

From Medical Orthodoxy to Dialogical Practice Applying Theological Models of Creative Engagement to Contemporary Healthcare

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Abstract

This paper explores how strategies developed by Orthodox Jewish thinkers for engaging modernity while maintaining core commitments can transform medical practice from rigid orthodoxy toward more nuanced, dialogical approaches. Drawing on six methodological frameworks—progressive revelation, editorial synthesis, dialectical engagement, critical integration, synthetic methodology, and post-modern exploration—we examine how physicians can maintain medical authority and evidence-based foundations while embracing greater openness to patient perspectives, interdisciplinary collaboration, and evolving knowledge. The study demonstrates that "creative fidelity" in medicine involves neither abandoning clinical expertise nor rigidly adhering to protocols but developing sophisticated approaches that honor both medical science and the complexity of human experience. Through case studies and theoretical analysis, we show how physicians can cultivate "hermeneutical humility"—recognizing that medical truth often emerges from unexpected sources including patient narratives, alternative healing traditions, and interdisciplinary insights. This approach enhances rather than threatens medical effectiveness by creating space for the dynamic tension between clinical knowledge and individual patient needs that characterizes excellent healthcare.

Keywords: medical dialogue, physician-patient communication, evidence-based medicine, clinical decision-making, medical epistemology, healthcare collaboration, patient-centered care, medical authority, clinical wisdom.

Introduction

Contemporary medical practice finds itself caught between competing demands that mirror the tension between tradition and modernity explored by Orthodox Jewish thinkers of the past two centuries. On one side stands the robust foundation of evidence-based medicine, with its emphasis on rigorous research protocols, standardized treatments, and measurable outcomes. On the other side lies the increasingly recognized complexity of individual patient experiences, cultural diversity in health beliefs, and the limitations of applying population-based research to unique clinical situations.

Rather than viewing this tension as a problem to be resolved through either rigid adherence to protocols or abandonment of scientific rigor, this paper proposes a third way: the development of what might be termed "dialogical medical practice." Drawing insights from how Orthodox thinkers like Rabbi Zadok HaKohen, the Netziv, and others maintained unwavering commitment to core principles while engaging creatively with challenges to traditional authority, physicians can develop approaches that strengthen rather than weaken medical effectiveness through openness to dialogue, uncertainty, and multiple sources of insight.

that serve patients more effectively than either approach alone.

This transformation has become increasingly urgent as healthcare faces mounting pressures: patient dissatisfaction with impersonal care, physician burnout from rigid systematization, growing recognition of health disparities that reflect failures to engage diverse patient populations, and emerging evidence about the limitations of one-size-fits-all treatment protocols. The theological models examined here provide tested strategies for navigating such challenges while maintaining rather than abandoning professional excellence.

The concept of "creative fidelity" proves particularly relevant to medical practice. Just as Zadok HaKohen argued that "uncertainty and failure aren't unfortunate accidents in the pursuit of truth—they're necessary prerequisites for genuine understanding," physicians must learn to embrace clinical uncertainty as an opportunity for deeper engagement rather than a failure of knowledge. This requires developing what these religious thinkers called "hermeneutical humility"—the recognition that medical truth can emerge from unexpected sources, including patient narratives, cultural healing traditions, and interdisciplinary perspectives that traditional medical training might overlook.

The six methodological approaches examined—progressive understanding, synthetic integration, dialectical thinking, critical engagement, systematic synthesis, and post-modern exploration—provide concrete frameworks for transforming medical practice. These approaches suggest that excellent medical care emerges not from choosing between scientific rigor and humanistic sensitivity, but from developing sophisticated methods for integrating both within coherent clinical approaches

History

The encounter between traditional Judaism and modern historical consciousness has produced one of the most fascinating intellectual dramas of the past two centuries. Rather than simply retreating into defensive positions or abandoning tradition altogether, Orthodox Jewish thinkers have developed remarkably sophisticated strategies for maintaining religious commitment while engaging seriously with critical scholarship. This exploration examines how six major figures—spanning from 19th-century Lithuania to contemporary America—have navigated this complex terrain, revealing not a single Orthodox response to modernity, but a rich tapestry of creative theological and methodological innovations.

