Dogma, Heresy, and Classical Debates: Creating Jewish Unity in an Age of Confusion

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Rabbi Hayyim Angel is the National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. He has taught advanced Bible courses to undergraduate, graduate, and rabbinical students at Yeshiva University since 1996. He lectures widely in synagogues and schools throughout North America. He lives in Teaneck, New Jersey, with his wife and four children. This article appears in issue 27 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals and was reprinted in issue 44.

Judaism includes the basic tenets of belief in one God, divine revelation of the Torah including an Oral Law, divine providence, reward-punishment, and a messianic redemption. Although there have been debates over the precise definitions and boundaries of Jewish belief, these core beliefs have been universally accepted as part of our tradition.[1]

The question for believing Jews today is, how should we relate to the overwhelming majority of contemporary Jews, who likely do not fully believe in classical Jewish beliefs? Two medieval models shed light on this question.

Rambam: Dogmatic Approach

Rambam insists that proper belief is essential. Whether one intentionally rejects Jewish beliefs, or is simply mistaken or uninformed, non-belief leads to one’s exclusion from the Jewish community and from the World to Come:

> When a person affirms all these Principles, and clarifies his faith in them, he becomes part of the Jewish People. It is a mitzvah to love him, have mercy on him, and show him all the love and brotherhood that God has instructed us to show our fellow Jews. Even if he has transgressed out of desire and the overpowering influence of his base nature, he will be punished accordingly but he will have a share in the World to Come. But one who denies any of these Principles has excluded himself from the Jewish People and denied the essence [of Judaism]. He is called a heretic, an *epikoros*, and "one who has cut off the seedlings." It is a mitzvah to hate and destroy such a person, as it says (Psalms 139:21), "Those who hate You, God, I shall hate." (Rambam, *Introduction to Perek Helek*)

Scholars of Rambam generally explain that Rambam did not think of afterlife as a reward. Rather, it is a natural consequence of one's religious-intellectual development. Only one prepared for afterlife may gain acceptance. Although Rambam did not invent Jewish beliefs, he did innovate this position of Judaism being primarily a community of believers in a set of dogmas.[2]

Professor Menachem Kellner explains that prior to Rambam, Jewish faith was defined by an experiential relationship with God and the Torah. There were of course underlying beliefs in God, the revelation of the Torah, the Oral Law, God's personal involvement and providence, and the Messiah; but these beliefs were not commanded, nor were they too precisely defined. Kellner suggests that Rambam's innovative view arose from the surrounding Muslim culture. During that period, Muslims asked, (a) who is a Muslim and who is an unbeliever? (b) Who will achieve salvation and who is damned? To be a Muslim in good standing and achieve salvation requires one to have proper beliefs, regardless of one's actions. Therefore, the need to define proper belief was a central concern in Rambam's world.[3] Judaism also needed to be distinguished from Islam since both are monotheistic faiths, and Jews faced intense pressure to convert to Islam in order to attain better social status.[4]

Rambam's attempt to define the tenets of Jewish faith follows in the footsteps of the Mishnah in Sanhedrin 90a, which is the only place in the Talmud where beliefs are presented in dogmatic form:

> All Israel have a portion in the World to Come, for it is written, "Your people are all righteous; they shall inherit the land forever, the branch of My

> planting, the work of My hands, that I be glorified." But the following have no portion therein: He who maintains that resurrection is not a biblical doctrine, the Torah was not divinely revealed, and an *epikoros*…

Clearly, this Mishnah is not a roster of all Jewish belief, but rather focuses on the issues that fractured the Jewish community during that period. The Sages stressed these particular tenets of faith in order to distinguish the faithful rabbinic community from Sadducees and other sectarian groups.[5]

Although these efforts by the Mishnah are significant in terms of expressing proper Jewish belief, Rambam goes much further than the Mishnah by defining Jews as a communion of true believers. This innovative position opened the door to heretical exclusions even when one was not trying to exclude himself or herself from the Jewish community.[6]

Ra'avad-Duran-Albo: Mistaken, Not Heretics

Rambam (*Laws of Repentance* 3:7) rules that there are several categories of heretics. One of those is the person who believes that God has a body. Yet, Ra'avad (Rabbi Abraham b. David, 1125–1198) disagrees, since even some great rabbis mistakenly concluded that God does have a body:[7]

> Why did [Rambam] call such a person a heretic? Several greater and better rabbis than he thought [that God does have a body and likeness] based on what they see in biblical verses and even more so from rabbinic teachings that can confuse the thoughts.

Ra'avad agrees with Rambam that God does not have physical attributes. However, he insists that it is incorrect to label as heretics those who mistakenly believe otherwise. They are believing Jews who made an honest error based on an overly literal reading of Tanakh and Midrash.

