Emunat Hakhamim: Surrender or Challenge?

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In 1990, I met with the Chief Rabbi of a major city in Israel, a man who was known for his great erudition and who authored a number of volumes of halakhic responsa. He told me that a military leader of Israel had asked him to encourage yeshiva students to serve in the army. He had responded to the general: instead of getting yeshiva students to serve in the army, all the soldiers should put down their weapons and start studying Torah. He quoted a Midrash that God will protect the Jewish people if they all study Torah. I asked the rabbi if he would risk the security of Israel based on that Midrash. He told me without hesitation: "yes, of course! We don't need an army, we need everyone to study Torah. We have the words of hazal, and our Sages spoke truth."

When I expressed my astonishment that he actually thought Israel did not need military defense, he expressed his astonishment that I doubted the truthfulness of the words of the Midrash. The two of us were operating on different sets of assumptions.

The Chief Rabbi was living in a pre-modern spiritual/intellectual bubble. He relied faithfully on the words of our ancient Sages; they knew the real truth. Their words were uttered in pure holiness. The teachings of our Sages are absolutely reliable, far more trustworthy than anything that could be said or taught by military, political, or governmental experts—especially those who were not religiously observant.

The Chief Rabbi thought it was a lack of faith on my part to give more credibility to the experts than to statements made by our Sages. For my part, I was horrified that an intelligent and pious Chief Rabbi would genuinely think that Israel did not need military defenses if everyone simply studied Torah and kept the mitzvoth. We sat in the same room, we believed in and observed the same Torah…but we were in different spiritual/intellectual worlds.

This rabbi and others of similar mindset are advocates of their version of *emunat hakhamim*, requiring us to have absolute faith in our Sages and their teachings. For them, all genuine truth exists within the ken of our Sages. All "outside" information is not credible…unless the Sages themselves gave it credibility.

This kind of thinking has gained traction within Orthodox Judaism in recent decades. It has led to an Orthodoxy that fosters authoritarianism and obscurantism. It has relegated immense power to *gedolim* who are supposed to have a monopoly on truth. It has fostered negative attitudes toward secular sources of knowledge, since the Sages have the keys to all real knowledge themselves. It discredits those fine Orthodox Jews who do not share their worldview, and ostracizes Orthodox rabbis who do not fall into line with their faith in the almost infallible wisdom of the *gedolim.*

A venerable exponent of the *emunat hakhamim* view was Rabbi Avraham Karelitz,(1878-1953) popularly known as the Hazon Ish. He taught that "everything written in the Talmud, whether in the Mishnah or in the Gemara, whether in halakha or in aggadah, were things revealed to us through

prophetic powers…and whoever deviates from this tenet is as one who denies the words of our Rabbis, and his ritual slaughtering is invalid and he is disqualified from giving testimony. (*Kovetz Iggerot* 1:59. This is cited by David Weiss Halivni, in *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought and History*, ed. Michael Fishbane (Albany: State University of NY Press, 1993, p. 40, n. 13)

Not only are we instructed to believe in the prophetic powers of ancient Talmudic sages (even though they never claimed these powers for themselves), we are asked to suppress our own minds to the opinions of the sages. Even if we think their statements are unreasonable, we should assume they are right and we are wrong. Thus taught Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, an influential Hareidi leader of the 20th century: "Our rabbis have told us to listen to the words of the Sages, even if they tell us that right is left and not to say, heaven forbid, that they certainly erred because little I can see their error with my own eyes. Rather, my seeing is null and void compared with the clarity of intellect and the divine aid they receive….This is the Torah view [*daas Torah*] concerning faith in the Sages. The absence of self-negation toward our rabbis is the root of all sin and the beginning of all destruction, while all merits are as naught compared with the root of all—faith in the Sages." (*Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* 1:75-77, cited by Lawrence Kaplan "*Daas Torah*; A Modern Conception of Rabbinic Authority," *Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy*, ed. M. Sokol Northvale, NJ, Jason Aronson, 1992, pp. 16-17).

Proponents of *emunat hakhamim* ascribe divine powers to the sages of all generations, including our own. They not only know Torah better than anyone else; their Torah knowledge gives them the right and authority to guide the Jewish people in all areas of life. In the words of Rabbi Bernard Weinberger: "*Gedolei Yisrael* possess a special endowment or capacity to penetrate objective reality, recognize the facts as they really are and apply the pertinent halakhic principles. This endowment is a form of *ru'ah haKodesh* [Divine inspiration], as it were, bordering, if only, remotely, on the periphery of prophecy. ….*Gedolei Yisrael* inherently ought to be the final and sole arbiters of all aspects of Jewish communal policy and questions of *hashkafa*." Cited by Lawrence Kaplan, p. 17).

