

Articles of Faith

Traditional Jewish Belief in the Internet Era

RABBI GIL STUDENT



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The Story of Hirhurim – Torah Musings

Hirhurim, what is now called Torah Musings, started in 2004 as a platform for discussion and debate of contemporary Torah and communal subjects. But let's start this story earlier.

1. First Steps Online

I started working at a corporate job in 1995. In those days, the Internet was very young and not widely available to the public. Not only did I not have a personal email address, I did not have a work email address, either. It was only at my second job that I received an email address and went on the World Wide Web for the first time. The company had given Internet access to the computer professionals to test it out. I was going to visit family in Charleston for Yom Tov and one of the computer programmers allowed me to go online on his computer and check the weather forecast. It's funny to think about how impressed everyone was with my printouts of the weather forecast.

My first contribution to online discussion was on January 13, 1997. To an email list hosted by Torah.org, I submitted an analysis of the debate among Rishonim (medieval Torah scholars) about the nature of the prohibition of cannibalism. I used my work email from that second job. Over time, I became involved in Torah discussions on the Avodah email list, run by R. Micha Berger and his Aishdas organization. My involvement grew over the years, as an impressive group of scholars and students – including some prominent rabbis – exchanged emails about every Torah subject under the

sun. There were incredible, high-level exchanges that allowed me to learn from, and with, many impressive people with different backgrounds.

There were other, more technologically advanced, forums for discussion of Judaism online. I was active in both Yahoo and Delphi groups about Judaism, as well as a few others (never AOL). I usually went by the pseudonym Pareto Soup – an actuarial term from the 1990s. These groups enjoyed vibrant debates, but most members had limited Torah knowledge. The discussions were frequently interrupted by Christian missionaries. At the time, I knew Tanach cold and took pleasure in rebutting the missionaries. Only Avodah had serious Torah scholars and advanced discussion of *halachah* and *hashkafah*.

11. Blog Beginnings

Fast forward to 2004. Blogs were fairly new in general, Jewish blogs in particular. A blog is a website with articles (posts) that have a title and content that could include anything the author wishes to write. Posts are date-stamped with the most recent at the top so visitors can easily see what is new. Blogs also allow for readers to leave comments, thereby creating a conversation. Blogs only started becoming a noted phenomenon in 2001. By 2004, there were tools that made it easy for anyone to make a blog. A blogging community grew among those who wrote and read blogs.

In 2004, I saw one blog that engaged in halachic discussion and I read it with great interest, and then great disappointment. The author affiliated with the Conservative movement and offered what I considered incorrect arguments to halachically permit homosexual activity. I left comments to the blog arguing against his points but quickly realized that this left me at a distinct disadvantage. He wrote the primary essay and I was writing in the comments, in smaller letters all the way at the bottom. I decided that the proper way to disagree was to start my own blog and explain the texts and the *halachah* as I understand them. I called the blog Hirhurim, which means musings, to reflect that I was not publishing rabbinic decisions but merely the thoughts of a young student (no pun intended). At the time, I was considering completing a graduate degree in Jewish Studies and seeking a position in academia. Recognizing that writing about homosexuality could damage my career prospects, I wrote under the pseudonym Simcha.

So, on the afternoon of March 15, 2004, I posted a critique of arguments from the Conservative movement about homosexuality. Not long after, I went back to the beginning and posted a statement of purpose:

In the Beginning

Monday, March 15, 2004 1:36 PM

Statement of Purpose

This blog is a forum for my thoughts on Torah and other contemporary issues. I will try to keep the ranting to those subjects and not veer off to random annoyances or silliness. Comments are welcome but will not necessarily be answered because I have no need to always get the last word. I will sometimes simply let readers decide who has the better argument or whether a question is just plain stupid.

Who am I?

I am glad you asked. I am going by the name Simcha here but this identity is pseudonymous and very thinly veiled. There will be many hints on this blog as to my true identity but I ask that it remain unarticulated. If you think you know me, e-mail me.

