

**URI ZUR**

**THE JEWISH FAITH AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AMONG XXI<sup>ST</sup>  
CENTURY RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS**

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**Abstract:** The Jewish faith and lifestyle requires the individual to address issues that involve many facets of life, including education, religious matters, self scholarship, personal development, and many other issues. The main problem in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that modern Jewish society does not subscribe to a homogenous worldview concerning Judaism. There are several different typical sectors within Jewish society. Haredi (Ultra-orthodox) Jews, secular Jews, Modern Orthodox, and traditional (meaning: less observant). The article does not discuss the two extremes: Haredi Jews and secular Jews. The main concern of this article involves Modern Orthodox and traditional Jews and their personal development within the Jewish faith. In many cases, Modern Orthodox and traditional Jews in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are inclined to increasing strictness and extreme attitudes in all issues related to Judaism, as a result of ignorance and personal lack of development in Jewish religious matters. This stands in complete contrast to the situation in the distant past, i.e., the Mishna and Talmud periods (first to six century AD), when the Jewish establishment encouraged scholarly personal development in all spiritual religious aspects.

**Key words:** Jewish faith, modern orthodox, traditional Jews, Jewish scholars, personal development.

## 1. Introduction

In breaking down the main problem of the scholarly personal development of Modern Orthodox and traditional Jews into more specific issues, it is first necessary to focus on the current absence of individual discretion. In the 21st century, Modern Orthodox and traditional (i.e., less observant) Jews tend to refrain from applying unbiased objective reasoning to issues related to Judaism. They prefer to adopt one specific approach or to adhere to the decisions of a single public figure almost exclusively, with absolute devotion, as if following the maxim “Appoint for thyself a teacher” (Epstein 1935a, 5) or “See [the moon] like this and then sanctify” (Epstein 1938b, 83). However these maxims, originally designed to guide individuals with regard to the determination of halakha (i.e., Jewish law), are not applicable to individual lifestyle choices. Nonetheless, a large number of observant Jews apply them with fervor to their own individual lifestyle choices.

## 2. The problems that arise relating to Jewish scholarly personal development

The current personally undeveloped scholarship of individuals within the Jewish faith should come as no surprise. It is a very convenient attitude because it removes any need for accountability. This approach allows one to rely on a figure of authority who directs the entire course of life of his Modern Orthodox or traditional followers. It thus releases the individual from the risk of an imposing sense of guilt. The problem is that individuals who rely on an authority in this manner also forgo the use of their own individual discretion, which might potentially lead them to different conclusions and an entirely different course of life.

Another problem related to this major issue of the undeveloped scholarly personality of Jewish individuals is that some Modern Orthodox and traditional Jews in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may also suffer from a lack of mastery and understanding of various Jewish source texts, texts that are not necessarily complex. Others, who have an appropriate level of understanding of the sources, prefer not to deviate from the normative Orthodox way of thinking and block their personal scholarly development. In other words, these individuals are not open-minded and are unwilling to consider other views, even if such views are not contrary to Judaism. An example of their inflexibility and undeveloped scholarly personality is their objection to the application of comparative analysis or literary criticism to Jewish source texts. The problem is that their approach leads to intellectual stagnation, has a paralyzing effect on the development and

dynamics of Jewish religious spirituality as well as of their own personal scholarly development, and is inconsistent with circumstances in the present century.

Another problem posed by the undeveloped Jewish scholarly personality emerges when individuals accept interpretations or accounts that originate from the Aggadah literature (third to twelfth century AD) as imperatives, or embrace various customs originating in the Kabbalah (twelfth to thirteenth century AD). Modern Orthodox and traditional Jews typically fail to distinguish between these two fields of Aggadah and Kabbalah—which are not truly binding—and the codex of halakhic law grounded in the Talmud Bavli (third to sixth century AD) or Talmud Yerushalmi (third to fourth century AD), which is truly obligatory after having been perfected over centuries through the interpretive criticism of mishnaic and talmudic scholars.

