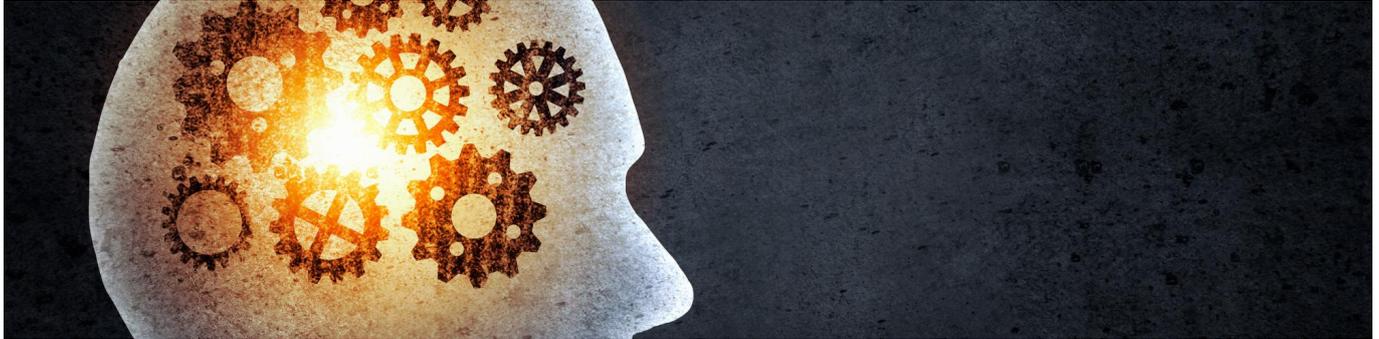


## [Musings on Intellectual Freedom: Blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel](#)

Submitted by mdangel1 on Tue, 09/01/2020 - 00:00



I recently had some correspondence with a rabbinic colleague in which we discussed ideas relating to the role of women in halakha. I had offered some thoughts on how I imagined things would be in messianic times. He found my ideas somewhat interesting and then asked: do you have a source for them?

I replied: The source is my own thinking.

Our dialogue then reached a cordial conclusion.

I mulled over this conversation, and realized that it reflects some of the problems I have with much discussion within the Orthodox world. It is increasingly difficult to express an idea without pinning it to an “authority” or a reliable “source.” Independent thinking is not considered to be good form.

If I had told my colleague that I had found my idea in a midrash, or a classic rabbinic work, or even in the writings of an obscure kabbalist...he would have taken my words more seriously. After all, I had a source!

But shouldn't ideas be evaluated on their own merit? A statement isn't truer if someone said it a few hundred years ago, even if that someone was a great scholar and sage. A statement is not less true if it is espoused by someone today, who has no “source” to substantiate his or her views.

Yes, certainly, we have a proper tendency to give more weight to the opinion of sages such as Rambam than the opinion of a person who is far less learned than Rambam. We assume that Rambam (or other “authority”) was surely wiser and more knowledgeable than we are; if early sources didn't come up with our idea, then it must be that our idea is wrong...otherwise the previous “authorities” would have said it first.

But this line of thinking keeps us focused on the past, and doesn't allow enough freedom to break new ground, to come up with novel ideas and approaches. It has been said that reliance on the authority of Aristotle kept philosophy from developing for a thousand years; reliance on the medical teachings of Galen kept medicine from advancing for many centuries. Whether in the sciences, arts or philosophy, innovation is a key to progress. An

atmosphere of intellectual freedom allows ideas to be generated, evaluated, rejected, accepted...it provides the framework for human advancement.

It is intellectually deadening to read articles/responsa or hear lectures/shiurim that are essentially collections of the opinions of early “sources” and “authorities.” Although it is vital for rabbis and scholars to be aware of the earlier rabbinic literature, it is also vital that they not be hemmed in by those opinions. One needs the intellectual freedom to evaluate sources, to accept what is deemed acceptable, to reject what is objectionable...and to offer one’s own views on the topic, even if no earlier source/authority exists.

Oh yes, I have a source for these views!

Rambam wrote (Guide of the Perplexed, 2:13): “For when something has been demonstrated, the correctness of the matter is not increased and certainty regarding it is not strengthened by the consensus of all men of knowledge with regard to it. Nor could its correctness be diminished and certainty regarding it be weakened even if all the people on earth disagreed with it.” Rambam also noted (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Kiddush Hahodesh 17:24): “Since all these rules have been established by sound and clear proofs, free from any flaw and irrefutable, we need not be concerned about the identity of their authors, whether they be Hebrew prophets or gentile sages.” We rely on the proofs, not on the credentials of the author.

Some years ago, I wrote an article “Orthodoxy and Diversity,” in which I expressed my concerns. “Orthodoxy needs to foster the love of truth. It must be alive to different intellectual currents, and receptive to open discussion. How do we, as a modern Orthodox community, combat the tendency toward blind authoritarianism and obscurantism?

First, we must stand up and be counted on the side of freedom of expression. We, as a community, must give encouragement to all who have legitimate opinions to share. We must not tolerate intolerance. We must not yield to the tactics of coercion and intimidation.

Our schools and institutions must foster legitimate diversity within Orthodoxy. We must insist on intellectual openness, and resist efforts to impose conformity: we will not be fitted into the bed of Sodom. We must give communal support to diversity within the halakhic framework, so that people will not feel intimidated to say things publicly or sign their names to public documents.” (Here’s the link to that article:

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/orthodoxy-and-diversity>)

When well-reasoned views are expressed, they should be evaluated fairly. Quoting “sources/authorities” does not in itself validate an opinion. Not quoting “sources/authorities” does not invalidate an opinion.

We certainly should draw on the wisdom and scholarship of others, and we should give them due credit when we learn from them and quote their words. But we should not shut off our own brains, nor feel unable to express an opinion without basing it on an earlier source. A thinking Judaism makes us better Jews...and better human beings.

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