

# On Why I Value 18Forty and the Orthodox Conundrum Podcasts

- by Rabbi Matt Schneeweiss (rabbischneeweiss.substack.com, published on 6/28/23)

## **The Important Work of Rabbi Scott Kahn and Rabbi David Bashevkin**

My two favorite Jewish podcasts are [18Forty](#), by [Rabbi David Bashevkin](#), and the [Orthodox Conundrum](#), by [Rabbi Scott Kahn](#). This article is not so much a review, but a personal expression of praise and gratitude for the important work being done by these two rabbis, expressed with help from one of my favorite writers.

The one-sentence description of the 18Forty Podcast reads: “Helping you find meaning in life through the exploration of Jewish thought and ideas.” 18Forty’s tagline, repeated at the beginning of each episode (after the catchy intro music) is: “Hello and welcome to the 18Forty Podcast where each month we explore a different topic balancing modern sensibilities with traditional sensitivities to give you new approaches to timeless Jewish ideas.”

The mission statement of the Orthodox Conundrum is a bit wordier, but only because its scope is broader:

The Orthodox Conundrum is a forum in which we look honestly at the Orthodox Jewish community, identifying what works well and what does not, so that, through an honest accounting, we can find solutions that will be successful. We will examine some of the major issues that affect the Orthodox world, without exaggeration, whitewashing, or pretending that they don’t exist. Our hope is that the Orthodox Conundrum will spark wider discussion that will enable Orthodox Judaism to continue moving forward in the areas at which it excels, and to rectify the areas that need improvement.

Granted, there are major differences between 18Forty and the Orthodox Conundrum, but I’d like to focus on their similarities. Both examine major questions, issues, and problems that face the Orthodox (and Orthodox-adjacent) world. Both hosts are compassionate, curious, knowledgeable *talmidei chachamim* (Torah scholars) who also happen to be talented interviewers (albeit with markedly different styles). Both podcasts help me to keep my finger on the pulse of Jewry while regularly exposing me to new ideas and perspectives that I might otherwise never encounter.

This past Shabbos, I arrived at a newfound recognition of why I continually find value in these podcasts. This realization was sparked by an unexpected source: a collection of essays by nature writer Barry Lopez entitled *Embrace Fearlessly the Burning World* (2022).<sup>1</sup> In this article I’d like to share some passages from Lopez which highlight three types of value I find in these podcasts.

### **Value #1: Appreciation of *Tzelem Elokim* Diversity**

The first set of excerpts are from [Six Thousand Lessons](#) (2013), with my emphasis in bold. Lopez writes:

From the beginning, I wanted to understand how very different each stretch of landscape, each boulevard, each cultural aspiration was. **The human epistemologies, the six thousand spoken ways of knowing God**, are like the six thousand ways a river can run down from high country to low, like the six thousand ways dawn might break over the Atacama, the Tanami, the Gobi, or the Sonoran.

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<sup>1</sup> My many thanks to the anonymous “Plonit” who sent me this book as a gift through Amazon!

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Having seen so much, you could assume, if you are not paying close attention, that you know where you are, **succumbing to the heresy of believing one place actually closely resembles another**. But this is not true. Each place is itself only, and nowhere repeated. Miss it and it's gone.

Of the six thousand valuable lessons that might be offered a persistent traveler, here is a single one. Over the years in speaking with Indigenous people – Yupik and Inupiat in Alaska and Inuit in Canada – I came to understand that they prefer to lack the way we use collective nouns in the West for a species. **Their tendency is not to respond to a question about what it is that “caribou” do, but to say instead what an individual caribou once did in a particular set of circumstances** – in that place, at that time of year, in that type of weather, with these other animals around. It is important to understand, they say, that on another, apparently similar occasion, that animal might do something different. All caribou, despite their resemblance to each other, are not only differentiated one from the other but in the end are unpredictable.

In Xian once, where Chinese archaeologists had recently uncovered a marching army of terra-cotta soldiers and horses, and where visitors can view them in long pits in situ, I studied several hundred with a pair of binoculars. The face of each one, men and horses alike, was unique. I've watched herds of impala bounding away from lions on the savanna of Africa and flocks of white corellas roosting at dusk in copses of gum trees in the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia, and have had no doubt in those moments that with patience and tutoring I could distinguish one animal from another.