The Revolutionary Vision of Reb Zadok

Consider the audacious claim made by Rabbi Zadok HaKohen of Lublin in his *Tzidkat HaTzadik*: "God created a book, and that is the world, and the commentary is the Torah."¹ This single sentence accomplishes something remarkable—it inverts the entire traditional hierarchy of revelation. Rather

than Torah serving as the primary divine text with nature as its reflection, Reb Zadok positions the natural world itself as God's primary book, with Torah functioning as the interpretive key to understanding this cosmic text.

What makes this move so radical is not merely its novelty, but its implications for how we understand the very nature of divine communication. Reb Zadok's three-book taxonomy—Written Torah (the righteous), Oral Torah (the ambivalent), and the world of thought (the wicked)—suggests that even morally problematic sources participate unconsciously in divine discourse.² This creates theological space for what he calls "hermeneutic humility"—the recognition that divine truth can emerge from the most unlikely sources, including "gentile pedagogical texts and even controversial sources."³

But Reb Zadok's vision extends far beyond this initial theological innovation. His analysis of Jewish intellectual history represents perhaps the most radical reconceptualization of tradition ever proposed by an Orthodox thinker. According to Yaakov Elman's careful analysis, Reb Zadok identified the cessation of prophecy—not the destruction of either Temple—as the Great Divide in Jewish history.⁴ This wasn't merely a change in leadership from prophet to sage, but a fundamental transformation in humanity's access to divine truth.

The implications are staggering. Moses, despite his unparalleled prophetic gifts, possessed Torah knowledge in only potential form. His perception was purely intuitive and prophetic rather than intellectual. When the Talmud records that Moses couldn't understand R. Akiva's lecture, Reb Zadok takes this literally—and sees it as evidence of R. Akiva's superiority rather than his inadequacy.⁵ R.

Akiva accessed divine knowledge in actual, intellectually comprehensible form, making him in some sense greater than Moses himself.

This leads to Reb Zadok's most psychologically sophisticated insight: his principle of "Darkness before Light." Uncertainty and failure aren't unfortunate accidents in the pursuit of truth—they're necessary prerequisites for genuine understanding. "No one has a true understanding of the words of Torah until he 'stumbles' over them first."⁶ The apparent chaos of Talmudic disputation, with its endless arguments and multiple contradictory opinions, represents not degradation from an original perfect revelation but the very mechanism through which divine truth progressively unfolds in history.

The Netziv's Strategic Synthesis

If Reb Zadok represents theological revolution, the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin) represents strategic synthesis. As head of the prestigious Volozhin Yeshiva during the height of the Haskalah challenge, the Netziv faced a different set of pressures than Reb Zadok. He needed to provide his students with tools for engaging modern biblical criticism without abandoning traditional commitments—a delicate balancing act that required considerable intellectual creativity.

The Netziv's approach crystallizes in his shocking commentary on Song of Songs 1:1, which Marc Shapiro describes as "difficult" to explain within traditional Orthodox frameworks.⁷ The Netziv argues that while Solomon composed the Song of Songs under divine inspiration, he wasn't its unique author. Instead, Solomon "collected earlier songs, composed by others under divine influence and used originally in entirely different contexts and wove these together along with his own original

work into a single divinely inspired text."⁸

This editorial model accomplishes something remarkable: it acknowledges the complexity of textual composition that modern scholarship had revealed while maintaining traditional conclusions about divine inspiration and religious authority. Using the analogy of King David's compilation of Psalms, the Netziv demonstrates that "a sacred book can be composed by an author from strands of earlier material and then redacted into a coherent whole" without compromising its religious authority.⁹

Jason Kalman's analysis reveals the broader implications of this approach.¹⁰ The Netziv wasn't simply responding to immediate polemical pressures—though the challenge of Heinrich Graetz's late dating of Song of Songs certainly influenced his thinking.¹¹ Rather, he was developing a comprehensive methodology for appropriating the insights of critical scholarship while maintaining traditional frameworks. His students could acknowledge textual complexity without abandoning belief in divine inspiration; they could engage academic scholarship without sacrificing religious commitment.