The initial March 15, 2004, blog post led to a lively discussion with many contributors in the comments. I decided to continue writing on different subjects that interest Torah students. Prof. Marc Shapiro had recently published a controversial book on the thirteen principles of faith. I had written a lengthy critique of the book (included as a chapter in this volume) and posted a brief summary of the main points of my critique. The next subject was an announcement of the publication of a new book by R. Nosson Slifkin (*The Camel, the Hare & the Hyrax*), then a discussion of a proposed eruv in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, then a summary of the critiques and defenses of a visit of cardinals and priests to the YU *beis midrash*. In other words, I leapt straight into controversy.

III. Leaping Into Controversy

The blog became popular, as judged by visits and comments, so I continued blogging on a daily basis. I started writing lengthy discussions of controversial topics. I began a series of analyses of the views of different rabbis about women's prayer groups – where only women attend, lead the prayers, and read the Torah – which had been controversial in the 1980s and 1990s. I sided with the critics and laid out all the arguments in great detail. I wrote about issues like the religious challenges of archeology

and biblical criticism, the increasing *chumros* (stringencies in practice) in Orthodox society, brain death and organ donation, and the challenge of academic Talmud study. These are all subjects that interested me and which I had spent a lot of time researching and thinking about. Apparently, these subjects also interested many other people, who shared their varying perspectives and asked questions in the comments section. I am often told that the comments section was the best part of the blog. Many of the commentators were very knowledgeable and capable of debating at a high level.

To some extent, blogs were a free-for-all platform for discussion and debate. I maintained in the main section what I considered responsible and respectful discussion of issues and sources. Readers then discussed the issues in the comments sections, challenging arguments, offering additional sources and explanations, and going off on a wide variety of tangents. It was never clear exactly where the line lies between acceptable and unacceptable discussion. Obviously, I deleted any profanity or clear nastiness. However, there were many gray areas. I turned to R. Aaron Levine and R. Asher Meir for their generous advice and guidance. Most critics of blogs did not understand what they are and how they function. These rabbis were willing to explore the *metzi'us*, the reality of the phenomenon, and only then offer specific guidance. Still, nothing is perfect. In his halachic guidance, Rabbi Levine assured me that I do not have to live up to the standard of perfection. I have to make it clear how I expect people to behave and enforce it to the best of my ability. The ultimate blame for improper behavior lies with the person who acts improperly. R. Asher Meir, who wrote a column called "The Jewish Ethicist," also kindly answered some of my questions and even wrote an essay in December 2007 about how to run a frum blog.

By December 2004, I had decided months earlier to publish Jewish books rather than continue in academia. Therefore, I revealed my identity and blogged by my real name. (For the record, Gil is a common first name in Israel, where my mother was born, and Student was my family's name in the shtetl in Poland.) At the time, blogs were all the rage. There was constant back-and-forth between blogs, posts arguing with other posts. There was a sense of community.

Blogs were the cutting-edge of communal conversation. All the hock, the talk about what's going on in the community, took place on blogs. With the World Wide Web only about a decade old, this was where all the young, tech-savvy people were shmoozing. Newspapers published

stories about blogs. I became a mini-celebrity just by being my nerdy self. It turns out that I had something to say and people wanted to hear it. The way everything took off surprised me and everyone who knew me. I'm the quiet guy with a *sefer* open. Blogs empowered the little man, the quiet, easily overlooked guy.