A related issue concerns the adoption of new customs, or the transformation of customs originating in the numerous sects of the Jewish Diaspora. Modern Orthodox Jewry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not homogeneous and comprises a broad range of sects, each of which maintains customs from more or less recent historical periods. The problem is that some Modern Orthodox and traditional Jews do not recognize the unique significance of the traditions of their own sect. As a result, we see today a cross-sectarian embracing of customs, such as adopting prayers from other sects. In this way, the authentic customs and ancient traditions of each sect are lost and it is doubtful whether they will ever be recovered.

These issues prompt important questions. Jews in the 21<sup>st</sup> century who view this situation of undeveloped Jewish scholarship are justified in asking—What, then, is the Judaism of this century? What patterns of personal Jewish scholarly development should Modern Orthodox Jews follow? Is the problem of scholarly personal development relevant only for Modern Orthodox and traditional Jews? Should the *modus vivendi* of undeveloped scholarship be adopted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by everyone?

### **3. The relationship between the individual personal development of Jewish scholars and modern 21<sup>st</sup> century society**

The relationship between the individual personal development of Jewish scholars and modern 21<sup>st</sup> century society is a complicated and painful issue. Various proposals exist regarding this issue, but here I will discuss several of the more problematic aspects of this relationship, which encompasses many concerns, including whether Jewish scholarly individuals have a unique form of expression in modern 21<sup>st</sup> century society, and if so, what is this form of expression? How should self-developed Jewish scholars conduct themselves in modern society in this century? What type of expression should be given to the positions of self-

developed Jewish scholars on current issues of religious spirituality? What is the attitude of the religious spiritual establishment to non-conforming individual approaches on issues pertaining to the self-development of Jewish religious spiritual scholars?

The general answer to all these questions depends on the maximum potential degree of mutual tolerance between the self-developed Jewish scholars and modern 21<sup>st</sup> century society. In other words, self-developed Jewish scholars can only express themselves in modern society in the current century when upholding a state of mutual tolerance between themselves and modern society. This should also be the attitude of Jewish scholars to modern society: They must conduct themselves within the boundaries of the accepted norms of 21<sup>st</sup> century society, while modern society must allow them a proper and appropriate degree of freedom of action. This approach should also be applied to the worldview and judgments of self-developed Jewish scholars, as well as to current issues of religious spirituality that emerge in various areas. Self-developed observant Jews need unlimited freedom of thought in order to allow them to use their own judgment. According to this approach, the religious spiritual establishment should also exhibit tolerance, openness, and progress by encouraging freedom of thought and by supporting the scholarly personal development of individuals' freedom of thought and ability to use their own judgment to express their opinions and realize their decisions or conclusions in practice, even if the individual's perspective differs from the accepted norm, so long as it is within the extended boundaries defined by Judaism for the scholarly self-development of individuals.

#### **4. Redesigning the identity of self-developed scholarly Jews**

Resolution of the issue concerning self-developed Jewish scholars in 21<sup>st</sup> century modern society is a task relegated to various entities, including the government, society, and culture, but it is also an obligation of these individuals themselves. Jewish scholars must themselves undergo a thorough personal transformation to reshape their identity and ultimately attain the level of self-developed scholarly Jews.

The process might be long and tiring, replete with internal conflicts and crises, but it is expedient and important, because it is the means for removing the various cognitive and practical “obstacles” and “subordinations” in various areas, mainly in issues pertaining to Jewish spirituality which, until the 21<sup>st</sup> century, were frequently dependent on a process of submitting questions to rabbis and receiving their answers.

The new identity of the self-developed scholarly Jew on issues of spiritual Judaism (Meyer 2006, 127-128) should be manifested, first and foremost, in more intense and thorough knowledge of the canonical

sources of the Jewish people. The basic resources include the Bible, the various traditions of oral law in halakha and Aggadah, the Mussar literature, Jewish law, and the traditions of prayer and liturgy (Schweid 2001-2002, 132-133), as well as Jewish traditions that serve as the basis for education in the home.