Following Ra'avad's approach, Rabbi Shimon b. Tzemah Duran and Rabbi Yosef Albo maintained that one should be considered a heretic only if one willfully

denies a principle of faith or willfully affirms a principle denied by the Torah.[8] Duran even cites statements by Rambam that Duran considers to be beyond the pale of Jewish belief. He concludes that Rambam is not a heretic for holding these views, but reached mistaken views out of purity of motive. It should be stressed that Duran agrees that there *are* correct beliefs, and rabbis should correct the errors of those Jews who have mistaken beliefs. However, this does not mean excluding them from the community as heretics, but rather embracing and teaching them.

In his extensive survey of medieval thinkers, Professor Menachem Kellner concludes that the decisive majority support this latter view, rather than the exclusionary dogmatic position of Rambam.[9]

Halakhah defines Jewishness by birth and nationhood, and not by belief. We ideally want all Jews to learn, observe, and believe in the Torah and tradition. However, we should not exclude as heretics those who fall short unless they intentionally wish to exclude themselves from the community.[10] Jews who make honest mistakes or who are ignorant of proper Jewish belief are not to be labeled as heretics. Rather, we should do what we can to educate them.

It is important to note that Rambam himself differentiated between the original Karaites, who were true heretics who broke from the Jewish community, and their followers and descendants who did not know better because they grew up as Karaites (*Laws of Rebellious Ones* 3:3). After stating that one who denies the Oral Law is a heretic (*Laws of Rebellious Ones* 3:1–2), Rambam exonerates the Karaites of his day for having been raised with erroneous beliefs. Menachem Kellner explains that in Rambam's system of thought, there was no latitude for someone who makes an innocent error regarding Rambam's first five principles of faith that pertain to the essence of God. In that arena, if a Jew believes that God has a body, that person is a heretic. However, the Karaite error is within Rambam's eighth principle, as they deny the revelation of an Oral Law revealed to Moses along with the Written Torah. In this respect, those Karaites who actively denied this principle of faith are heretics, but later generations who grew up with miseducation should be deemed as ignorant against their will, rather than as heretics.[11]

Conclusion

Moving this discussion to a contemporary communal level, Menachem Kellner contends that Orthodox society must properly frame the question in terms of its relationship with non-Orthodox society. If we ask how much we should tolerate heresy, we already have lost the battle. Pluralism, in the sense of saying that non-Orthodox and non-halakhic positions are legitimate within Torah and halakhah, is an impossible position. Declaring that most non-Orthodox Jews are in the category of "*tinok she-nishbah*"—one who was kidnapped and raised among heathens and therefore no longer accountable for one's religious behavior—may promote greater tolerance, but is insulting.

Kellner concludes that one should ask instead: What can we do to enhance the future of the Jewish people? A healthy family can survive disputes. We should not ignore the disputes; but areas of agreement, our shared past, and a shared concern for our future as a people, should bring us together despite fundamental differences in belief and observance.[12]

We may define the question differently. If we view ourselves as a community of believers inside a box, and everyone else as outside that box, then Rambam gives us an objective standard of who is in our group and who is excluded. If, however, we define ourselves more positively as believing Jews who embrace God, Torah, and all Jews, then we would espouse the view of Ra'avad-Duran-Albo, who maintain proper belief while considering those who reject or do not know these beliefs as wrong or ignorant rather than as heretics.

The halakhic definition of a Jew is one who has Jewish mother or who is a halakhic convert. Not every Jew lives a full Jewish life, but there is a continuum with more and less committed Jews, rather than insiders and outsiders. The approach espoused by Ra'avad-Duran-Albo, which appears closer to the original concept of Jewish belief, also represents a more productive means of addressing today's fragmented society from within tradition. We stand for an eternal set of beliefs and practices, and we embrace and teach all Jews as we build our community together.[13]

No less significantly, it is critical for believing Jews to understand that there are many legitimate paths within Jewish tradition. Many rifts are created when rabbis and others insist that their path is the only true path, while others are considered wrong or not even acknowledged. One of the great nineteenth-century rabbis, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv), expressed his fear based on the realities of his time that faithful Jews may brand other faithful Jews as heretics for following other legitimate paths within tradition:

> It is not difficult to imagine reaching this situation in our time, Heaven forbid, that if one of the faithful thinks that a certain person does not follow his way in the service of God, then he will judge him as a heretic…the people of God will be destroyed, Heaven forfend. (*Meshiv Davar*, I:44)