Through their many interviews with Jews from all walks of life, Scott Kahn and David Bashevkin have helped me to appreciate and value diversity – not the *modern* brand of diversity touted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century USA, but the ancient Jewish value of *human* diversity as expressed by Chazal in [Sanhedrin Chapter 4 Mishnah 5](#):

Man was created alone to teach you that anyone who kills a single Jewish soul is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world, and anyone who preserves a Jewish soul is considered by Scripture to have preserved an entire world ... and to declare the greatness of Ha'Kadosh Baruch Hu, **for a human being stamps many coins using a single seal, and they are all similar to each other – but the King of kings, Ha'Kadosh Baruch Hu, stamped all people with the seal of Adam ha'Rishon and not one of them is similar to another**. Therefore, each and every person is obligated to say, "The world was created for me."

I begin listening to every new episode with a set of judgments, conscious and unconscious, based on my premises and prejudices about the topic, the title, and the interviewee. Invariably, as I listen, my preconceived notions begin to melt, my assumptions dissolve, and I suddenly find myself marveling at an individual “human epistemology” – a singular “way of knowing God.” By the end of each episode, no matter what, I emerge with a sense of having beheld a *tzelem Elokim* in its glory. I acknowledge, with shame, that I had succumbed once again to the heresy of believing that one Jew actually closely resembles another. I realize, with humility, that each human being is themselves only, and nowhere repeated. “Miss it, and it is gone.” My feeling of “*Love your fellow as yourself*” ([Vayikra 19:18](#)) is renewed.

Lopez bemoans how TV and other forms of media have exacerbated these insidious forms of stereotyped thinking:

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It is terrifying for me to consider, now, how television, a kind of cultural nerve gas, **has compromised the world's six thousand epistemologies, collapsing them into "what we all know" and "what we all believe."** To consider how some yearn for us all to speak Mandarin or English, "to make life easier." To consider how a stunning photograph of a phantom orchid can be made to stand today for all orchids. To consider how traveling to Vienna can mean for some that you've more or less been to Prague. How, if you're pressed for time, one thing can justifiably take the place of another.

It is tempting to believe that the Information Age, and the present "social media epoch," have broadened our recognition of *tzelem Elokim* diversity. It certainly has the potential to do so by granting us access and insight into the many worlds outside of our own bubbles. Sadly, the opposite has proven to be the case. We have become quicker to pigeonhole, to generalize, and to form hasty judgments because we feel we know the inner and outer worlds of other people on the sole basis of our superficial online exposure.

This is why long-form interviews, like 18Forty and the Orthodox Conundrum, are critical. They show us that not every Hasid is *that* kind of Hasid, not every Zionist is *that* kind of Zionist, not every feminist is *that* kind of feminist.<sup>2</sup> Instead of seeing people *through* their labels, we begin to see them *despite* their labels. Slowly but surely, the labels recede into the background, and we come to regard them as individuals, each one *b'tzelem Elokim*. And the more this happens while listening to podcasts, the more we will yearn to know people this way in real life.

Lopez concludes by underscoring the urgent need to appreciate this type of diversity:

During these years of travel, my understanding of what diversity can mean has evolved. I began with an intuition that the world was, from place to place and culture to culture, far more different than I had been led to believe. Later, I began to understand that to ignore these differences is not simply insensitive but unjust and perilous. **To ignore the differences does not make things better. It creates isolation, pain, fury, despair.** Finally, I came to see something profound. Long-term, healthy patterns of social organization, among all social life-forms, it seemed to me, hinged on **work that maintained the integrity of the community while at the same time granting autonomy to its individuals.** What made a society beautiful was some combination of autonomy and difference that, together, minimized strife.

This is exactly the kind of work that David and Scott do: they maintain the integrity of the community while at the same time grant – or, more accurately, affirm – the autonomy of its individuals. In so doing, they increase *shalom* in a world that is in desperate need of *shalom*.

### **Value #2: The Courage to Imagine a Better Future**

The most alarming essay I've read by Lopez thus far bears an appropriately dire title: *An Era of Emergencies Is Upon Us and We Cannot Look Away (2021)*. Lopez states the problem in stark terms:

Crudely put ... **we can no longer afford to carry on in a prolonged era of polite reflection and ineffective resistance. An Era of Emergencies is bearing down on us.** We must now consider, for example, how to organize the last industrial extractions of oil, fresh water, natural gas, timber, metallic ores, and fish in order to ensure our own survival; and we must consider, of course, what comes after that. We must reckon with the Sixth Extinction, which will remove, for

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<sup>2</sup> FYI, not every "rationalist" is *that* kind of rationalist – a topic I hope to write about later this summer.