Knowledge and application of all the above is the basic foundation for reshaping the identity of self-developed Jewish scholars in 21<sup>st</sup> century modern society in order to attain the level of scholarly personal development necessary in current-day modern society (Ben Yosef 2003, 110-113).

Failure to assimilate or to apply this need to reshape the identity of self-developed Jewish scholars according to standards of scholarly personal development is currently perceived in modern Jewish society as a step backwards in a society that is rapidly progressing in a different direction, an indication of immersion in an antiquated past, and an obsolete practice that should be abandoned entirely.

## **5. The sources of the new identity of self-developed Jewish scholars**

As early as the Middle Ages, Jewish philosophers expressed clear opinions concerning “thinking individuals,” or in modern terms, “the thinking observant individual,” as an essential factor illustrating the self-developing Jewish scholar. For example, in his volume *Sefer torat hovot ha-levavot*, R. Bahye ben R. Yosef ibn Paquda (Spain, 1050-1120) likens those individuals who do not think independently or form their own opinions but are rather dependent on the instructions of superior authorities, to blind men led by seeing men. He describes people who believe in the singularity of God based merely on tradition without having arrived at such a conclusion on the basis of their own reasoning and understanding as: „A group of blind men who each place their hand on the shoulder of the companion in front of them... until reaching the healthy leader... if he ignores them and does not warn them... an obstacle will hinder them all and they will lose their way, and may fall into a pit" (Ibn Paquda 1973, 49).

He continues to ask, “Must we investigate the singularity in an academic manner or not?” (Ibn Paquda 1973, 50) His response is the foundation for the religious spiritual dimension of the new identity of self-developed Jewish scholars, the “thinking” dimension of that identity, whose fields of reasoning and research might also encompass religious spirituality and theological matters, such as the singularity of God.

He continues: “Whoever is able to investigate this issue [the uniqueness of the divine] and everything else similar to it, through intellectual consideration... he is obligated to investigate it to the extent of his attainment and power of understanding... and anyone who does not

investigate these issues and their truth, is penalized for acting faithlessly towards his Creator” (Ibn Paquda 1973, 50).

From all this, the basis for the new identity of the self-developed Jewish scholar can be clearly deduced. Any person endowed with mental capacities, with the ability of objective discernment, understanding, intellectual curiosity, and mental faculty, is obliged to apply these to all the subjects of this contemplation. This is the obligatory aspect of the “thinking” component within the new identity of the self-developed scholar. Exploration of all things religious and spiritual, and even of God's existence and qualities, is an affirmation of the religious spiritual component of this self-developed scholarly identity. In other words, the fundamental essence of the new self-developed Jewish scholar was formulated as early as the Middle Ages, albeit using different words.

The source and authority of this self-developed scholar as an objective intellectual obligation stems from the same source, that is, God, who granted the individual his mental faculties. Otherwise, for what purpose was his intelligence granted him? If God did not wish for humans to think or make use of their mental faculties, he would have limited them from the onset, from creation, just as He did not want humans to live forever and therefore limited their lifespan and decreed death for human beings at the end of their days (Gen. 3: 19).

In light of all the aforesaid, those who do not utilize their abilities and faculties granted them by God but instead rely upon the opinions of others to do their thinking for them, without bothering to learn and think for themselves in order to form or express their own opinions, are likened to a blind man, and a blind man is comparable to a dead man (Epstein 1936b, 206).

Jewish philosopher R. Yosef Albo (Spain, 1380-1444) wrote similarly in his book *Sefer ha-‘iqarim*, as follows: “And I was obligated to write all this as I saw that there were frivolous people... lacking knowledge or understanding. From this derives the permission for every wise person to inquire into the principles of religion and elucidate the verses in a manner that concurs with the truth according to his opinion. And even though he does believe in some of the statements set down by early Masters—principles such as the coming of the messiah, renewal of the world, and so forth, which are not fundamentals... he is not to be considered, Heaven forbid, as denying the Torah or its fundamentals” (Albo 1951, 53).

