

Havdalah: Does It Separate or Combine? A Memoir and a Legacy

Some three hundred of us crowded into the hall of the stately mansion that American railway magnate Jay Gould had built on his estate on the banks of the River Thames, south of Oxford. Since 1953, it had been home to a Jewish Boarding School called Carmel College. Carmel had been founded in 1948 by my father, Rabbi Dr. Kopul Rosen (1913–1962). Most of its pupils, however, were there less for a religious education than for its secular curriculum, which was based on that of the great English public schools.

It was Saturday late afternoon, as the long dusk of northern climes very slowly turned day into night. Most of the students came from non-observant homes. Many were sent away to school reluctantly. The impositions of a traditional Shabbat were hard to bear without telephones or televisions permitted, without being allowed to write. For most of us it was a hardship.

We had been forced to attend traditional Shabbat services, unfamiliar and unintelligible. We had sat through three festive meals, during which each course was interspersed with singing *z'mirot*. These songs, based in the main on sixteenth-century mystical poems, would have been familiar to those of us brought up in traditional homes. They were designed to be uplifting, joyous, and spiritual. But for most of us they were educational exercises in which we had to sing, under compulsion, verses in a language we did not understand. Rabbi Kopul, our headmaster, would randomly select pupils to sing a verse each, or ask for volunteers. The rest would join in the chorus. Most of us stumbled over our tasks in embarrassed incompetence. School, after all, was school.

The Shabbat meals were in many ways the highlight of the week, at least in culinary terms. Shabbat food was always better. But most of us looked forward to Shabbat only because we were allowed to stay in bed later than normal. Otherwise the day dragged. It was not that we had no latitude, particularly during the long northern Sabbath days of summer. We were privileged to be living on a magnificent country estate. In between services and meals, we could play sports informally on the extensive playing fields or sit in the long grass reading or playing games. We could walk the countryside or lounge under the willow trees on the river banks and watch the boats go up and down. It was all part of our privileged education in two cultures.

Most of us suffered it at the time, the way most kids are unappreciative of the values of discipline and education. But looking back, there was one feature of the Shabbat at our school that most of us remember with affection and inspiration. That was the Havdalah ceremony that brought Shabbat to an end and returned us to our more familiar secular routines.

We would be herded in to the baronial hall that served as our synagogue, resentful of our recreations being interrupted. There, a broad majestic wooden staircase descended against the sandstone wall, past the Mane Katz

painting of Moses in hasidic dress receiving the Torah on Sinai and into the hall where the chairs were laid out facing the portable ark. Friday night services were not too long and singing Lekha Dodi was pleasant enough. But Shabbat morning was long: two services, interspersed with reading the Torah reading and chanting of the haftarah. On Saturday afternoons, we had to go through yet another service, Minḥah (the afternoon service). Students conducted all the services. We would judge them on the expertise or incompetence they displayed while leading the prayers or reading from the Torah. During the services some, mainly the younger, less self-conscious of us, participated enthusiastically in the singing. Others remained silent, some reading more familiar texts or comics they had smuggled in. Most just daydreamed their way through it.

When Minḥah was over, the sun began to set. Kopul presided over all the proceedings. He was a tall, commanding figure. During the week he walked around the campus in a long black academic gown and often wore a mortarboard on his head. On Shabbat and festivals, however, he wore a dark, Saville Row tailored suit. He was magnetic, his smile winsome, his eyes deeply brown and arresting above his imperial beard. In addition to his handsome and strong presence, he had a warm lyrical voice, soft and melodious—and not at all cantorial—that he used to advantage on religious occasions. His voice rang out in his flights of oratory, rising and falling with emphasis, like a song. It was compelling and often overwhelming. But he was also fearsome, sometimes dominating, moody and unpredictable.

Kopul had been born in London, but educated spiritually in Mir in Lithuania. His mentor was Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz (1873–1936), who had been the greatest figure of the Musar movement of his age. Reb Yerucham, as he was known, was himself a very impressive and powerful personality. His emphasis on introspection had come directly from Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810–1883), the founder of the Musar movement. But Reb Yerucham had added a musical, mystical, meditative element to the Musar tradition he had inherited. My father revered him, and it was his style that his pupil brought to the school he founded.