In 2005, some books by my friend R. Natan Slifkin were banned by Charedi rabbis in Israel and America (personally, he always went by Natan with family and friends, but his publisher had earlier advised him to use Nosson in his books). I got involved in supporting him and, in particular, blogging about those issues. My concern then, and today, was less about the specific circumstances of his books and more about the issues of *halachah* and *hashkafah*. The ban was an attack on my *rabbe'im* and the *hashkafah* I was taught. I wrote many essays on the subject. There are different segments within Orthodox Judaism with different views on specific issues. As I argue in the chapter on Torah and science in this book, there is a strong stream of Jewish thought that supports R. Slifkin's approach on one specific issue. I believe that is true about most of the issues underlying the ban on his books. The concept of *eilu va-eilu*, these and those are divine words of Torah, applies here. There is room to oppose the ideas in R. Slifkin's books and room to support them. I support them. I later helped him publish new books under the guidance of my *rabbe'im*, with careful review by prominent and capable Torah scholars, and with explicit approval by prominent mainstream rabbis. At the launch event for R. Slifkin's first post-ban book, R. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb of the OU spoke. I have since become close with R. Weinreb and have learned a lot from him personally.

In 2007, Prof. James Kugel, a Torah-observant, yarmulke-wearing Bible professor at Harvard, published a best-selling book arguing for biblical criticism against Orthodox Judaism. The apparent blessing given by an outwardly Orthodox Jew for biblical criticism over traditional Judaism created quite a storm. This generated an ongoing discussion on Hirhurim in 2007 and 2008. Throughout the years, I have argued in favor of traditional beliefs and against biblical criticism. Because this belief continues to seep into the Modern Orthodox community, I have repeatedly argued that it lies outside of the acceptable boundaries of Jewish beliefs. (See the chapter on the subject in this volume.) I have also highlighted alternative understandings of the text that account for the questions of biblical criticism without sacrificing traditional beliefs. I have received very positive feedback from rabbis and educators about these essays.

iv. Mainstream Acceptance

2006 was a big year for Hirhurim and for bloggers. In February 2006, the *Jerusalem Post* released its list of blog awards for the previous year. Hirhurim was voted the #1 Jewish religion blog of 2005. In May 2006, I spoke at the annual convention of the Rabbinical Council of America on the subject of Torah scholarship on the web. At the time, I was not a member of the organization. The invitation to speak was, to me, a recognition that I had some sort of respectability in the world of Torah and an invitation into that community in which many of my friends were rising leaders. Later that year, at its November 2006 convention, Agudath Israel of America held its primetime motza'ei Shabbos (Saturday night) session on blogs. To his enormous credit, R. Dovid Zwiebel reached out to me in advance to discuss the *metzi'us* (facts) of blogs. He struck me then and continues to strike me as, in addition to his many other impressive qualities, an incredible mensch. That motza'ei Shabbos, I drove to Connecticut to attend – for the first and only time – a session at an Agudah convention. While R. Zwiebel characteristically spoke in a measured and careful way about the potential dangers of the Wild West of blogs, in which anyone can find a platform and broadcast his thoughts without any editorial oversight, other speakers used much harsher language against bloggers. I would classify the main type of speech offered as polemic (see further in the introduction), which, given the venue and audience, was probably appropriate.

At that time, the World Wide Web was still new and many had only become aware of it within the past few years. Smartphones and tablets did not yet exist. This was a new phenomenon and it was not yet clear where it would lead. While I was taken aback by the harsh tone of the Agudah convention in general, I understood the circumstances and recognized that they were not talking about me. However, I did feel alienated from the speakers and still, to this day, find it difficult to learn Torah from them – which I recognize as my own deficiency. In general, I sensed a lack of recognition of the nature of the change in conversation that I discuss in the chapter of this book about authority in the Internet era.

Going back to the 2006 RCA convention, it was an important milestone in my own world. I have since joined the organization and am currently serving my third term on its Executive Committee. It became clear to me that communal leaders were reading my blog posts. Over the years, I have repeatedly been surprised by prominent Torah scholars and community leaders who tell me they read my blog. I have even received phone calls

from prominent rabbis asking me to write about specific issues that they feel need to be presented to the public. The great Marvin Schick deserves specific mention for recognizing the power of blogs early and even starting one himself. He was well into his seventies and repeatedly reached out to me to discuss topics about which I wrote, sharing his wise thoughts and his generous encouragement.