The basis for the new identify of the self-developed Jewish scholar can also be deduced from Albo's statements. He “permits” any “wise person” (that is to say, man's “thinking” aspect) “to inquire into the principles of the religion” in all religious spiritual matters as research objectives or researchable subjects. This is the scholarly personal development aspect of the new Jewish scholar, which is permitted to investigate all aspects of the faith.

That is to say, if a person “thinks” that a certain “religious spiritual topic” (e.g., the coming of the messiah, which is the example Albo uses) is not one of the principles of the faith (in contrast to the opinion of Maimonides, who believes that it is one of the Thirteen Principles of the Faith) (Ben Maimon 1963, 248) he is not to be considered an apostate.

In light of all the above, from this one can also deduce the basis for perceiving the new identity of the self-developed Jewish scholar.

## **6. Examples of the self-developed Jewish scholarly way of thinking on spiritual religious issues**

In principle, any subject on which the Torah has not forbidden reflection is permitted for thinking and meditating, even if such contemplation entails evil thoughts. We learn this from the Torah's words, “You shall not hate your brother in your heart” (Lev. 19: 17). The Torah forbids one to silently hate his brethren, that is to say, to think evil thoughts about one's neighbor. From this we conclude that thinking evil thoughts is not a transgression of the Law and is certainly not subject to punishment, so long as the Torah does not forbid it (nonetheless, evil thoughts indicate that such a person should be more virtuous and study the ethical literature to correct his ways).

Beit Hillel (the house of Hillel) also thought so, as evident in their difference of opinion with Beit Shammai (the house of Shammai) concerning the biblical verse, “to see whether he has put his hand to his neighbor's goods. For every word of trespass” (Ex. 22: 7-8). Beit Shammai explains: “This is to intimate liability for [expressed] intention as for actual deed.” Beit Hillel explains: “He is not responsible unless he actually misappropriates it” (Epstein 1936a, 213). Their disagreement concerns the boundaries of topics for contemplation. According to Beit Shammai, an evil thought is just like an evil act and it is forbidden. According to Beit Hillel, an evil thought is not an evil act until a person actually performs some action.

The following discussion between the sages of the tannaitic period, found in the Talmud Bavli concerning the drafting of the final eight verses of the Torah (Deut. 34: 5-12), relates to this issue of defining the limits of absolute freedom regarding topics of contemplation. “The Master has said: Joshua wrote the book which bears his name and the last eight verses of the Pentateuch. This statement is in agreement with the authority who says that eight verses in the Torah were written by Joshua, as it has been taught: [It is written], *So Moses the servant of the Lord died there* (Deut. 34: 5). Now is it possible that Moses being dead could have written the words, ‘Moses died there’? The truth is, however, that up to this point Moses wrote, from this point Joshua wrote. This is the opinion of R. Judah, or, according to others, of R. Nehemiah. Said R. Simeon to him: Can [we

imagine the] scroll of the Law being short of one word, and is it not written, *Take this book of the Law?* (Deut. 31: 26) No; what we must say is that up to this point the Holy One, blessed be He, dictated and Moses repeated and wrote, and from this point God dictated and Moses wrote with tears” (Epstein 1935b, 72).

The disagreement between R. Judah and R. Simeon illustrates the point to which one can stretch the limits of contemplation on religious matters. According to R. Judah, there are almost no limits. R. Judah entirely rules out the possibility that the final eight verses were written by Moses, based on the following rationale: How can one explain the fact that he wrote that he died if he had already died?! Since that is impossible, R. Judah concludes that Moses did not write the final eight verses of the Torah but rather it was Joshua who completed the Torah's final eight verses describing the death of Moses. At this point of the talmudic debate it does not record that anyone from among the sages vehemently protested R. Judah's statement. None of the sages admonished R. Judah for being a denier of the Torah; there were no provocations, sanctions, or violence of any kind. On the contrary, the discussion represents a legitimate difference of opinion between these sages, with each one holding a different opinion concerning the final eight verses of the Torah.

