

Rationalists verses Mysticism, Why the Hostility?

by Ariel Bar Tzadok

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I have recently come across a group of individuals who identify themselves as Orthodox Jews, whereas at the same time embrace ideas and beliefs that certainly put them on the fringes of Orthodoxy. Yet, regardless of their ideas and beliefs, it is their behavior, that, in my opinion, places them completely outside the boundaries of acceptability. They call themselves religious rationalists, and yet act irrationally in their attacks, insults and mockery of anything and everything about the mystical teachings of Torah.

It should never be one's intent to embarrass another. Therefore, there should never be a need to identify any offending individual or group by name. We can leave names and finger-pointing out of it. Our job is to make sure that the public is able to ascertain and recognize what is proper Orthodox kosher Judaism from what is not.

Torah Judaism is not a monolithic path, it is ever growing, expanding and evolving. Yet, in order to protect the definition of authentic Torah from being twisted and turned inside-out, into something contrary to its very self, all evolving expressions of Torah must be built upon a proper, accepted and established precedent and authority. This is called the Mesorah, the unbroken, reliable chain of Rabbinic/Torah authority.

Mesorah means that no one can just come along and declare something to be Torah or authentically Jewish, without acceptable and provable validation. Since Temple times, in order for their views and opinions to be accepted by their peers, and thus made incumbent upon all Israel, Sages have outlined their proofs, and their arguments for validation. And even so, this does not mean that even the most well thought-out arguments are destined to be adopted and embraced. Torah Judaism is alive because it stays true to its spiritual origins, as outlined in such works as the Talmud, and the other works of our Sages throughout the centuries. We are essentially their spiritual children and we walk in their paths.

Now, let me address the issue at hand. Why is it that the medieval rationalist (Maimonidean) school of Judaism vehemently attacks the mystical (Zoharic) school of Judaism simply because of the Zohar's apparent embrace of Grecian (neo-Platonic) philosophical elements? The rationalist school itself is clearly built upon Grecian (Aristotelian) rationalist elements. Why is it OK for the rationalists to condemn something in others, that they themselves do even more so?

Those today, who wish to exclude the mystical and the supernatural from Judaism seek to cling to the RaMBaM as their role-model. Yet, RaMBaM's denial of the essential beliefs of our Sages caused great controversy in his day, causing his works in these areas to be, for the most part, rejected by the many in Torah Judaism. One can go online¹ to learn about what was called the Maimonidean Controversy.

1 http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0013_0_13046.html

Within the flexibility of Orthodox Judaism, even an Aristotelian Maimonides is granted his rightful place. Even though he may reject certain clear teachings of the Talmudic Sages, RaMBaM's views are nevertheless **respected**, even while **not** being **accepted** by everyone.

Modern day rationalists who wave the flag of RaMBaM do not act, in any way, with proper respect towards opposing views, a practice which is fundamental to Torah Judaism. They go on the attack, offend, insult, scoff and seek with ever-growing anti-Torah vehemence to mock the mystical teachings of our Sages.

Mocking the teachings of the Sages is considered a terrible religious crime. The Talmud speaks clearly against those who mock and insult, condemning them in sharp, harsh terms. Let the Talmud speak for itself.

“Rava used to say to the scholars: Please do not scoff, so that you will not have to endure pain. R. Katina said: Whoever scoffs will have his income slashed, as it says, “He withdraws His Hand [that gives sustenance] in the case of scoffers” (Hosea 7:5). R. Shimon b. Lakish said: Whoever scoffs will fall into Gehinnom. R. Oshaia said: He who is arrogant will fall into Gehinnom. R. Chanilai b. Chanilai said: He who scoffs brings destruction on the world, as it says, “So now, do not scoff lest your affliction becomes more severe, for of total obliteration have I heard from my Lord, God” (Isaiah 28:22). R. Elazar said: Scoffing is indeed a serious sin since at first it is punished by affliction, but it ends in obliteration [as stated in the above verse].” Ayn Yaakov, Avodah Zarah 18B, (Finkel ed. Page 738)

Everything within the Mesorah has its place within the greater framework of accepted Orthodox Torah practice. The mystics extend respect to the rationalists, while the rationalists seem incapable of acting with proper reciprocity.

Another bone of contention the rationalist has with his mystical Orthodox counterpart is the place and authority of the Zohar in Orthodox Judaism. For the last 800 years, the overwhelming majority of Torah Sages have embraced the teachings of the Zoharic Kabbalah. Entire segments of Orthodox Judaism are built entirely upon the Zohar's teachings. The entire Hasidic movement is based on it, as is the majority of the Oriental Sephardi communities. Rabbi Yosef Karo, author of the authoritative Shulchan Arukh (Code of Jewish Law) elevated the Zohar to having a legal authority second only to the Talmud itself.

In his Beit Yosef commentary to the Arba Turim law code (OH147), Rabbi Karo expresses his opinion that with regards to a law not specifically defined in the Talmud, we do not reject the position of the Zohar in favor of the Poskim (deciders of Halakha, Jewish Law).