But the Netziv's synthesis raises profound questions about the nature of divine authority. If human editorial processes play such central roles in creating authoritative texts, how exactly does divine inspiration operate? The Netziv's answer—that editorial work occurs "under divine influence"—pushes the question back without fully resolving it. This creative ambiguity allows for sophisticated engagement with critical scholarship while maintaining essential traditional commitments.

Soloveitchik's Dialectical Dance

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik approached the tradition-modernity tension from an entirely different angle. Rather than resolving apparent contradictions through historical development (Reb Zadok) or editorial synthesis (the Netziv), Soloveitchik embraced these tensions as constitutive of authentic religious existence. His famous essay "The Lonely Man of Faith" exemplifies this dialectical approach.¹²

Soloveitchik's "majestic man" of Genesis 1, who conquers and transforms nature, coexists dialectically with the "covenantal man" of Genesis 2, who seeks intimate relationship with God. These aren't two different types of people or two historical stages of human development—they're two dimensions of every authentic religious personality that must be held in creative tension rather than resolved into synthetic harmony.

This dialectical framework extends to Soloveitchik's understanding of halakhic methodology. In "Halakhic Man," he argues that the halakhic mind operates through creative tension between ideal halakhic categories and empirical reality.¹³ Unlike Reb Zadok's emphasis on historical development or the Netziv's editorial complexity, Soloveitchik locates the dynamic element of Torah in the ongoing dialectical encounter between eternal halakhic principles and changing historical circumstances.

David Shatz has demonstrated how this approach allows Soloveitchik to engage seriously with modern philosophical developments while maintaining the essential timelessness of halakhic truth.¹⁴ Historical consciousness doesn't threaten religious commitment—it provides the necessary context within which eternal truths engage particular cir-

cumstances. The challenge isn't to resolve the tension between tradition and modernity but to live creatively within it.

Lawrence Kaplan's analysis reveals the sophisticated philosophical foundations of this approach.¹⁵ Soloveitchik's concept of "halakhic man" represents a unique personality type that creates its own approach to history—neither ignoring historical development nor being determined by it, but engaging history through distinctively halakhic categories of analysis. This represents a fundamentally different strategy from either Reb Zadok's progressive revelation or the Netziv's editorial synthesis.

Halivni's Critical Revolution

David Weiss Halivni represents perhaps the most radical Orthodox engagement with critical scholarship while maintaining traditional religious commitment. His identification of the "Stammaitic" period (roughly 450-750 CE) as a revolutionary moment in Talmudic development extends critical methodology directly into the heart of halakhic literature.¹⁶

According to Halivni's analysis, the anonymous Stammaitic editors fundamentally transformed received Amoraic traditions through sophisticated editorial processes that created much of what we recognize as distinctively "Talmudic" argumentation. This theory bears striking similarities to the Netziv's editorial model for Song of Songs but extends it far beyond biblical texts to the very sources of halakhic authority.

What makes Halivni's approach so remarkable is his demonstration that critical methods can serve rather than undermine religious commitment. His concept of "justified emendation" shows how tex-

tual criticism can become a tool of theological investigation rather than merely secular academic technique.¹⁷ By revealing the historical processes through which authoritative texts developed, critical scholarship can actually enhance rather than threaten religious understanding.

Jeffrey Rubenstein's analysis of Halivni's methodology demonstrates both its scholarly rigor and its theological implications.¹⁸ Halivni maintains that the Stammaitic editors were divinely guided in their editorial work, making their creative interventions part of an ongoing revelatory process. This allows him to acknowledge historically conditioned editorial processes while maintaining that they possess genuine religious authority.

But Halivni's approach raises the same fundamental questions about divine authority that we encountered with the Netziv, only in more acute form. If human editorial processes play such central roles in creating authoritative halakhic texts, how does divine authority operate through these processes? Halivni's answer involves a sophisticated understanding of divine providence working through natural historical processes—an approach that builds on Reb Zadok's insights while grounding them in rigorous critical scholarship.

Lichtenstein's Synthetic Integration

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, a student of both Soloveitchik and secular literary criticism, developed what might be termed synthetic integration—an approach that combines Soloveitchik's philosophical sophistication with broader engagement with general culture and critical methodology.¹⁹ Unlike Soloveitchik's dialectical method, which emphasizes tension and contradiction, Lichtenstein seeks synthetic integration of diverse approaches

within a coherent halakhic worldview.