Indeed, further along in the discussion, an opinion opposing R. Judah's opinion is presented. According to R. Simeon his opponent, the entire Torah, coming from God, was written by Moses, including the final eight verses. He is unwilling to accept the fact that the entire Torah was not written by Moses as conveyed by God. On the other hand, he overcomes the impossible facts by developing his own description of the process: in this way he distinguishes between Moses' state when writing the Torah (“Moses repeated and wrote”) and his state when he is requested by the Holy One Blessed be He to write about his own death (“Moses wrote with tears”).

This tolerance for differences of opinions between the sages, based on scholarly self-development, without admonishing R. Judah for his unique opinion that so significantly differs from conventional thinking on such a sensitive spiritual topic as Moses' writing of the Torah dictated to him by God, symbolizes the extent of the permitted limits of thought on any religious spiritual subject, which existed as early as the tannaitic period.

Another example of stretching the limits of contemplation, linked to the text of the Torah and encompassing scholarly personal development, can be found in the Talmud Bavli where it states: “One taught: There was an assiduous student at Jamnia [Or Jabneh] who by a hundred and fifty reasons proved that a [dead] creeping thing was clean” (Slotki 1938a, 85).

The sages were puzzled: “It is puzzling, what was the sharp mindedness it took to render the reptile pure when the Torah has already rendered impure” (Bar Shmuel 1961, 26). That is to say, what was the



sharp mindedness, i.e., what was the wisdom, in striving to render a reptile pure using 150 excuses when the Torah (*force majeure*) had already explicitly stated that the reptile was impure? Is it possible that a senior disciple disputed the Torah and none of Yavne's sages even bothered to put him in his place?

This passage may be viewed as further evidence from tannaitic times of the limits of contemplation facilitated by scholarly personal development, which included even subjects that openly appear in the Torah that were ostensibly clear and should not have incited any differences of opinion. Yet it is possible to stretch the limits of such contemplation even if it is unconventional, such as the opinions of the above “assiduous learner.”

However, one must note that in later times, for example in Maimonides' time (12th century AD), the spiritual topics facilitated by scholarly personal development that were permitted to the contemplative individual were already limited, at least with regard to religious spiritual subjects, due to the concern of people's limited capabilities. And so Maimonides determines: “Any thought that causes a person to uproot any one of the principles of the Torah, we are warned not to raise, and not to cogitate upon it, or follow the dictates of our hearts, because people's minds are limited, and not all minds can perfectly encompass the truth, and thus enters into apostasy” (Ben Maimon 1957, 130-131).

Maimonides presents examples of prohibited Jewish scholarly thought, including thoughts about the Creator's unity (“perhaps he is or perhaps he is not”), prophecy (“perhaps it is true or perhaps it is not”), and the Torah (“perhaps it is from Heaven or perhaps it is not”). However, as stated before others, including R. Albo in *Sefer ha-’iqarim*, did not accept Maimonides' opinion on this point of blocking the scholarly way of thought facilitating personal development.