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example, many of our pollinators and one day, probably, many of us. **We must invent overnight, figuratively speaking, another kind of civilization, one more cognizant of limits, less greedy, more compassionate, less bigoted, more inclusive, less exploitive.**

I am not a Jewish historian. I am embarrassingly ignorant about much of what is going on even in the present. As a *ger* (convert), I lack the inherited sense of shared history that so many of my Jewish-born peers seem to possess. But I *am* a Jewish educator, and from where I stand, I fear that an Era of Emergencies *is* bearing down on us. Perhaps every generation of Torah teachers feels this way, but that doesn't make it any less true. The Jewish nation is riddled with spiritual maladies originating in educational malpractice, much of which has gone on for centuries.

I, myself, feel helpless to address these crises. All I feel equipped to do is to teach Torah, as I understand it, to the small circle of students I have. I am not a visionary, but in my opinion, Scott Kahn and David Bashkevkin are. Or at the very least, they're willing to step up to the plate in an effort to find ideas and people who will make a difference. They are responding to the call of "in a place where there are no men, strive to be a man" ([Avos 2:5](#)).

The catalyst for Lopez's reflections in this essay was a recently published book of photography he read:

Many of the pictures in the 2021 book *American Geography: Photographs of Land Use from 1840 to the Present* speak to questions about our survival as a species. Some reflect our sense of grief about what has happened. In others you can feel the photographer's bewilderment at the same time as his or her wonder. For some viewers, these pictures might prompt feelings of anger and condemnation. **If you imagine the project as a whole piece of cloth, you could say that the larger question here is: *What have we done?***

For me, who began my professional life as a photographer as well as a writer more than fifty years ago, the stance *American Geography* takes is one of direct confrontation. **The volume dispenses with sentimentality and nostalgia about our once-primal landscapes and is, further, not compromised by iconic photographs of the beautiful.** Also, for all of its pictures from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the project is much less about our past than it is about our future. *American Geography* **persistently questions the value of the "fruits of progress" (or the lack of them) and also the putative ethical foundation** for Manifest Destiny. To go on like this, the photographs suggest – to continue to applaud the individual quest for substantial personal wealth at the expense of others, and to continue to promote the puerile dreams of some to secure positions of social and political advantage over others – would be suicidal.

To my mind, this is a perfect description of the vantage point offered by Rabbi Bashevkin and Rabbi Kahn. With a solid grasp of Jewish history, they prompt their listeners to take a step back and ask, collectively as a people, "What have we done?" While they acknowledge the many triumphs of the modern era that have helped us take significant strides, they "dispense with sentimentality and nostalgia" and prod their audience to "persistently question the value of the 'fruits of progress' (or the lack of them) and also the putative ethical foundations" of the traditions, practices, and trends that have reigned. They do so, *not* with the antagonistic spirit of anonymous internet commenters nor with the militancy of extreme reformers and activists, but – as David Bashevkin always says – by "balancing modern sensibilities with traditional sensitivities."

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Lopez writes about the kind of courage and imagination that are necessary to be this type of visionary:

The courage ... for me, is **the decision to address unflinchingly the troubling future**, to prompt a reconsideration of what will work for us now, what we will freely abandon, and what we will hold on to at any cost ... [a willingness] **to reimagine our future**, to identify a different road than the one that the prophets of technological innovation, or global climate change itself, are offering us.

Scott Kahn and David Bashevkin possess this type of courage and imagination. They aren't afraid to address the troubling future and they are willing to imagine different versions of what that future might look like, even if that means letting go of cherished values and institutions. As Scott Kahn said, he endeavors to "[identify] what works well and what does not, so that, through an honest accounting, we can find solutions that will be successful" and to "examine some of the major issues that affect the Orthodox world, without exaggeration, whitewashing, or pretending that they don't exist."

Even knowing that there are people out there like David and Scott gives me hope for the future.

### **Value #3: Conversation**

I haven't managed to find a specific citation for this final excerpt. I happened upon it online when I was searching for another Lopez quotation.

**Conversations are efforts toward good relations.** They are an elementary form of reciprocity. They are the exercise of our love for each other. They are the enemies of our loneliness, our doubt, our anxiety, our tendencies to abdicate. **To continue to be in good conversation over our enormous and terrifying problems is to be calling out to each other in the night.** If we attend with imagination and devotion to our conversations, we will find what we need; and someone among us will act — it does not matter whom — and we will survive.