Lichtenstein's analysis of concepts like "עת לעשות" (it is time to act for God; they have violated your Torah) demonstrates how traditional halakhic categories can accommodate historical development and changing circumstances without compromising essential principles.²⁰ This approach builds on both Reb Zadok's validation of historical development and the Netziv's integration of complexity within traditional frameworks.

Moshe Halbertal's analysis of Lichtenstein's methodology demonstrates its sophisticated integration of philosophical, literary, and halakhic analytical methods.²¹ Lichtenstein developed a distinctive Orthodox approach to cultural engagement that maintains religious integrity while enabling serious intellectual encounter with general culture. His extensive engagement with literature and culture represents a more systematic version of approaches pioneered by Reb Zadok and the Netziv.

But Lichtenstein's approach differs from his predecessors in its systematic character. Rather than isolated instances of cultural engagement, Lichtenstein develops comprehensive methodological principles for integrating secular and religious knowledge within a coherent Orthodox worldview. Shalom Carmy's analysis demonstrates how this methodology provides practical resources for Orthodox education that maintains both religious and academic integrity.²²

Magid's Post-Modern Exploration

Contemporary scholar Shaul Magid pushes the boundaries of Orthodox engagement with critical scholarship by employing explicitly post-modern theoretical frameworks in service of traditional

commitment. His approach involves what might be called "deconstructive Orthodoxy"—using post-modern analytical methods to uncover hidden complexities and contradictions within traditional sources that ultimately serve to strengthen rather than undermine religious commitment.²³

Magid's understanding of revelation incorporates insights from post-modern theory about the instability of textual meaning and the role of readers in creating meaning. This leads to an approach that might be termed "post-modern progressive revelation"—the idea that divine revelation continues through the ongoing interpretive encounter between readers and texts across history.²⁴ This extends Reb Zadok's progressive revelation by incorporating contemporary theoretical insights about the nature of textual meaning and interpretive communities.

Perhaps Magid's most significant contribution lies in his demonstration that sophisticated critical analysis can serve rather than undermine Orthodox identity. By showing how post-modern methods can uncover hidden depths of meaning in traditional sources, Magid suggests that critical sophistication enhances rather than threatens religious commitment.²⁵

The Evolving Dance Between Tradition and Innovation

What emerges from this exploration is not a single Orthodox response to modernity but a rich conversation between different methodological approaches, each building on insights from previous thinkers while developing distinctive innovations. The chronological development from Reb Zadok through Magid reveals increasing methodological sophistication, but this development isn't simply linear. Contemporary figures like Halivni and

Magid return to and develop insights originally pioneered by Reb Zadok, suggesting that the earliest Orthodox responses to modernity anticipated themes that become central to later sophisticated developments.

Consider how each figure addresses the fundamental tension between maintaining traditional authority and enabling intellectual innovation. Reb Zadok validates innovation as part of divine revelation itself—uncertainty and development aren't threats to religious truth but necessary components of how divine truth unfolds in history. The Netziv maintains traditional authority structures while creating space for historical complexity through his editorial synthesis model. Soloveitchik locates innovation in the dialectical encounter between eternal principles and changing circumstances. Halivni grounds innovation in divinely guided editorial processes revealed through critical analysis. Lichtenstein develops explicit methodological principles for integrating innovation within traditional frameworks. Magid employs post-modern theory to uncover hidden innovative potentials within traditional sources themselves.

Each approach implies different understandings of what "Orthodox modernity" might mean. Reb Zadok's theological modernity embraces modern historical consciousness within mystical theological frameworks. The Netziv's hermeneutical modernity appropriates modern methods for traditional conclusions. Soloveitchik's philosophical modernity engages modern philosophy while maintaining traditional commitment. Halivni's critical modernity applies critical methods directly to traditional sources. Lichtenstein's synthetic modernity systematically integrates modern and traditional approaches. Magid's post-modern modernity employs con-

temporary theory for Orthodox purposes.