After Minḥah in the early evening, the darkness began to fall outside. The tall, mature trees cast their shadows and out across the fields odd lights began to pierce the dark from the other side of the river. In the hall everyone sat in silence. The tall, imposing figure of my father (whom everyone called Kopul) commanded us to close our eyes and to think about our lives, about the week that had passed, what we had done well and what we had done badly. If the past week had not been what we had hoped for, we were instructed to strive to improve on it in the week ahead. Kopul asked us to evaluate everything about ourselves, what we were happy with and what disappointed us. He gave us little homilies and then encouraged us to meditate, to envision soft velvet, or too look through closed eyes at black and white fire ahead of us. (He had books of Hindu and Buddhist writers on his shelves, in between the talmudic texts). Then, after a few minutes of silence, he would start humming a Musar tune from Mir. It was a slow, reflective, wordless tune. He started very quietly and gradually got louder. Then we, hesitatingly at first, but with increasing strength and feeling,

joined in as the humming, the wordless songs, continued on, a silent meditative break, and then on again. If some of us sniggered at it all to begin with, somehow the spirit caught us up and nearly all of us eventually gave in to the atmosphere and participated.

In between each one of the four regular and familiar melodies, he would talk to us as we were seated silently in the gloom. He would speak quietly but forcefully, his voice rising to a crescendo as he became more animated about some aspect of Jewish life, some idea that would, he hoped, inspire us to appreciate the beauty as well as the functionality of Torah. Sometimes he would talk about keeping Judaism alive within ourselves, and sometimes about our obligations to our home communities. Sometimes he would talk about external challenges. Often he would express his profound commitment to the idea and reality of Israel as the Jewish homeland.

When eventually it became dark outside, one of the pupils would get up to lead the Maariv service. If some took it seriously, most just sat there longing for Shabbat to end so that they could find out the latest football scores (if they hadn't already surreptitiously and illegally done so). And so we came to Havdalah.

Up to the *bimah* Kopul strode, and called out for two boys to join him. One held the candle and the other the spices. A prefect brought the silver cup and wine. Kopul poured the wine, and then lit the large intertwined candle and signalled to a boy to switch the lights off. In the darkness of inside and out, the candle flame sputtered and flickered as its light radiated around the ornate hall with its beamed ceilings, its sandstone walls, its cornices and carved wooden door frames, its leaded windows. It illuminated Kopul's handsome head, his eyes shut in concentration. When he was ready he commanded us to stand and when he was satisfied with the silence he began.

"Hinneih El y'shu·ati evtah v'lo efhad," he sang out: "God is my support; I will trust and not fear." His voice rang around the hall. We were focused on his illuminated face, his eyes closed in concentration. In the dark there was no other sound. Hundreds of boys and young men were standing transfixed, like a silent army of devotees. He went through the rituals: putting down the cup, smelling the spices, looking down at the fingers of his two hands curved in the light of the flame. The moment he sipped from the cup, the lights were switched on. The spell was broken. The undercurrent of talking and shuffling returned and the imaginary walls that had separated holy from profane magically disappeared, in an instant.

It was an experience. But it was also a lesson. One of Kopul's favorite themes was that we usually think of Havdalah, the Hebrew word for "division," just as we generally talk of division in English. There are divisions between social classes, political opinions, league tables in sport. All these divisions divide negatively. One is higher or better than the other. In our Western culture, we like to create divisions. Good fences make good neighbors. We differentiate, and usually the differentiation is competitive. To differ is to divide.

Greek thought posited a divide between the two eternal substances: matter and soul, body and mind. Eternal spirit was obviously superior. If the mind was busy contemplating ultimate truth and the body intervened to demand sleep or food, then obviously the body was to blame for the distraction and halting the pursuit of the most important thing in our universe—hence the idea that platonic love was the highest form of love of which human beings were deemed capable.

In such a world, a line in the Havdalah liturgy that acclaims God as the One “who divides between holy and mundane, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, between the seventh day and the six days of activity” implies both a preference and superiority for one item in each pair over the other. But such superiority only increases divisiveness. Surely the goal, eventually, must be to unite and to combine.

In fact, Havdalah can be understood to imply the truth that differences are actually complementary. Heaven and earth are divided, not to oppose each other but to supplement, to add different areas or zones of activity. Night and day, light and dark, are just different phases of the same continuum. We need them both. Humans cannot manage without them both. Israel and the other nations of the world are interconnected. Religions and cultures interact and yet they are different, each with its own saints and significant people to sustain it. The seventh day is not in opposition to the six days of physical activity; they complement each other. In this way Havdalah is not simply about proclaiming separation, but rather a recognition that differences are important and necessary, and can become greater than the sum of the parts. The human and the Divine are not the same, but they are both necessary components of this world.