Both Scott Kahn and David Bashevkin routinely tackle what some might consider to be "unsolvable" problems — problems involving thorny issues of philosophy, theology, history, assimilation, education, inclusion, policy, economics, parenting, tragedy, leadership, community, relationships, and more. Both men come across as modest and realistic, never purporting to have solutions to these perennial issues — yet, I'm sure that doesn't stop their listeners and critics from *accusing* them of claiming to have answers.

This passage from Lopez helped me to realize the value of having these conversations even *without* attempting to arrive at solutions. As far as I know, this is exactly what 18Forty and Orthodox Conundrum aim to do. In [\*Love in a Time of Terror\*](#), an essay published just a few months before his death in December 2020, Lopez lauds the style of discourse among "traditional people like the Warlpiri" — a group of aboriginal people who live in the Northern Territory of Australia:

I've felt for a long time that the great political questions of our time — about violent prejudice, global climate change, venal great, fear of the Other — could be addressed in illuminating ways by considering models in the natural world ...

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The goal in these conversations, from a traditional point of view, is **to put off for a good while arriving at any conclusion, to continue to follow, instead, several avenues of approach until a door no one had initially seen suddenly opens.**

These are the types of solutions I predict will emerge from the discourse facilitated by the Orthodox Conundrum and 18Forty podcasts. I think this will happen precisely because these two men do *not* attempt to solve the problems they raise, but instead, examine them *lishmah* (for their own sake). This is the type of “non-goal directed, curiosity-based” exploration I wrote about in [Octopuses, MDMA, and the Ecstasy of Torah](#) – the type of exploration that, in the long run, leads to world-changing results. This is the type of learning *lishmah* that brings good of its own accord, as the Rambam writes in [Hilchos Teshuvah 10:2](#):

One who serves [Hashem] involves [himself] in Torah and mitzvos and walks the paths of wisdom not because of any worldly matter - neither out of fear of harm nor in order to inherit the good - but [merely] does what is true because it is true, **and the good will ultimately come about as a result.**

Perhaps as important as the solutions is the feeling of support generated by the conversations themselves – what Lopez describes as the “calling out to each other in the night.” I’m sure that many listeners have reached out to David and Scott to let them know that they feel heard. In what can feel like the crushing darkness of our protracted exile, such conversations have the power to reassure us that we are not alone. They strengthen our hope that we, as a people, will survive and one day thrive, with Hashem’s help.

### Concluding Thoughts

Lopez concludes his eulogy of the writer Wallace Stegner, *In Memoriam: Wallace Stegner (1996)*, with a reflection on writing as an act of love:

We are all going to die, of course. And deaths remind us to live our lives fully, to take advantage of every opportunity to love and to be loved. And deaths as large as Stegner’s – a first-rate novelist and essayist, a model historian, **a man who took citizenship seriously** – remind us how poorly we often do, meaning to love each other.

I don’t know that Wallace Stegner ever meant to teach that particular lesson; **it’s in our way of life that we often teach best what we’re not conscious of, by the example of our lives.** But I will always remember this about him, what he encouraged. It is a good idea to love each other, and to love the Earth. It is the only way we can make children. It is the only way we can have a place to abide. And by those two things perpetuate ourselves. **No one knows what human destiny is, but surely it must be our hope that it is something good, that it is striving toward what we call God.** And we know that it is love and all that love contains – passion, awe, allegiance, ecstasy, respect, selflessness – that carries us in that direction.

If love is to discover and rediscover life, to encourage and protect it, to marvel at it and serve it ... it is the best we can do for each other to remember, to say it all again. And in this instance of Wallace Stegner, the best he could do was very much enough.

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I had never heard of Wallace Stegner, but as I read these words, I thought of Rabbi Scott Kahn and Rabbi David Bashevkin. Both men take their Jewish citizenship seriously. Both teach by example in their podcast interviews. Both help us advance towards something good, towards God.

Though I'm sure they would downplay their own achievements, it is clear to their audiences that they are striving to do the best they can to help us discover and rediscover Jewish life, to encourage and protect it, to marvel at it and serve it. By Lopez's definition, this is love.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to Rabbi David Bashevkin and Rabbi Scott Kahn for their labors of love. May Hashem help you to succeed in your endeavors.

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As much as I would love to promote 18Forty and the Orthodox Conundrum, I didn't write this article for that reason. I wrote it because reading these passages from Lopez helped me to understand why I appreciate these podcasts, and once I had that understanding, I felt the need to express it. But if you haven't listened to these podcasts, I urge you to visit the websites of [18Forty](#) and the [Orthodox Conundrum](#) (or wherever you go for your podcasts), skim the episode list until you see something that catches your interest, and give it a listen!