The Question of Development versus Continuity

Perhaps the most fundamental question running through all these approaches concerns the relationship between development and continuity in Jewish tradition. Does authentic tradition require unchanging preservation of inherited forms, or does it demand creative engagement that necessarily involves transformation? Each of our thinkers provides a different answer to this question.

Reb Zadok's progressive revelation emphasizes genuine development as part of the divine plan itself. The cessation of prophecy represents a fundamental transformation in how divine truth becomes available to humanity, making later intellectual achievements in some sense superior to earlier prophetic insights. This represents a truly revolutionary understanding of tradition—not as something to be preserved unchanged but as something that achieves its fullest expression through historical development.

The Netziv maintains essential continuity while acknowledging editorial complexity. His editorial synthesis model suggests that divine inspiration operated through complex compositional processes from the beginning, making the complexity discovered by modern scholarship compatible with rather than threatening to traditional views of inspiration and authority. This preserves continuity while accommodating complexity.

Soloveitchik locates continuity in trans-historical principles that engage changing circumstances dialectically. The eternal dimensions of halakhic truth remain constant while their engagement with particular historical circumstances creates the appear-

ance of development. This maintains both continuity and development by locating them at different levels of analysis.

Halivni identifies specific historical moments of creative development—particularly the Stammaitic period—within an ongoing tradition that maintains essential continuity with earlier stages. His approach suggests that tradition develops through recognizable historical processes while maintaining religious authority through divine guidance of these processes.

Lichtenstein develops methodological principles that preserve continuity while enabling development through systematic integration of traditional and modern approaches. His synthetic methodology maintains essential commitments while creating space for ongoing intellectual engagement and development.

Magid suggests that development and continuity are dialectically related rather than opposed. Post-modern analysis reveals that traditional texts contain hidden potentials for development that become actualized through contemporary interpretive encounters. Tradition maintains its authority precisely through its capacity for ongoing creative interpretation.

Contemporary Implications and Future Directions

The diversity of sophisticated Orthodox responses to modernity revealed by this exploration has significant implications for contemporary debates about tradition and change in Jewish life. Rather than representing a single Orthodox position, these thinkers demonstrate multiple viable approaches that maintain essential religious commitment while

engaging seriously with critical scholarship and contemporary intellectual developments.

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized this sophistication. David Berger's studies of Orthodox responses to historical criticism demonstrate how these earlier models continue to influence contemporary debates.²⁶ Similarly, Tamar Ross's work on Orthodox feminism shows how these methodological approaches provide resources for addressing contemporary challenges to Orthodox thought.²⁷ The creative theological thinking evident in these figures provides resources for ongoing Orthodox intellectual engagement with contemporary challenges.

Consider the educational implications of these different approaches. Reb Zadok's progressive revelation suggests that Orthodox education should cultivate hermeneutical humility and appreciation for complexity rather than simply transmitting fixed conclusions. The Netziv's editorial synthesis suggests teaching traditional methods while acknowledging historical complexity. Soloveitchik's dialectical approach emphasizes developing abilities to think dialectically about tensions rather than resolving them prematurely. Halivni's critical Orthodoxy involves training in both traditional and critical methods simultaneously. Lichtenstein's synthetic integration requires developing sophisticated analytical abilities that can navigate multiple methodological frameworks. Magid's post-modern approach involves theoretical training in service of traditional commitment.

These different approaches also imply different institutional requirements and challenges. Some require specialized scholarly training that may not be available in traditional institutions. Others require

integration of secular and religious education that challenges institutional boundaries. Still others require tolerance for methodological diversity that may create institutional tensions.

The Continuing Dance

What becomes clear through this exploration is that Orthodox thought has demonstrated remarkable creativity and resilience in responding to the challenges of modernity. From Reb Zadok's pioneering progressive revelation through Magid's post-modern analysis, Orthodox thinkers have consistently found ways to maintain unwavering commitment to Torah and halakha while engaging contemporary intellectual challenges with increasing sophistication and methodological creativity.

Perhaps most significantly, this exploration demonstrates that Orthodox commitment need not require intellectual limitation. Whether through mystical theology, hermeneutical sophistication, philosophical dialectics, critical scholarship, synthetic integration, or post-modern analysis, Orthodox thought continues to demonstrate remarkable capacity for intellectual creativity and methodological innovation.

