Postmodernism to Jewish Gain." *Mosaic*, 15 Nov. 2017.

¹⁹⁵ Gibbons, Alison. "Postmodernism Is Dead. What Comes next?." *The TLS*, The Times Literary Supplement, 12 June 2017.

¹⁹⁶ Shagar, *BeTorato Yehgeh*, 201.

generation of theorists with spiritual significance as they are reinterpreted in concert with Talmudic passages or Hasidic sermons. In this way, Shagar's legacy lives on in the unflagging pursuit of meaning, in the insistence that the Torah be as vibrant in every generation as it was in its first.

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