

Gerrymandering Our Boundaries On Communal Responsibility and Cultural Translation

On September 30th, 2024, just a few days before Rosh Hashana, Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz, Abraham Arbesfeld Torah Dean of RIETS, delivered a Sichas Mussar titled “Turning Twitter into *Mishnah Berurah*.” For someone like me—someone far too conversant in the underbelly of social media—his words hit hard. Rabbi Lebowitz explained why he deleted his personal Twitter account (now X), and how he repurposed that time to give a daily *Mishnah Berurah* shiur. “It has been life changing,” he reflected. “Instead of going to sleep with some inane meme or aggravating piece of lashon hara, I go to sleep with a three-point summary of halacha in my mind.”

As someone who has gone to sleep with plenty of memes—many inane, some worse—and more than his fair share of lashon hara scrolling, Rabbi Lebowitz’s words gave me pause. And rightly so. I may be uniquely qualified to speak to the sheer ugliness and addictive waste of time that social media can be.

It’s a sad expertise, but an expertise nonetheless. So I listened to Rabbi Lebowitz’s shiur twice. Not defensively, but openly. And I asked myself: so, nu, why do you still post?

Rabbi Lebowitz’s decision is not only understandable—it is deeply admirable. His choice to trade distraction for devotion is a model that speaks for itself. But I’ve come to believe that there’s more than one way to be responsible. And so, what follows is not a rebuttal or response, but a complementary reflection.

At the heart of the question is this: who do we feel responsible for? Because that’s the real crux of it. I worry that in the Diaspora, we’re gerrymandering the lines of Jewish responsibility. And I mean that quite literally.

Gerrymandering—the deliberate redrawing of political boundaries to favor one group and exclude others—has become an unfortunate metaphor for the way some Jewish communities define “community” itself. We draw lines—ideological,



educational, social—and then quietly label everything outside of them as not our problem. Our school, our shul, our neighborhood, our hashkafah. We don’t say it aloud, but we all know the map.

Especially in the Diaspora, the lines have become increasingly narrow. I used to think the blame for Jewish disaffiliation lay mostly outside our walls—societal trends, secularism, assimilation. But now I think a large share lies within. The most insular corners of observant Judaism often fail to cultivate a vision for all of the Jewish

People. And if not from within the beis midrash, then where?

And so, I've stayed on social media—not in defiance of Rabbi Lebowitz's message, but in deep appreciation of its truth, while recognizing that there may also be another path.

Because for all its toxicity, social media also offers the chance for cultural translation. For reaching past the borders of your own community and transmitting something deeper, something sacred, in a language someone else can understand.

On a recent 18Forty series, we explored “Jewish Outreach”—and we deliberately avoided the term “kiruv.” Why? Because this isn't about outreach as programmatic recruitment. It's about cultural translation. It's about language, resonance, and empathy.

Frieda Vizel, a former Satmar Hasid and brilliant cultural observer, introduced me to this term: cultural translation. It's what she does in her work trying to foster a deeper understanding, appreciation and respect for Hasidic life to broader audiences, and it's what I think Torah itself demands of us. Not merely translating words, but translating experience; expressing the inner world of Jewish values into a register someone

outside your community—or even outside the faith—can feel, if not fully grasp.

Douglas Hofstadter, in his book *Le Ton Beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language*, explores this very idea through the seemingly simple task of translating a single French poem. But the book isn't really about poetry. It's about whether you can capture the essence of an experience in another language, another cultural framework. His answer, in essence, is mystical: the translator must find a way to let the inessential (the words you use) carry the essential (the idea you're transmitting). A kind of alchemy.

And this mystical alchemy is at the heart of the Jewish mission itself. When the Torah (Gen. 12:3) says of Avraham, *venivrechu vecha kol mishpechos ha'adamah*—that all the families of the earth will be blessed through you—it's not about universal conversion. It's about universal resonance. That through our story, others might discover their own. That's cultural translation. That's *arvus*.

On Shavuot night of 1804, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov shared a Torah insight regarding the nature of translation, later published in *Likutey Moharan* #19. Translation, explains Rebbe Nachman, isn't just a communication tool—it's a metaphysical transformation. As my dearest friend and teacher Reb Joey Rosenfeld once wrote, for Rav Nachman, “the light of translation is the possibility of the essence undergoing a process of change so significant that it can now be found in the inessential, yet through some impossible power, it retains its essential nature.”

We need this now more than ever.

ולכך אמרה תורה את כספך לא תתן לו בנשך

אני ה' אלקיכם אשר הוצאתי אתכם מארץ מצרים לתת לכם את ארץ כנען להיות לכם לאלקים, ומה ענין זה לכאן שאמר לתת לכם את ארץ כנען להיות לכם לאלקים. אבל הפי' הנראה כי כאשר נכנסו ישראל לארץ היו ישראל עם אחד לגמרי, וראיה לזה שהרי כל זמן שישראל לא עברו הירדן ולא באו לארץ לא נעשו על הנסתרות עד שעברו ונעשו ערבים זה בעד זה, הרי שלא נעשו ישראל ערבים זה בעד זה, כי נקרא ערב שהוא מעורב עם השני, ולא נעשו ישראל מחוברים להיות עם אחד לגמרי עד שבאו לארץ והיו ביחד בארץ והיה להם מקום אחד הוא ארץ ישראל, וע"י ארץ ישראל הם עם אחד לגמרי, ולכך כתיב ג"כ להיות לכם לאלקים, כי יש להם אל אחד, ולפיכך את כספך לא תתן בנשך ובמרבית לא תתן אכלך.