The Sephardic-Inclusive Communal Model

One of the beacons of light emanating from the Sephardic world in the modern age is its inclusive communal model. Rather than creating separate synagogues for the devoutly Orthodox, or splintering into movements or denominations that fracture the Jewish community, this model calls for synagogues to be faithful to Jewish tradition and to welcome Jews from the entire spectrum of religious observance.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jews of Germany, America, and several other major communities splintered into denominations and movements. They led us to today's painful fragmentation with no easy resolutions presenting themselves going forward. The Sephardic inclusive communal model provides a desperately needed alternative to the realities of today.[14]

So why did so much of the Jewish world miss this point? In addition to the historical circumstances, there is a good conceptual answer to that question, explored by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his book, *Community of Faith*.[15] Rabbi Sacks observes that there is a great challenge in the inclusive model: It is the least consistent, and we greatly value consistency. Some people asked: Why belong to a traditional synagogue that preaches ideals so different from my lifestyle? Why not build synagogue communities that espouse messages more consistent with my values?

Others criticized the institutions and their rabbis. How can an Orthodox synagogue be a welcoming home to people who do not live by Orthodox standards? We should build separate synagogues and schools exclusively for those who are entirely faithful to tradition. This desire for greater consistency contributed to the fracturing of the Jewish community.

These are genuine challenges to the inclusive communal model. Our response to these challenges is the positive agenda of a unified faith community. Those who

join it do not necessarily adhere to all of the mitzvot or Jewish beliefs in the traditional sense. However, they want to belong to a congregation that in its public and collective expressions remains loyal to the principles by which Jews have always lived. As a result of this model, Jews who personally do not observe many mitzvot can develop a profound respect for their synagogue and community, because they correctly understand that it faithfully represents Jewish tradition.

Aside from the commitment their own members, rabbis and communal leadership also need to be open to all Jews, and work to create a welcoming environment where that attitude is fostered throughout the community. Our challenge is to the build an ideal communal setting, faithful to tradition, and welcoming to all Jews. We need to set the standard by which all participants are encouraged to bridge the gaps between their lives and the ideals of the Torah.

This vision may be easier said than done in today's climate, but it is critical to advance it as a productive alternative to the unfortunate reality we currently experience.

Judaism is both a peoplehood and a religious covenant. Ideally, all Jews should be committed to both dimensions of the Torah. In an age when many Jews have lost or diminished their religious connection, however, our commitment to peoplehood must prevail to include Jews who are not fully committed to the Torah or Jewish belief. The winners will be the Torah and the Jewish people.

[1] See Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004). Review Essay, R. Yitzchak Blau, "Flexibility with a Firm Foundation: On Maintaining Jewish Dogma," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 12 (2004), pp. 179–191.

[2] See Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1986); Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999). Review Essay, David Berger, *Tradition* 33:4 (Summer 1999), pp. 81–89. Menachem Kellner's second edition of *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* (2006) contains a response to David Berger's review. See also Seth (Avi) Kadish ("Jewish Dogma after Maimonides: Semantics or Substance?" *Hebrew Union*

College Annual 86 [2015], pp. 195–263), who discusses the need to understand Rambam's dogmas in the broader context of Rambam's writings and religious outlook, rather than in a vacuum.

[3] Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought*, pp. 7–9.

[4] Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*, pp. 49–50.

[5] R. Jonathan Sacks observes that instead of writing treatises or systematic lists of beliefs, the Sages included central Jewish beliefs in the prayer liturgy. The emphasis in the second blessing of the Amidah on God for His future resurrection of the dead, for example, ensured that sectarians who denied the resurrection would be unable to lead the prayer service, and would be discouraged from attending synagogue altogether ("The *Siddur*: Book of Jewish Faith," in *Mi-Tokh Ha-Ohel: The Weekday Prayers*, ed. Daniel Z. Feldman and Stuart W. Halpern [New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2014], pp. xiii–xxi).

[6] Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*, p. 2.

[7] For a survey of rabbinic positions on God's incorporeality, see Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology*, pp. 45–70.

[8] Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought*, pp. 99–107.

[9] Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*, p. 68. Aside from Rambam, only R. Abraham Bibago and Abarbanel disallowed error in belief and considered people making those errors heretics.

[10] Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*, pp. 111–126.

[11] *Ibid*., pp. 84–85.

[12] *Ibid*., pp. 98–99, 111–126.

[13] See also R. Dov Linzer, "The Discourse of Halakhic Inclusiveness," *Conversations* 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 1–5; Menachem Kellner, "Must We Have Heretics?" *Conversations* 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 6–10.

[14] See further discussion in R. Marc D. Angel, “Other Thoughts about Jewish Pluralism,” in Angel, *Seeking Good, Speaking Peace: Collected Essays of Rabbi Marc D. Angel*, ed. Hayyim Angel (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1994), pp. 24–35.

[15] R. Jonathan Sacks, *Community of Faith* (London: Peter Halban, 1995).