## **7. Illegitimate decisions of the scholarly self-developed individual**

Within the decision-making system of the self-developed Jewish scholar, it is not legitimate to oppose the commandments of the written or oral Torah or the rulings of previous sages. This is an accepted principle and so there is no reason to expand on this topic. However, there are other issues in which the self-developed scholar may reach illegitimate decisions, for instance decisions on all universal issues. Ethics, for example. The universal, elementary field of ethics is a natural imperative and one that is accepted by the majority of intelligent people everywhere and in all times (Shafran 1969, 215). Any decision by the self-developed scholar that goes against universal ethics would be an illegitimate one. The same holds for universal justice, virtuous behavior, and so forth. It

should be emphasized that all these tenets preceded the Torah, which underscores their universality as well their mandatory nature. Universal ethics and universal justice are known in Judaism by the well-known phrase, “the Seven Noahide Laws,” (Epstein 1938c, 381-382) and these predate the Torah. That good manners predate the Torah is concluded in the Mishna: “Where there is no good breeding there is no Torah,” (Epstein 1935a, 40) which means that good manners existed before the Torah, even in the lengthy period of the twenty-six generations before the Torah was given to Israel (Mirkin 1961, 92).

Other issues are mandated by common sense. For example, if one borrows money or an object from a friend, he or she is obliged to return it. There are other topics that naturally obligate the individual, such as honoring one's father and mother. This duty would exist even if it was not a biblical commandment. A person naturally respects his parents. This is also true of other topics linked to mercy or compassion that a person performs naturally: even animals act in this manner, such as animal mothers who have compassion for their offspring. Therefore, any decision contrary to such principles would be considered illegitimate.

## **8. The essence of the argument underlying the identity of the self-developed Jewish scholar**

Everybody is required to study the Torah as part of fulfilling Jewish religious spirituality, since this was an instruction given to Joshua, Moses' successor: “This Book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth; but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success” (Jos. 1: 8).

The object of studying the Torah is for learning's sake, as a commandment that must be observed and fulfilled, as stated in the verse. Once a scholar studies extensively and advances in his studies, he or she then “shall have good success,” or literally, become wise and a self-developed scholarly individual. They can then attain a higher level of skills in instructing and teaching others as part of their scholarly personal development. And, naturally, they will be able to reach decisions on various spiritual religious matters by themselves and for themselves.

Here is a simple example: A rabbi (who is a developed scholar) can decide on religious spiritual matters independently. He is not required to go to another rabbi to consult with him on the topic of his deliberations, although he may certainly do so if he wishes. His individual capacity to reach decisions on a specific topic stems from his extensive store of knowledge and his scholarly personal development. Therefore, we can conclude that this also applies to self-developed scholars who are intellectuals, study extensively, and are knowledgeable on spiritual

religious and Judaic matters. Similar to the rabbi they, too, can make decisions due their scholarly personal development. They are likewise not obliged to consult with a rabbi if they do not feel a need to do so because they are personally developed scholars.

This is a basic insight that Ezra the Scribe developed as early as the mid-fifth century BC, when he came to the Land of Israel from Babylon and saw that the local Israelites were negligent in their observation of the commandments (Neh. 1: 7; Ez. 9: 2-3), i.e., they failed to observe the commandments relating to Temple service (Ez. 4: 24) after the exile of “the carpenters and metal workers” (2 Kings 24: 14).

Ezra the Scribe hastened to rectify these digressions by transferring the authority to teach from the pedigreed theocratic elite (the priests) and the seers (the prophets), who had the authority to demand obedience, to the knowledgeable people (the wise men) who studied and knew the Torah. And so it is written: “...and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Torah... So they read in the book in the Torah of God clearly, and gave the interpretation, so that they understood the reading” (Neh. 8: 7-8). The Levites who know the Torah are those who read and teach the Torah, based on their knowledge of the Torah and their ability to interpret and explain it to the people in an intelligent manner so that the people can understand the words of the Torah.

Although Ezra learned from his rabbis, he was an autodidact, a self-taught scholar. And so it is written about him: “For Ezra had set his heart to study the Torah of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel his statutes and judgments” (Ez. 7: 10).

Credentials or qualifications are insufficient because learning and knowledge are what confers upon a person the title of a learned sage. This was the case until the last student of Hillel the Elder: Beginning from Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai (Epstein 1938d, 284), all the renowned sages were called by their first names, such as Simeon the Righteous (Epstein 1935a, 2), Shemaiah and Abtalion (Epstein 1935a, 7), without noting any rabbinical title whatsoever (“Rabbi is greater than Rav, Rabban is greater than Rabbi, and his name alone is greater than Rabban”) (Halevi 1970, 9).