While that is personal, the 2006 Agudah convention marked an important milestone in the broader Jewish blogging world. On the one hand, it warned the community about the dangers of blogs. But it also raised the profiles of blogs and generated a certain amount of celebrity around them. Sometimes, denouncing a problem gives it more publicity. From time immemorial, leaders have struggled over the best way to offer guidance without generating more curiosity about the phenomenon which they want to discourage.

Also in 2006, I published my first article in Jewish media. Jason Maoz, at the time the editor of *The Jewish Press*, asked me to contribute to the newspaper. I remember a rebbetzin writing on an email list about her dream of being discovered for her online writing and transitioning to traditional writing. To some degree, I feel like that happened to me from my blog. After my first article in *The Jewish Press*, I slowly began to publish more and more in traditional media. To date, I have published over 25 articles in that newspaper and I write regular weekly, monthly and quarterly columns in different newspapers and magazines.

In 2007, an entrepreneur wanted to create a master website of the most popular Jewish blogs. He offered an opportunity to generate significant revenue through the collective power of popular Jewish writers. As an Orthodox rabbi, I was hesitant to join without an editorial veto, but the entrepreneur and I reached an agreement. With that, I was one of the first bloggers to join Reshimu. Unfortunately, Reshimu collapsed fairly quickly and there were some bad feelings on all sides. Throughout the life of the blog, my attempts to generate some income from the enormous amount of time I invested into the platform never amounted to much. But Hirhurim did open doors for me.

In 2007, Nechama Carmel, the editor of the OU's *Jewish Action* magazine, asked me to do a rush review of the newly published *Machzor Mesoras HaRav*, the Rosh Hashanah *machzor* with commentary from the teachings of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Because of the seasonal nature of the book, the review had to be written quickly, in time for the pre-Rosh Hashanah

issue. Apparently my name was suggested because of my blog. This review began a long association with *Jewish Action* magazine, where I eventually became book editor and joined the editorial board. The planning meetings and further discussions have given me exposure to important communal discussions and decisions. They have helped shape my ideas about leadership. Additionally, I have ghost-written articles for important communal leaders, giving me personal time to discuss their thinking on vital issues of the day.

In 2008, Nefesh B'Nefesh, the organization encouraging and facilitating *aliyah*, decided to host a blogger convention in Jerusalem as a marketing tactic to promote *aliyah*. I was honored to receive an invitation to attend and an opportunity to fly on a chartered *aliyah* flight. I experienced the full Nefesh B'Nefesh flight, which was full of excitement and inspiration. From the gathering at the departure airport throughout the entire flight and arrival in Israel, there was a constant *simcha shel mitzvah*, joy for the precious achievement of moving to the Holy Land. In exchange for the free flight, I wrote blog posts about the experience and a specific family making *aliyah* at the time (R. Shalom Rosner and his family), and spoke at the convention. It was one of the most memorable experiences of my life.

v. Growing the Blog

Posting five times a week, while working a full-time job and raising a family, became too much of a burden. I write exclusively on my phone (or BlackBerry in the early years), which allows me to write on the subway or bus. It also enables me to lie on the couch exhausted and write. I generally only have time to write one draft, often barely awake. Somehow, it comes out coherent. However, this pace was not sustainable. In October 2007, after the Reshimu debacle, I enlisted the help of other people to add new features to the blog while reducing my burden of constantly writing. The idea was to add roundups to Hirhurim. This was an attempt to capture the constantly expanding Jewish Internet.