Rabbi Nachum Rabinovich has pointed out that *emunat hakhamim* actually has a very different meaning and intent ("*Emunat Hakhamim, Mah Hi*?", in *Darka shel Torah*, Maaliyot Press, Jerusalem, 1998, pp. 206-214). We are expected to respect the wisdom of our sages, but not to assume their infallibility or their quasi-prophetic status. Rather than blindly following their words, we are expected to examine their comments carefully; to try to understand their intent; to accept or reject them only after careful consideration. "True *emunat hakhamim* requires deep analysis to seek the reasons for the words of the sages; this entails an obligation on the part of the student or questioner to a very careful and critical examination, to determine if there is place to dissent. Certainly their words have reason, but one is still obligated to clarify whether to follow [their words] in actual practice" (p. 213).

It is up to each individual to make informed decisions; it is wise to consult the advice and teachings of sages. But one is not allowed to suspend personal judgment. "There is a difference between one who seeks advice and then ultimately acts based on personal responsibility, and one who relies on a "great tree" without independent thought. There are those who ascribe this childish behavior under the name *emunat hakhamim*, whereas this is a perversion of this important virtue. Instead of acquiring true Torah, people who cling to this mistaken notion of *emunat hakhamim* thereby distance themselves from the light of Torah, and in the end don't know their right from their left" (p. 214).

For Rabbi Rabinovich, *emunat hakhamim* does not foster an attitude of blind obedience. On the contrary, it demands careful attention to the words of our sages…followed by a personal evaluation of whether those statements ought or ought not to be accepted. His views are very much in line with a long rabbinic tradition that calls for respect for the words of our sages, but not a belief in the infallibility or divine inspiration of their words.

The Talmud and Midrashim are replete with statements by great sages on various topics…medical cures, demons, seemingly far-fetched interpretations of biblical verses. It is not a religious virtue to ascribe "truth" to all their statements, although it is important to try to understand the context of their words.

Rabbi Hai Gaon taught that the *aggada* should not be considered as divinely revealed tradition. The authors of *aggada* were merely stating their own opinions, and "each one interpreted whatever came to his heart." Therefore, "we do not rely on them (the words of aggada)." Rabbi Hai Gaon maintained

that *aggadot* recorded in the Talmud have more status than those not so recorded—but even these *aggadot* need not be relied upon (See *Otsar Ha-Geonim*, ed. B. M. Lewin. Jerusalem, 5692, vol. 4 (*Hagigah*), pp. 59–60).

Rabbi Sherira Gaon taught that *aggada*, Midrash, and homiletical interpretations of biblical verses were in the category of *umdena*, personal opinion, speculation (Ibid., p. 60). Another of the Gaonim, Rabbi Shemuel ben Hofni, stated: "If the words of the ancients contradict reason, we are not obligated to accept them" (Ibid., pp. 4-5).

Rabbi Abraham, son of Maimonides, in an important essay concerning *aggada*, maintained that one may not accept an opinion without first examining it carefully. (See his *Ma-amar Odot Derashot Hazal* , printed in the introductory section of the *EinYaacov*.) To accept the truth of a statement simply on the authority of the person who stated it is both against reason and against the method of Torah itself. The Torah forbids us to accept someone's statement based on his status, whether rich or poor, whether prominent or otherwise. Each case must be evaluated by our own reason. Rabbi Abraham stated that this method also applies to the statements of our sages. It is intellectually unsound to accept blindly the teachings of our rabbis in matters of medicine, natural science, astronomy. He noted: "We, and every intelligent and wise person, are obligated to evaluate each idea and each statement, to find the way in which to understand it; to prove the truth and establish that which is worthy of being established, and to annul that which is worthy of being annulled; and to refrain from deciding a law which was not established by one of the two opposing opinions, no matter who the author of the opinion was. We see that our sages themselves said: if it is a halakha (universally accepted legal tradition) we will accept it; but if it is a ruling (based on individual opinion), there is room for discussion."