At some stage it was even determined that a sage has precedence over a prophet. This is based upon the verse “that we may gain a heart of wisdom” [lit., a prophet is one who has a heart of wisdom] (Ps. 90: 12), which implies that knowledge gained through learning and study is more important than prophecy. In practice, since Ezra there have been no prophets, and the period of the sages, based on the importance of study and personal development that confers knowledge, began and has lasted until our own era, the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This was also what the sages determined: “Study is greater, for it leads to action” (Epstein 1936a, 202). If somebody learns something he will probably put it into practice, and thereby gain not only study and personal development but benefit from the action as well. A person who merely performs the act, does not profit

from the study of the matter and it does not contribute to his personal development.

All the aforesaid constitutes the foundation of the self-developed Jewish scholar's identity that should materialize in the current century. With this higher level of the self-developed scholar, comes the obligation to utilize his abilities by inquiring into all religious spiritual matters, even those concerning the divine, as determined by R. Albo in *Sefer ha-'iqarim*, mentioned above.

## **9. Additional examples of the practical method implemented by the self-developed Jewish scholar**

From the Talmud Bavli we can also infer a practical technique for the self-developed Jewish scholar that applies to the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well. One of the accepted conventions of the Talmud's rules is that no sage from the amoraic period (third to sixth century AD) should contest sages from the previous tannaitic period (prior to the third century). If such a situation nonetheless arises, the amoraic sage is permitted to disagree only if he presents support for his opinion by referring to earlier sources or earlier sages from the tannaitic period who appear to agree with his opinion. Such a situation is described in the Talmud Bavli as "*tanna'ei hie*" (Sirilyo 1972, 147) or "*tania ke-vateih de-ploni*" (Sirilyo 1972, 145). Borrowing from the field of logic, such circumstances are known as *argumentum ad verecundiam* or, in Hebrew (literally), "hanging on to tall trees."

An analogy to this situation in the 21st century is manifested in the self-developed scholar's conduct, which is also based on an appeal to authority. One option is to pose a "question" to a rabbi, which is the easiest method, absolving one from learning the material or taking responsibility for his personal decisions, and has the effect of blocking his personal development. The second option is preferable, since it obliges one to thoroughly study the subject and assume personal responsibility for its implications and for one's own personal development. That is to say, in order to address any problem, one needs to be a self-taught personally developed scholar and to thoroughly study the material pertaining to the topic, found in all the relevant and reliable sources, which will ultimately expand the learner's knowledge base and extend his Jewish scholarship. In this manner, the inquisitive intellectual can independently make an appropriate decision on the topic of interest and on matters of religious spirituality, without needing or relying on the decisions of others, and can assume responsibility for the consequences of his decision. From his perspective, these reliable sources constitute an "authority."

Another practical example of scholarly personal development concerns topical questions on religious spirituality that emerge in a

certain location, such as the construction of a synagogue in the heart of a residential neighborhood. In order to resolve the problem in this specific case, two different and opposing points of view were presented. The first relies on “putting a question to the rabbi,” who determined that one cannot object to the construction of a synagogue in the heart of a residential neighborhood. The second position, representing the approach of the self-developed scholar, concludes, after having studied and examined the subject and the sources, that the community should be compelled to accept the construction of a synagogue only if no other synagogue exists there (Ben Maimon 1958, 96-97). The implication is that if other synagogues already exist in the area then a [another] synagogue should not be built in the heart of a residential neighborhood.

