

Preface

The Sacred Literature of Rabbi Shagar

Like many of my generation who grew up in the Modern Orthodox world of the 1950s and 1960s, I have often needed to work hard to reconcile the conflicts of modernity with Jewish life and to integrate the modernist mindset with some of our difficult-to-reconcile ideologies. This quest led me to the work of many great thinkers: I studied the philosophies of Rabbi Kook while a student in Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav in the early 1970s, and as a layman in my later adult years, I explored the works of the thinkers Emmanuel Levinas and Yehezkel Kaufmann. Yet the psychological and spiritual strains between the modern world and some of the Jewish belief system remained ever-present. The integration of heart and mind, soul and intellect, within the context of our tradition has often escaped me.

As I entered my seventh decade, this search led me to the work of Rabbi Shagar, and his work introduced to me a new language for a new generation. In his philosophy, the strict doctrine of the yeshiva world is challenged; his is a Judaism that focuses not on obedience, but on

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how the text and the law relate to the individual. Using the tools and language of the postmodernist, Rabbi Shagar helps the reader relate to the world around him, engaging the student in a stimulating dialogue that allows for a much richer spiritual experience.

Until now, Rabbi Shagar's works were known mostly within Israel; very few were available in English. So when asked to help subsidize the translation of some of his more approachable works, I immediately agreed. The anglophone world should appreciate this volume; after all, as an audience at once more individualistic and less integrally involved in the nationalist collective than their Israeli brethren, English-speaking Jews should resonate deeply with Rabbi Shagar's sensitivity to the individual's search for an independent approach. Rabbi Shagar's views are in complete opposition to the doctrinaire philosophy force-fed to many within the American yeshiva system: an approach that relies on top-down authority and leaves little room for the exploration of individual spiritual needs. I believe that many readers will be assuaged both psychically and spiritually by the enveloping and open-minded philosophy of Rabbi Shagar.

In a documentary on Rabbi Shagar by Israeli television in 2012, one of his students, Dr. Yitzchak Mandelbaum, a clinical psychologist, astutely summed up his discovery of the teachings of Rabbi Shagar as follows: **"ידעתי שמצאתי את שלא ידעתי שחיפשתי"**, "I knew I had found what I didn't know I had been searching for." And so it has been for many who have incorporated his teachings into their worldview.

Perhaps Rabbi Shagar attained this heightened sensitivity through his own struggles and suffering. His mother went through the Holocaust. From this he learned that the world is often a bad, cold place offering no personal security. While he was serving as a soldier in the Yom Kippur War, his tank took a direct hit in battle with the Syrians; two of his yeshiva buddies were immediately killed, and he was badly burned – an event he hardly ever spoke of, but which raised in him questions of faith. As a student of the works of Rabbi Kook and Rabbi Naḥman of Breslov, he reportedly said Rabbi Kook lacked that gnawing pain of extreme religious doubt. Rabbi Naḥman, on the other hand, was suffused with doubts, helping Rabbi Shagar tackle his own questions.

This sensitivity to the inherent conflicts within modern Judaism endowed Rabbi Shagar with the tools to reach many young students

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seeking intellectual and spiritual renewal. His unique fusion of a fresh and existential reading of classical Jewish texts, contemporary thinkers, the great Jewish and non-Jewish philosophers, and Hasidism addressed the growing sense of alienation within the younger generation of modern religious students, a fact rarely admitted in the yeshiva world.

The Jewish religious establishment was allergic to the concept of deconstruction – the postmodernist mode of textual analysis that parses the critical gap between text and meaning. Rabbi Shagar, on the other hand, saw this approach as an opportunity for the student to be released from the shackles of religious cliché, ideology, and convention, and to relate to religion as an ongoing existential dialogue that is more than just an institution of formal laws. Whether addressing the depth of one's relationships, the concept of forgiveness, or romantic love, Rabbi Shagar's writing blends Jewish thought with the works of secular philosophers, encouraging his students to seek a more authentic spiritual truth. As Rabbi Shagar explained, study is not only about what the Talmud says, but about how it speaks to the individual student. Even more stunningly, while always disappointed when a student who did not find his place within this spiritual world left the path of observance, Rabbi Shagar maintained warm relationships with those who questioned and rejected.

For those who chafe against the broad, grand arguments and dogmatism of the prevailing Orthodox doctrine: Take comfort in Rabbi Shagar's postmodernist melding of theories and his new paradigm of learning and understanding our Jewish texts. While Rabbi Shagar's approach encourages religious observance and a vibrant dialogue with tradition, it lacks the dogmatic security of previous generations. My exposure to the works of this great man did not lay to rest the bulk of my ongoing questions. It did, however, provide me with some solace and a modicum of harmony for the mind and soul.

I believe a new Jewish way of living is evolving. Where it will go, nobody knows. But the process is already well underway, and Rabbi Shagar's work provides seedlings for the sprouting of this Jewish way of life.

My generation failed in its mission of synthesis; by demanding a religious certitude based on fixed and rigid systems, we failed to integrate the realities of the modern world with the individual religious and spiritual needs of today's Jews. I hope the teachings of Rabbi Shagar will

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be assimilated into the mindset of the next generation of Jewish leaders, who will utilize these tools – along with the neglected and marginalized philosophies of other great modern Jewish thinkers – to disseminate a Judaism more relevant for the new era.

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