Therefore, the Torah states: “Your money you shall not give with interest; I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God.” What is the connection between this and the statement “to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God”? The explanation is that when Israel entered the land, they became one unified people. Evidence for this is that before Israel crossed the Jordan River and entered the land, they were not punished for hidden sins, and when they crossed over they became mutually responsible for one another. This shows that Israel did not become mutually responsible (arevim) until they were united as one people. The term “mutual responsibility” (arev) implies being intertwined with one another. Israel did not become fully connected as one unified people until they entered the land, were together in the land, and had one unified place—the Land of Israel. Through the Land of Israel, they became completely one people. Therefore, it is also written “to be your God,” as they have one God. Consequently, “your money you shall not give with interest, and your food you shall not give with usury.”

The Maharal, in the sixth chapter of



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Bashevkin's interview with
Frieda Vizel



Kohanim turn Twitter into *Mishnah Berurah*. Converts know how to translate *Mishnah Berurah* into Twitter.

Netiv Tzedakah, offers a striking insight: the halachic concept of *arvus*—mutual responsibility—only truly came into force when the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel. Exile is an individual story, but Israel is a shared story. Diaspora Jews might pray together, learn together, even hurt together—but only in Israel are we legally, spiritually, and metaphysically one people. In exile, we build communities; in Israel, we build a nation. *Arvus* isn't just a halachic formality—it's a spiritual chemistry that can only be catalyzed by shared soil. Rav Avraham Borenstein of Sochatchov (1838–1910) in his responsa *Avnei Nezer* (O.C. 314) explains that it's only in the Land of Israel that the Jewish people become a singular body. Rav Soloveitchik echoed this in his *Yahrzeit shiurim*: a people, a covenant, a fate—formed not in abstraction, but in the land of Israel.



Scan the QR code above to listen to Rabbi Lebowitz's sicha on Turning Twitter into Mishna Berurah

In the Diaspora, that temptation is much stronger.

And so we return to Torah transmission. Who are our transmitters?

Two demographics sit at the heart of Torah development: Kohanim and converts. Matan Torah is told in the parsha of Yisro—a convert. The definitive translation of the Torah into Aramaic is by Onkelos—a convert. The bedrock of the Oral Torah is Rebbe Akiva—descended from converts.

And yet Torah is also protected by Kohanim—holy, bounded, and insulated. The first name in the chain of mesorah in Pirkei Avos is Shimon HaTzaddik, a Kohen Gadol. In Malachi 2:7 it states, “כִּי שִׁפְתָי כֹהֵן יִשְׁמְרוּ-דָעַת” וְתוֹרָה יִבְקְשׂוּ מִפִּיהוּ—“For the mouth of the Kohen guard knowledge, and people seek Torah from his mouth.” The Kohen, elevated through lineage and ritual purity, embodies the sanctity and stability of Jewish tradition. He is entrusted with preserving the unbroken transmission of the Torah—not by innovation, but by fidelity. Kohanim represent the gravitational pull of Torah inward—toward the holy, the inherited, the insulated.

But preservation is only half the story. Without Kohanim, Torah might lose its purity. Without geirim—converts and cultural translators—it might lose its reach.

Kohanim are guardians. Converts are

translators. Kohanim turn Twitter into *Mishnah Berurah*. Converts know how to translate *Mishnah Berurah* into Twitter.

And we need both. We need those who preserve—and those who expand. Those who sanctify—and those who sweeten.

We often translate *arvus*—*Kol Yisrael areivim zeh bazeh*—as mutual responsibility. But perhaps there's another layer hidden in the word *areiv*. In *Birchas HaTorah*, we pray *v'haarev na*, that Torah should become sweet in our mouths. The same root—עָרַב. What if *arvus* isn't just about responsibility, but about making Torah sweet for one another? To be *areiv* to someone else is not just to answer for them in court, but to make their experience of Judaism more resonant, more palatable, more alive. We are not only accountable for each other—we are flavor-bearers for one another's faith. To be responsible for another Jew is to help them taste the beauty, to carry Torah in a tone they can recognize as their own. We are not merely transmitters of truth—we are translators of sweetness.

That's why I'm still here. That's why I still post. Not to replace the *beis midrash*, God forbid, but to accompany it. To extend its reach. To help build bridges between those inside and those just outside the door.

So maybe, on some days, I'll fall asleep with *Mishnah Berurah* on my mind. And on others, with a meme. But if I'm lucky, one day someone will scroll through a post and see, in those pixels, a window into a world that was once foreign—and now suddenly feels like home.