The practical method utilized by self-developed scholars can also rely upon a logical method or normative supposition, since they too were acceptable among the sages and can be applied in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A logical method that was already used by the sages for decision making was the *a fortiori* rule. One classic example utilized by the sages is based on the story of Hillel and Bnei Beterah. The Bnei Beterah did not know whether bringing the Paschal sacrifice on the Sabbath overrides the Sabbath prohibitions or not. Hillel answered them that the Paschal sacrifice defers the Sabbath, and based his statement on the learning method of analogy (*gezerah shavah*). This method requires knowledge of the theoretical study material—just as Hillel had learned from his teachers who were the supreme authorities in their generation, and application of this logical form of argument is based on *a minori ad majus* reasoning (*kal va-ḥomer*) (Epstein 1938e, 334).

An example of normative suppositions concerning citations of the sages is a statement by R. Joḥanan (third century AD) who said: “If the Torah had not been given we could have learnt modesty from the cat, honesty from the ant, chastity from the dove, and good manners from the cock” (Epstein 1938a, 698).

In light of all of the aforesaid, it is as true in the current century as it was in the past: A person may reach decisions on religious spiritual matters by relying upon the logical method of *a fortiori* reasoning, on the condition that there are no contradicting statements, or decisions may be based on normative assumptions that meet a fixed logical standard and do not contradict statements that were discussed in the past and on which obligatory conclusions were reached. An example that is as relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it was in the past is all religious spiritual matters related to the issue of whether saving lives defers or overrides the Sabbath.

## 10. Conclusions

This article focuses mainly on the Modern Orthodox and traditional sectors, which account for a considerable portion of modern Jewish society. The root of the problem that plagues these sectors is the loss of individual discretion; the absence of learning and the lack of learning ability and scholarly personal development; the failure to assume accountability; and the unwillingness to bear the practical consequences of such accountability. One solution proposed for all these problems is to encourage the public to designate an objective leader who would outline a proper Jewish course of action, thereby resolving or avoiding some of the problems.

A second solution that has consequently emerged is based on the division between rabbinical authorities whose task is to teach Jewish law (halakha), and self-developed scholars who study, are calculated and responsible, and are able to reach decisions independently, even decisions on religious spiritual matters, based on their own knowledge and personal development.

Thus two distinct types of observant people have developed: The first, perhaps similar to the past, appeal to rabbinical authority on all matters, including religious spiritual matters that do not involve halakhic instruction; the second, the studious, rely on reason and are responsible and capable of making their own decisions even on religious matters, in light of their knowledge and personal development. These are those we have termed “self-developed scholarly Jews.” They appeal to rabbinical authority, but only on issues that they initiate and raise which are related to halakhic rulings (Ben Rafael 2009, 430-431).

The first models of this second type have already begun to emerge and they exist in certain places in Jewish 21<sup>st</sup> century modern society. The question is, will this trend continue to develop or not? Will there be sufficient tolerance between the solitary self-developed individuals and the religious spiritual framework within Jewish modern society or will this phenomenon be terminated prematurely? Time will tell, since it will depend on the restructured identity of the self-developed scholar and on the socio-religious framework that such people must confront. The second type of observant individual is not created *ex nihilo*. It is a legitimate concept: The sages have already referred to this type, as have Jewish philosophers in different periods who encouraged the perception of man as “thinking” for himself in the form of personally developing scholars.

It is impossible to prevent differences of opinion and deliberations on this concept, as well as on the topic of whether we should define limits or not, and if we do, what are the limits that should be defined. Still, all this is not new. Differences of opinion on the limits of freedom of thought were common among the sages, as they were among the commentators. Should these opinions also include theological matters pertaining to religious

spirituality or would this constitute evil thoughts or denial of the Torah? There are also related deliberations, such as whether some decisions are illegitimate, and if so, on what issues?

Deliberations should not undermine the essence of the argument that speaks of the need for such a new self-developed scholarly identity in the current century. This argument remains firm and indispensable. From a practical perspective, this concept is already implemented in practice by quite a few observant people in Jewish 21<sup>st</sup> century modern society, who apply scholarly personal development practices to various religious spiritual mat.

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