The first was a Parashah Roundup, compiled by the indefatigable Steve Brizel. Every week, Steve compiled a list of links of recently posted essays on the weekly Torah portion. Steve searched the web for the most insightful *divrei Torah* and presented a helpful summary for readers. I compiled a Jnews Roundup of links to news articles of interest to Orthodox Jews. I was not able to continue this feature on a regular basis until I started the Daily Reyd in 2013. However, it is the element of the website about which

I consistently receive the most positive feedback. In 2008, Joel Rich joined the team to attempt to capture the quickly growing online library of audio lectures. Joel compiles an Audio Roundup of new Torah lectures, with summaries and occasional comments. He has a superhuman ability to listen to and summarize dozens of Torah lectures every week. Due to the popularity of this feature and the high number of people who click through the Audio Roundup links to listen to the lectures, Hirhurim-Torah Musings has consistently been the number one referrer to the yu Torah website. One feature I tried to run was to highlight new periodicals. When a new English-language journal was published, I listed its table of contents with brief descriptions of each article and occasional comments. The task of reading every article in the new journals became too much. I tried skipping some articles but received feedback that authors became insulted. Instead, I discontinued the feature.

In early 2007, R. Ari Enkin began contributing regular *halachah* articles in his own unique style. He published so many articles that he combined them into a multi-volume series of *Dalet Amot* books. With his gift for clarity and brevity, R. Enkin writes a flowing narrative on a wide variety of very practical subjects, with sources in the footnotes. With the October 2007 expansion of Hirhurim, R. Enkin grew in his role at Hirhurim, becoming the blog's general editor and helping manage the quick-paced comments section.

All of these articles and roundups accepted comments. Readers freely added their thoughts to the subject and corrected any perceived mistakes. The level of knowledge among commenters varied widely but some were respected rabbis and professors, others learned laymen, others yeshiva students. The comments section is the key element that made blogs a form of social media. People interacted with each other and with the writers. While there was some editing, based on rabbinic guidance, there was also an assumption that people who commented with something mistaken would be confronted and corrected. I know that I valued corrections but often ended up debating in the comments section the proper way to read a specific passage or commentary. The feedback, usually almost instantaneous, was gratifying but also, to some degree, frustrating. The debate was often exhausting.

In 2008, I organized the first Hirhurim-Torah Musings symposium. I reached out to Orthodox and non-Orthodox rabbis for their thoughts about why people become Orthodox. The results were very interesting. The

essay by the prominent Conservative rabbi David Wolpe was so impressive that *Yated Ne’eman* reprinted it (and named its author). He explains that people choose Orthodoxy because it offers three things: community, the coherence of a fully formed system of thought, and connection with a higher Being.

We held our first and only live event on July 7, 2010, at The Jewish Center in Manhattan. In advance of the event, I solicited articles for a journal on technology, which included authors such as R. Aharon Rakeffet, R.J. David Bleich, R. Jonathan Sacks and R. Shlomo Aviner. People who contributed money to pay for the expenses of the event received copies of the journal. There were also free *Hirhurim* mugs and trinkets for all attendees. R. Kenneth Brander, at the time the head of Yeshiva University’s Center for the Jewish Future, generously came as a guest speaker. At the get-together, I unveiled a new website and name. *Hirhurim* became *Torah Musings*, at least officially. Many people still call it *Hirhurim* today, over a decade after the name change. The new website (TorahMusings.com) gave us more control over the website and more power for features. Tragically, during the conversion we lost the old comments. I still have the files but multiple techies could not recover the old comments.

VI. Moving Away From a Blog

In 2010, a new online trend involved giving words to a website that returned a video of animated bears saying the text you provided. One anonymous blogger created a bear video complaining, in a way that I perceived as mocking, about *divrei Torah* that assume biblical characters observed rabbinic law. In response, I created a similar bear video arguing that this Midrashic approach has a long pedigree that deserves a space on the Jewish bookshelf. This engendered hearty debate in the comments section and in real life. I remember having a lively discussion about this with a Bible professor and a *rosh yeshiva* at a wedding. This bear video became one of the memorable moments of *Hirhurim*-*Torah Musings*. But these moments do not last.

Both Twitter and Facebook were released to the public in 2006. At first, blogging overshadowed these forms of social media to the extent that people initially referred to Twitter and Facebook as “micro-blogging.” But that changed. They slowly gained prominence as the new generation of social media. New technology takes time to get to our community but slowly, important conversations moved from blogs to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. This is part of the normal cycle of technology evolution.