Regardless of whether the Zohar's origins are from medieval Spain, or from Mishnaic times, from the school of Shimon Bar Yohai, the position of the Zohar in classical Torah Judaism is well documented. If now, one is to come and reject the Zohar, for whatever reasons, is such a one not also rejecting the overwhelming majority of Rabbis who for the last 800 years have embraced the Zohar, proclaiming it central to Orthodox Judaism? Is not the one rejecting the Zohar also rejecting the Shulchan Arukh (Code of Jewish Law), the very foundation of Torah Judaism today?

One cannot reject the Zohar without equally rejecting those who embrace it, and abrogating the Torah laws and practices now common in the Orthodox Judaism of Zoharic origins.

By one rejecting the Zohar, those who embrace it, and the laws based upon it, such a one, by doing so, is also rejecting the Mesorah chain of Torah teachings. Such a rejection is essentially a rejection of Torah Judaism, as it has existed for the last 800 years.

One may indeed question whether or not the Zohar is the historical work of Shimon Bar Yohai. Questioning the Zohar's historicity is not the same as questioning its authority and reliability. Common sense dictates that one cannot reject the authority and influence of the Zohar without rejecting all of the Orthodox Judaism that is built upon it.

For over a century, the Reform and Conservative movements have rejected classical Torah teachings and have recreated Judaism in their own image. It seems that there are now newer elements trying to do the exact same thing. I only wish that they would be honest enough to admit what it is that they are doing. If they wish to begin another separatist movement in Judaism, then at least let them declare so publicly, and then proceed with their agenda. However, to claim themselves Orthodox and then attempt to fundamentally challenge and change the definition of Orthodoxy into something that contradicts classical Talmudic/Zoharic Orthodoxy, and is just plain deceptive and wrong!

Sometimes, some religious/rationalist arguments become so convoluted, that simple common sense gets lost in the quagmire of confused academics. Academicians, of all kinds, cannot but think rationally. This is the nature of their personalities. For the most part, they are incapable of higher forms of psychic/intuitive intellect, called spirit.

Academicians cannot touch the level of the soul. These are the conclusions of the famous father of Analytical Psychology, Carl Jung. The eminent doctor and psychiatrist stated, *"The intellect does indeed do harm to the soul, when it dares to possess itself of the heritage of the spirit. It is in no way fitted to do this, for spirit is something higher than intellect, since it embraces the latter, and includes feelings, as well. It is a guiding principle of life that strives towards super-human shining heights."* CW 13, 7

Academicians, by nature cannot understand, nor can they even tolerate that which they call the mystical. The mere thought of the mystical can make many an intellectual extremely emotionally upset. This too was understood by Jung in the context of its psychological reality. *"As a rule, graduation to the next level is barred by violent prejudice and superstitious fears."* (CW 17-344). *"A critical survey of oneself and his fates enables a man to recognize his peculiarities. But these insights do not come to him easily; they are gained only through the severest of shocks."* (CW 17-331A). *"There is no birth of consciousness without pain."* (CW 17-331)

Those who succumb to the modern influences of rationalism have a very hard time accepting the mystical, magical and supernatural predilections of the classical Sages of Torah. Under the guise of modernization, such religious academicians seek to twist and turn the teachings of our Sages on its ear, by making them to conform with the rationalist mentality, which, for the most part, is external to Torah Judaism. Such attempts, even when

made by leading Sages themselves fall to the wayside of history. This is why, to this day, that while RaMBaM's code of law is well embraced, his philosophical works are rarely, if ever studied in Torah circles and yeshivot (rabbinic colleges) today.

Granted, while the Moreh Nebuchim is readily available in Hebrew, English and other language, one will have to look far and wide for any Orthodox yeshiva offering any classes in it. On the other hand, the number of Rabbis who both study and teach, the Zohar, the writings of the Ari'zal, or any of the many latter day Kabbalists, including the RaMHaL or any of the Hasidic teachings are plentiful. Sheer numbers show that the place of the Zohar and Kabbalah in Judaism is far bigger than that of the philosophical works of the RaMBaM.

Personally, I know of only a handful who study the Moreh, and who are willing to teach it. I, myself, being one of this small number. My views on the RaMBaM, I have previously expressed in an essay titled, "Maimonides, Was He a Closet Kabbalist?" It is available on KosherTorah.com.²

One of the highest teachings that our Sages have taught us is that, "Elu V'elu Divrei Elohim Hayim" (these and these are the words of the Living God). Both rationalism and mysticism have their rightful place in the Torah of our Sages, both past and present. For one side or another to use non-Torah tactics of insults and scoffing demeans what should be a brotherly academic dialogue.

Insults and scoffing are wrong! This is not the Torah way! Those who pursue these paths are fundamentally wrong, and are an offense to Torah, Judaism and to all that is right and good in religion.

Old debates will never be resolved in the course of an essay. The rationalist/mysticism debate will continue because it is meant to continue, just like our Sages said, "*Any dispute that is for the sake of Heaven is destined to endure*" (Pirkei Avot 5:17). But we must make sure that such debate is handled in the proper Torah manner.

No name calling, no insults, no scoffing! In the end, whenever that end may come, all old debates will be eventually resolved. So, until that time, we have the obligation and responsibility to act as children of Torah, faithful to our Mesorah, and obedient to our laws.

Any comments? Please send them to me at koshertorah1@yahoo.com

² <http://koshertorah.com/PDF/rambam.pdf>