The future of Orthodox thought likely lies not in choosing among these approaches but in continuing their common project of what might be called "creative fidelity"—maintaining unwavering commitment to essential religious commitments while engaging contemporary challenges with ever-increasing sophistication. The pioneers examined here provide not final answers but proven methods for ongoing creative engagement with the permanent tension between tradition and modernity that defines contemporary religious existence.

This tension isn't a problem to be solved but a creative dynamic to be lived. Each generation must find its own ways of navigating the relationship between inherited tradition and contemporary insight, between religious commitment and intellectual honesty, between divine authority and human creativity. The figures explored here demonstrate that this navigation can be accomplished without sacrificing either traditional commitment or intellectual integrity—indeed, that the greatest religious insights may emerge precisely from the creative tension between these apparently opposing demands.

The conversation between tradition and modernity continues, and these six thinkers provide not only historical examples of sophisticated responses but ongoing resources for future creative engagement. Their legacy lies not in the specific solutions they proposed but in their demonstration that Orthodox commitment can inspire rather than constrain the most sophisticated forms of intellectual creativity.

Conclusion

The exploration of Orthodox responses to modernity reveals profound insights for transforming contemporary medical practice from rigid orthodoxy toward sophisticated dialogical engagement. Just as Rabbi Zadok HaKohen's "hermeneutical humility" allowed for divine truth to emerge from unexpected sources, physicians practicing dialogical medicine can discover healing wisdom in patient narratives, cultural traditions, and interdisciplinary collaboration while maintaining rigorous scientific standards.

The six methodological frameworks examined—progressive revelation, editorial synthesis, dialectical engagement, critical integration, synthetic methodology, and post-modern exploration—

provide concrete strategies for what we have termed "creative fidelity" in medical practice. This approach neither abandons evidence-based medicine nor rigidly applies protocols without regard for individual patient complexity. Instead, it develops sophisticated methods for integrating scientific rigor with humanistic sensitivity, creating more effective and satisfying healthcare for both patients and providers.

The practical implications are significant. Physicians who embrace dialogical practice report reduced burnout, as the creative tension between medical knowledge and patient engagement becomes energizing rather than exhausting. Patients experience improved satisfaction and health outcomes when their perspectives are genuinely integrated into treatment decisions rather than merely tolerated. Healthcare teams function more effectively when diverse expertise is synthesized rather than hierarchically organized.

Perhaps most importantly, this approach enhances rather than threatens medical excellence. Like the Orthodox thinkers who found that engaging modernity deepened rather than undermined their religious commitment, physicians who practice dialogical medicine often discover that openness to patient perspectives and interdisciplinary collaboration sharpens rather than compromises their clinical judgment. The apparent chaos of multiple viewpoints and competing considerations becomes, in Zadok HaKohen's terms, "the very mechanism through which [medical] truth progressively unfolds" in clinical practice.

The future of excellent medical care likely lies not in choosing between scientific rigor and humanistic sensitivity, but in continuing the project of creative

fidelity—maintaining unwavering commitment to healing while engaging contemporary challenges with ever-increasing sophistication. The theological pioneers examined here provide not final answers but proven methods for ongoing creative engagement with the permanent tension between medical authority and patient autonomy that defines contemporary healthcare.

This tension, like the tradition-modernity dynamic in religious thought, isn't a problem to be solved but a creative force to be harnessed. Each clinical encounter requires physicians to navigate the relationship between medical knowledge and individual patient needs, between evidence-based protocols and contextual wisdom, between professional authority and collaborative partnership. The figures explored in this analysis demonstrate that this navigation can be accomplished without sacrificing either clinical excellence or patient engagement—indeed, that the most effective medical care may emerge precisely from the creative tension between these apparently opposing demands.

As healthcare continues to evolve, physicians who master the art of dialogical practice will be better equipped to provide excellent care in an increasingly complex medical landscape. Their legacy will lie not in the specific solutions they implement but in their demonstration that medical commitment can inspire rather than constrain the most sophisticated forms of clinical creativity and patient engagement.

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