Today's hot technology will become obsolete in a few years. Email lists and chat rooms were still around when blogs were the big thing, but they were a small phenomenon populated by people hesitant to move on to the next big thing. I was predicting it from the beginning but, eventually, the next big thing after blogs – Facebook, Twitter and Instagram – took over and the blogs comment section became a dated relic. At one time, I was a minor celebrity blogger, even the self-proclaimed chief rabbi of the blogosphere. Once blogs became stale, my fifteen minutes of fame ended and I needed to move on. (Facebook and Twitter are no longer the big thing. Instagram is still big but WhatsApp and podcasts have taken over much of the communal conversation, for now.)

By 2013, I knew it was time for a change. Additionally, I received a call from Rav Hershel Schachter with complaints about Hirhurim-Torah Musings from members of his kollel. I am naturally independent-minded and stubborn, but there are a few people who, when they say something, I do it. Rav Schachter is one of those people. Additionally, the complaints he relayed were correct, issues that deep down I knew were a problem but difficult to fix. With all these things combined, I made a big change. I tore up the plan for Hirhurim-Torah Musings and turned the website into an entirely different creature. On August 1, 2013, I posted this to Torah Musings under the title, "The End of the Hirhurim Blog":

After nine and a half years of near-constant maintenance of this blog, I believe Hirhurim has run its course. We have accomplished a lot over this time, including over 5,000 posts and nearly 11 million hits. In my opinion, the ideas and dialogue have gotten stale. Additionally, for a few years already, social media has taken blogs' former place of pride as the stage for cutting-edge communal discussion. It is time to move on to a new mission and format.

Please return to TorahMusings.com on August 18th for its re-launch as something much bigger and better.

When people returned on August 18, they learned that I had converted the Torah Musings blog into the Torah Musings online periodical. I had personally moved to a more editorial capacity in order to bring on more guest writers. Additionally, I created an editorial board to help plan, edit and make decisions. An important platform with a deep communal reach requires a higher level of responsibility than a blog. Here is the official

announcement of August 18, 2013, under the title, “Welcome to the New Torah Musings”:

Welcome to the new Torah Musings, an online periodical of Orthodox Jewish law and thought published every weekday. Torah Musings is a place for the vibrant exchange of ideas, where scholars, rabbis and laypeople engage with Jewish law, thought and texts.

Longtime readers of the Hirhurim-Musings blog may want to know what has changed and why. The key principle is that henceforth Torah Musings is a periodical and not a blog. The differences between a website/periodical and a blog are mainly in emphasis, not necessarily in function. However, taken together, those distinctions create a very different experience.

What To Expect

Overall, the changes are intended to sustain a higher level of conversation, the kind that the blog had at its high points. The key methods for achieving this are adding more excellent writers, maintaining content-specific conversation and ensuring more consistent and responsible decision-making about the website. To be more specific, here are the highlights of what has changed:

Content – Other writers will take a prominent place on the new website. In the past, I was the primary writer and guest writers occasionally joined. Now, other writers – some guests and some with regular columns – will provide the majority of the content.

Dialogue – In the past, the majority of conversation was through comments and only occasionally with an essay written in response. While responses (previously called comments) will still play a role in the new website, they are being deemphasized in favor of full-length essays explaining readers’ views. We want conversation that is thought out, not off the cuff. More on comments below.

Decisions – In the past, I made all the decisions about what to publish and other policy decisions, often based on ad hoc consultation with advisors. The new website has an editorial committee charged with making those decisions. More on that below.

In summary, the focus of the website has moved to the content. Readers are encouraged to participate by responding substantively

and topically or by submitting essays of their own. In that respect, responses (comments) will be heavily moderated – the word “draconian” comes to mind – to ensure that they add to the discussion of the essay and reflect responsible Internet ethics (please see the Response Guidelines, which will be strictly enforced, even regarding news items). Additionally, a Submit Content tab has been included in the top menu to encourage reader participation in the exchange of ideas.

