The Observer Effect and PostModern Orthodoxy

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One of the enduring themes of my religious life has been the reconciliation of my Jewish and American cultural identities. As the daughter of a Modern Orthodox rabbi who taught me to look critically at the ways in which religion can be variously used and practiced, I became very aware of the pushes and pulls of different religious factions and how they have informed by beliefs. As a student of science, I gained insight into the importance of empirical knowledge and learned to look critically at the claims of universality and objectivity of research theories. My own framework for understanding differences in religious philosophy has developed over time, and centers around my personal struggles with the resolution of the cultural tension between my experience as an American—steeped in pervasive scientific values based on rational knowledge—and my experience as a Jew—with a set of mores and beliefs about the world that are strongly held but grounded within a framework that seems incompatible with the uncertainty that intellectual analysis brings.

The center of the internal struggle to integrate these seemingly incompatible aspects of myself crystallizes around my understanding of the observer effect. In science, the term *observer effect* refers to changes that the act of observing will make on the phenomenon being observed. Thus, every experiment is necessarily influenced by the presence of the investigator, and no researcher can be factored out of an experimental system. An elaboration of this discovery has led to the idea that as humans we inevitably try to impose order on a fundamentally chaotic universe; thus the way we structure our studies is implicitly biased and colored by human experience. This radical principle revolutionized the way we think about science and has led to a paradigm shift in the way we conceptualize and study other fields as well, comprising a vital component of postmodern scholarship. Postmodern ideas now permeate almost every scholarly enterprise, from literature and history to psychology and sociology. Serious scholarship in many fields requires an open acknowledgment of the perspectives that provide the lens through which ideas are given meaning. The intellectual ramifications of the observer effect pervade twentieth-century intellectual thought and are an implicit part of a Western cultural sensibility. Despite its importance to our scholarship, this paradigm has not seriously influenced the way large segments of the Modern Orthodox world think about or treat religion and religious study. This disparity, as I see it, is one of the fundamental problems facing Modern Orthodoxy today. Since Judaism is taught in a factual way, while at the same time uncertainty permeates every other faction of our life, religion can become encapsulated or split off as a result.

In my various experiences growing up and living in different Jewish communities, I have found that Orthodox Jewish thought is often taught and learned in a categorical way that does not take into

account differing viewpoints. As students, we are not taught to think critically about religious material or our religious leadership but must learn to do so on our own, outside of traditional educational systems. Religion is taught unequivocally, in a way that leaves out the doubts and subtleties each teacher necessarily brings to the material he or she teaches.

Under the current mainstream yeshiva system, pertinent information is selected and taught by instructors whose students are expected to grasp and apply it without significant evaluation of its merits. Teachers' formulations and interpretations are often implicitly presented and accepted as objective truths to be assimilated by their students. In this educational system, many learning experiences are characterized by acquiescence to the expertise of the teacher-as-authority. This method of indoctrination makes sense for young children as the stability and structure of an educational institution provide a sense of security, granting refuge from an ambiguous understanding of ideas. Yeshiva schooling constitutes a safe environment that provides a secure, though embryonic foundation for the understanding of religious knowledge.

The problem arises when this culture of indoctrination continues into our experiences as adult members of Orthodox communities. The dominant contemporary explanations of Jewish theology are generally given over in a way that precludes open debate or critical assessment of merit. In my experience, many religious leaders tend to be more concerned with making a point than with openly approaching others as an interpreter with a culturally bound perspective; this reluctance to address uncertainty extends to common religious discourse as well.

For many who do not acknowledge their participation in American culture, this does not pose a problem. They are content in being handed over objective knowledge, secure in the truth of their belief. But for those who choose to engage in Western culture and concomitantly adopt its cultural ethos, the struggle to integrate their American and Jewish sides is more difficult. It is not necessarily the content of the religious teachings that makes this challenging, but the way that knowledge is confused with or presented as objective truth. The prevailing methods for the dissemination of Jewish religious thought within communities are definitive and conclusive, as though the injection of any doubt or uncertainty into the discussion could lead the child or layperson astray. This trend can be alienating to those whose belief is influenced by American culture, as it leaves little space for a personal relationship with religious material. This can make it difficult to assimilate meaningful interpretations of religious information—and in effect widens the cultural divide between religious and secular selves.

The first time this conflict came starkly into my awareness was in my freshman year of college, in a humanities class covering a scholarly reading of the Old Testament. I had never before come into contact with this material—and its effects were gut-wrenching. I responded to what felt like an assault on my beliefs by holding on to my religious understanding of the Bible, defending it at all costs. As I listened to myself debate my classmates on the merits of these theories, I realized that I was approaching the issue from within a cultural perspective that was different from many of my fellow students. My only previous experience with the Bible had occurred within the framework of religious study, with an eye for one objective truth.

In this new, intellectual environment, my religious views seemed undeveloped; my beliefs were fundamental to my way of thinking but had never been challenged by the lens of historical scholarship. My previous yeshiva training had formed a secure basis for my religious beliefs but had not prepared me for impingement by the general prevailing cultural standards for critical thought. Because I could not locate my belief within a context, I was not equipped to effectively engage in intellectual discourse on the topic.

Years have passed since that shock of self-awareness, and yet I still find myself struggling with the same issues. How is it possible to incorporate a fundamental religious belief system with a world based in critical rationality? I believe that the first step in bridging this divide would start with a growing awareness of the subjective nature of our beliefs. We may posit the existence of a set of objective religious beliefs, but as human beings interpreting these truths, our knowledge is necessarily bounded, even flawed. Even objective truths based in religious faith must be filtered through our subjectivity. The observer effect has taught us that because we are a part of the system we are studying, there is no way of standing apart, separate from our cultural milieu.

Acknowledging the biases with which we enter religious debate is never an easy task. Religion is the scaffolding on which our society is built and has provided a vital function for humanity. It forms the underpinnings for Western civilization and the guidelines by which many of us live our lives. Perhaps the centrality of Judaism's position in our lives makes this struggle such a poignant one. It feels dangerous to subject our faith to critical examination as it may lead to a cynical deconstruction of our traditional Jewish beliefs. On the other hand, denying that our environment informs our perspective closes us off from seeing reality.

Each person must engage in his or her own quest for navigating meaning in religious tradition and modernity. For me, this has involved the reconciliation of the dueling sensibilities of my American and Jewish identities. The observer effect has helped me to locate my religious beliefs within a context. When viewed through a prism of critical rationality, Judaism becomes more complex, and is cast with ambiguity and nuance. And although it is decidedly more multifaceted and difficult, I am at peace with the uncertainty of my perspective, as it feels more compatible with the overarching environment in which I live. As humans our knowledge is necessarily limited; in our fallibility, we may take comfort in having others join in our struggle with uncertainty.