And this idea turned into a homily about school that Kopul liked to repeat. We were an international school. Pupils came from all over the Jewish world: from Israel and the Diaspora, from Arab lands and from Christian lands, Ashkenazic and Sephardic, rich and poor. There were even some non-Jewish pupils as well. Some students were very bright intellectually; others struggled. The tendency, Kopul said, would always be for children to be cruel and make fun of differences. But we had to embrace differences. We were living in a society of divisions: different houses, different classes, different age groups. Each individual was living in a specific space and a particular classroom that was appropriate for each pupil to grow and develop. The younger ones lived in more protected houses with more house-mothers and staff, while older pupils were more independent. Some needed remedial help, while others were so advanced they had to be given additional projects and tasks. But if we let those categories and spaces constrict us or limit us, then we would not be able to grow. We had to look beyond the divisions.

Rabbi Kopul was an admirer of Dr. Thomas Arnold of Rugby (1745–1842), who had brought reforms to the English public schools of the nineteenth century and who was very sympathetically depicted in Thomas Hughes’s once-famous 1857 novel, *Tom Brown’s School Days*. In Britain these so-called public schools were, and remain, the elite schools of the country. Their best students would go on to Oxford or Cambridge universities and thence to the top tiers of the British hierarchy. But Rabbi Kopul, for all that he admired the academic,

cultural, and sporting prowess of the public schools, felt that they lacked the warmth and human dimension that his Judaism had to offer. Our school was not to be just an academic institution, in his vision. It had to be a model for life, for Jewish life. From there we were led to think about our roles in the Jewish communities we came from, and to which we would return—and from there on to our position in the Jewish people and society. These were the messages that our mentor hammered home to us: the competing ideals of Athens and Jerusalem.

Later on in life as I pondered issues of Judaism, as a religion, a culture, and a people, I found this idea of *Kopul's* inspirational. So many biblical texts that touched on the idea of division and separation seemed, on the surface, to be restrictive. Separate spaces are mentioned first in creation between firmaments, land and sea. And then in the construction of separate floors and partitions in Noah's ark. The idea of separations on Mount Sinai—with Moses at the top, the priests and elders halfway down the slope, and the people at the bottom—offended my sense of egalitarianism. And the three separate chambers of the Tabernacle—with the High Priest in the Holy of Holies, the other priests in the inner court, and the people in the outer court—paralleled the three division at Sinai. There are periods of separation in biblical law. Husbands and wives have periods of separation. Those who are sick are separated until they are healed or the disease is no longer infectious. And there are priests who may and those who may not eat sacrificial meat. All such separations are linked the words for time such as *eit*, *z'man*, or *mo·eid*. Festivals are called *mo·adim* as well, pointing to the fact that they occupy separate time in the liturgical calendar.

These divisions are not intended to constitute value judgments, just the recognition of separate spaces and appropriate and inappropriate times and activities. Indeed, the idea that everything is different and yet connected is a core theme of Kohelet: "There is a time for everything" (3:1). Whichever word for time is used, it has multiple implications of difference yet completion.

Differentiation between impure and pure (*tamei* and *tahor*) animals, people, and places is symbolic of difference in a creative way: to enhance awareness, to prepare for a higher calling, to link the physical and the spiritual. *Tamei* and *tahor* are often translated as "impure" and "pure," or "unclean" and "clean"—which words do indeed conjure up good and bad, but that is not necessarily what is intended. A more nuanced and sensitive translation of the terms is called for (as Mary Douglas pointed out in *Leviticus as Literature*).¹ Havdalah, in recognizing different times and states, teaches that we can separate for bad, setting apart in a negative way. But we can also separate for good, to achieve something more and better. Instead of cutting off Shabbat and consigning it to the past, Havdalah is an invitation to integrate Shabbat and carry its values on into the week ahead. The *tamei/tahor* distinction is rather meant to highlight the recognition of different states within people and among people, to give them spaces to recover or to grow. In certain times and certain spaces, people or activities might be inappropriate, for reasons of modesty or to carry out specific and

restricted functions. The idea of Havdalah therefore falls into this category—just like the Hebrew root *kof-dalet-shin*, which can generate the word for holy (*kadosh*), but which can also generate entirely profane terms (as in Deuteronomy 23:18).

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¹ Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).