This is not to say that the words of our sages should not be taken seriously. On the contrary, statements of great scholars must be carefully weighed and respected. But they may also be disputed, especially in non-halakhic areas. In his introduction to *Perek Helek*, Maimonides delineates three groups, each having a different approach to the words of our sages. The majority group, according to Rambam, accepts the words of our sages literally, without imagining any deeper meanings. By taking everything literally—even when the words of the sages violate our sense of reason—they actually disparage our rabbis. Intelligent people who are told that they must accept all the midrashim as being literally true will come to reject rabbinic teaching altogether, since no reasonable person could accept all these teachings in their literal sense. "This group of impoverished understanding—one must pity their foolishness. According to their understanding, they are honoring and elevating our sages; in fact they are lowering them to the end of lowliness. They do not even understand this. By Heaven! This group is dissipating the glory of the Torah and clouding its lights, placing the Torah of God opposite of its intention."

Maimonides described the second group as also taking the words of the sages literally. But since so many of the statements of the rabbis are not reasonable if taken literally, this group assumes that the rabbis must not have been so great in the first place. This group dismisses rabbinic teachings as being irrelevant, even silly. Rambam rejected this point of view outright.

The third group, which is so small that it hardly deserves to be called a group, recognizes the greatness of our sages and seeks the deeper meanings of their teachings. This group realizes that the sages hid profound wisdom in their statements, and often spoke symbolically or in riddles. When one discovers a rabbinic statement that seems irrational, one should seek its deeper meaning. While

Rambam argued forcefully for a profound understanding of *aggada* and Midrash, he did not argue that all rabbinic statements are of divine origin. When one finds rabbinic statements to be unreasonable or incorrect—even after much thought and investigation—he is not bound to uphold them.

Following Maimonides' line of thinking, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote that "aggadic sayings do not have Sinaitic origin . . . they reflect the independent view of an individual sage" (See Joseph Munk, "Two Letters of Samson Raphael Hirsch, a Translation," *L'Eylah*, April, 1989, pp. 30–35). Rabbi Hirsch went on: "Nor must someone whose opinion differs from that of our sages in a matter of *aggada* be deemed a heretic, especially as the sages themselves frequently differ. . . ." He rejected the opinion that the authority of *aggada* is equal to the orally transmitted halakha. Indeed, he thought this was "a dangerous view to present to our pupils and could even lead to heresy."

The Hareidi-promoted understanding of *emunat hakhamim* is not only rejected by significant rabbinic authorities, but is deeply offensive to those who insist on the right to think for themselves and make their own decisions. To ascribe quasi-prophetic powers to a small clique of Talmudic scholars is intellectually unsound. It undermines a thinking faith and condemns the public to sheepishly follow the opinions of an unelected group of "*gedolim.*"

Aside from the untenable intellectual position, the Hareidi approach has serious practical flaws. Many questions arise. Who qualifies to be listed among the *gedolim* who are deemed to have divine insight? Why do different groups of Hareidim rely on different authorities? Why are *gedolim* often at odds with each other, sometimes bitterly opposed to each other? Why is it assumed that a Hassidic Rebbe or a Rosh Yeshiva has perfect judgment on all topics by virtue of being considered a *gadol* among his followers?

Many *gedolim* in 20th century Europe did not foresee the Nazi onslaught and did not warn their communities to flee or fight back. Many *gedolim* did not lend a hand in the establishment of the State of Israel; many continue to deny or downplay the religious significance of the return of Jews to their ancient homeland. Some *gedolim* encourage followers to rely on (and pay for!) their blessings, red strings and amulets. Many *gedolim* may have expertise in Talmud, but have little or no general knowledge in science, medicine, politics, economics, literature, history etc. Why should people be expected to trust narrowly educated men to pass judgment in areas where they have no particular expertise?

In my article, "Reclaiming Orthodox Judaism," (*Conversations*, no. 12, Winter 2012, pp.1-23), I pointed to the vital need for revitalization of a modern, intellectually vibrant Orthodox Judaism that repudiates the Hareidi notion of *emunat hakhamim*. How can we promote a Judaism that is faithful to tradition, and that also respects the autonomy and critical thinking of its adherents?

In my article, I wrote: "To reclaim Orthodox Judaism, we first need to transform the intellectual climate within Orthodoxy—to foster an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, and inclusive Orthodoxy that sees Judaism as a world religion with world responsibilities. We need to halt the slide to the right, and to battle fundamentalism, authoritarianism, and obscurantism in our homes, our schools, in our

communal life.”

While it is a virtue to respect the wisdom and insights of our sages, it is not a virtue to forfeit our own individual judgment. Orthodox Judaism, at its best, challenges us to think, to take responsibility, and to act wisely. Let us rise to the challenge.