The website now has three sections. Journal contains essays reviewed by the editorial committee. Magazine essays have not been reviewed. As you will see, only I will be adding to the Magazine section. It allows me a greater degree of deadline flexibility. The third section is The Blatt, which will contain enhanced News & Links as well as other miscellaneous commentary. The editorial committee is only directly responsible for the Journal section but will be making policy decisions about the entire website.

Because of its importance, I will list the members of the editorial committee (which is expected to change over time). The inaugural editorial committee consists of: R. Basil Herring, past EVP of the RCA; R. Micha Berger, internet guru; and R. Moshe Schapiro, of the YU library. I thank these three extraordinarily talented individuals for agreeing to take on this formidable task...

Initially, Torah Musings had a lot of energy. It was publishing interesting articles from a variety of mainstream Orthodox writers. We also added a weekly *halachah* column by R. Daniel Mann of Kollel Eretz Hemdah and created a formal relationship with Yeshivat Har Etzion that allowed Torah Musings to republish its content. Significantly, R. Dr. Gidon Rothstein began a weekly column about the medieval masterpiece of Jewish thought, *Derashos Ha-Ran*. He later moved on to other texts and now publishes two weekly columns on Torah Musings. On the launch of the new Torah Musings, I also started what became called the Daily Reyd, which is a roundup of articles that are relevant to Orthodox Jewish leaders. This is so popular that I often hear people praising the Daily Reyd more than the actual Torah content on Torah Musings. One prominent rosh yeshiva has repeatedly told me and others that he obeys his yeshiva’s president’s insistence that he keep up with community news by reading the Daily Reyd.

VII. Ongoing Torah Publication

However, I quickly became frustrated with the Torah Musings periodical. I wanted to write, not edit. Over time, I started writing more and stopped soliciting articles from other people. That allowed me to continue expressing my creative needs.

On three occasions, the Torah Musings periodical conducted formal symposia on specific topics. This involved soliciting scholars, such as historians, philosophers and halachists, to write about specific communal themes, fully edited before publication and then typeset and released as a booklet PDF. In 2015, we published a symposium on Open Orthodoxy, the left-wing phenomenon that steps over the line of Orthodoxy. In 2016, we held a symposium on *Masorah*, the religious traditions that guide us. In 2019, we held our third symposium, on the topic of Jewish ideas. All three were intended to thoughtfully explain the Orthodox opposition to the leftward shift at the fringes of the community. The introduction to this book draws heavily from my introductions to those symposia.

Currently, Torah Musings consists of weekly columns, including R. Rothstein's two columns, R. Mann's column and my own, Joel Rich's audio roundups and the rare guest article. I continue writing about contemporary *halachah* and *hashkafah*, and compiling the popular Daily Reyd. I also regularly publish the articles that I write for Torah Musings in two newspapers and a monthly magazine. While the Internet has great reach across geographies, I receive much more feedback from my newspaper and magazine articles. At least in the Shabbos-observant community, print gets more eyes than the screen. Now I spend less time on the website and more time on other communal projects.

Over the years, I published three books that consist primarily of Hirhurim-Torah Musings articles. *Posts Along the Way* was the first book. I conducted a contest on the blog to choose the best name for the 2009 book. In 2018, I published two volumes of *Search Engine*, one volume on Jewish community and another on Jewish leadership. The current book is different than any of those three earlier books. This book is inspired by the conversations on Torah Musings but delves into them in depth. Torah Musings articles are generally 1,000–2,000 words long with limited footnotes. On occasion, I have expanded the thoughts and discussion from Torah Musings into full articles, some appearing in academic journals or books, others in popular journals or magazines. The thoughts are more fully fleshed out and the sources more clearly documented.

After twenty years of blogging, sending out short-form analyses, this book contains long-form studies on some of the topics that have engaged us so much over the past twenty years.