Rationalisim vs. Mysticism: Book Review

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Steve Lipman, a Buffalo native, was a staff writer at the New York Jewish Week, 1983-2020.

Rationalism vs. Mysticism: Schisms in Traditional Jewish Thoughts. Natan Slifkin. The Torah and Nature Foundation. 557 pps. $39.95.

Reviewed by Steve Lipman

Rabbi Slifkin, who has earned a reputation, depending on your philosophical-theological leanings, as an annoying gadfly, in parts of the Orthodox world, or as a valuable beacon of clear thinking, in other parts, now offers a helpful guide to the widening divide between the dominant segments of Orthodox Judaism.

The British-born rabbi, whose well-documented expertise in the relationship of natural science to Jewish thought reflects his larger perspective on fundamental Jewish beliefs, now focuses on the philosophical gap between large parts of the Orthodox community.

"There are two fundamentally different worldviews regarding such things as epistemology (the nature of knowledge and where it comes from) and the relative roles of natural law and the supernatural. These are the rationalist and the (for want of a better word) mystical approaches," Rabbi Slifkin writes. "The rationalist approach has a rich heritage to it ... it was dominant amongst the Rishonim in many ways ... but has declined over time to the point that there are great Talmudic scholars of today who do not realize that it even existed."

The rabbi's definition of the two camps:

"Rationalists believe that knowledge is legitimately obtained by man via his reasoning and senses, and should be preferably based upon evidence/reason rather than faith, especially for far-fetched claims. Mystics are skeptical of the ability of the human mind to arrive at truths, and prefer to base knowledge on revelation, or -- for those who are not worthy of revelation -- on faith in those who do experience revelation."

Rabbi Slifkin notes that "mystics often demand belief in the absolute truth of every word in the Talmud, along with the Tannaic and ultimately divine origins of the Zohar, and many other texts. Rationalists, on the other hand, usually dispute the divine origins of the kabbalistic texts, and also maintain that not every part of the Talmud is divinely-inspired wisdom….The gulf between the two approaches is vast and unbridgeable."

Rabbi Slifkin experienced hareidi rejection firsthand. About two decades ago, several of his groundbreaking books about aspects of natural science were banned by several hareidi rabbis.

"In many Orthodox Jewish communities today," Rabbi Slifkin writes, "there is simply no place for the rationalist approach… Sages sometimes possessed incorrect beliefs about the natural world; this was widely acknowledged by the Rishonim, and yet this view gradually became less accepted to the extent that today there are some people who are in denial that any rabbinic authority ever subscribed to such a view."

"On the other hand," he writes, "the rationalist approach is championed in Modern Orthodox communities, where it is considered to be the preferred approach."

The accepted wisdoms in some mystical circles often bring claims that counter opinions, or citations of hazal that support them, are forgeries, fabrications, the Orthodox form of "fake news." Instead of the honored "70 Faces of Torah," just a single one.

Often citing the opinions of Maimonides, a pre-eminent advocate of the rationalist path, Rabbi Slifkin mentions "the position of Rambam and many others that the Sages of the Talmud were not infallible in matters of science," whereas, in many hareidi circles,"great Torah scholars are presumed to know much more than merely the texts they have studied."

Included in Rabbi Slifkin's wide swath of Jewish principles upon which rationalists and mystics part company are gematria, netilat yedayim, the size of a kezayit, prayer and Kaddish, Torah study, the plagues of Egypt, miracles and

"wonder" rabbis, angels and demons, the inherent sanctity of the land of Israel and the Jewish people and the Hebrew language, the function of mitzvot, segulot and mezuzot, sun's path at night, and infallibility of the Zohar and aggadata…in other words, nearly everything of a significant hashkafic and halakhic basis in which a believing Jew believes.

A representative sampling of the rabbi's thoughts:

* on yeridat hadorot, which "is often assumed today to be axiomatic and fundamental to Judaism, and supported by the full gamut of classical sources. In fact, the Talmud is ambivalent: there are a number of sources which indicate that certain earlier generations were superior, but there are also a number of sources which state that certain later generations were equal or ever superior."

* on Daat Torah, the notion "that the ultimate guidance on all areas of life -- even social and political decisions with no obvious connections to Torah. The contemporary concept of 'Daat Torah' is very different from traditional ideas about the wisdom and authority of rabbis. There are numerous historical forces involved in the evolution of the contemporary notion of Daat Torah ... while it is a source of wisdom, supplementary knowledge and experience is also useful."

* on ayin hara (the "evil eye."): "In Orthodox circles today, it is widely believed that a 'rational' view of ayin hara is that it means stirring up Divine judgment of others via jealousy, whereas a mystical, non-scientific view is that it involves some form of energy being emitted from the eye."

Though Rabbi Slifkin makes clear where his sympathies lie, he buttresses his opinions with a wealth of documentation that makes his book weighty in the literal and figurative sense; he express understanding of mystical fears, and does not overtly attack mystical sensibilities;" it is ... important," he writes, "not to undermine treasured beliefs of the community ... each society will have its own approach to which beliefs are a treasured component of their identity….

The rationalist approach is a Pandora's Box, which can potentially cause more problems than it solves, and which, on a communal level, demonstrates a tendency to weaken zealous passion for Torah observance and sacrifice…The leaders of the hareidi community have decided that, regardless of how many Rishonim and Aharonim espoused the rationalist approach, they do not want it legitimized in their community."

As Rabbi Slifkin points out, the current battle between forces of rationalism and mysticism are an outgrowth of the trenchant divide between the once-

emergent, then-minority hasidic movement and the entrenched and dominant "Litvak" approach to Jewish life and Torah learning, whose austere expression of fealty to Judaism fostered the growth of the more-emotional, less-text-oriented hasidic movement. The latter, of course, emphasized joy in daily life and allegiance to wonder-performing rabbis, rather than a cold connection to strict halakha.

Philosophically, the rabbi argues, the hasidim won. Their mystical hashkafa is unquestionably and unquestioningly taught now in most hareidi yeshivot, even the proudly Litvish, yeshivish, mitnagdish, "black hat" ones. Even worse, Rabbi Slifkin contends, alternate interpretations of acceptable norms of Jewish behavior or of Jewish belief are rarely taught, suggesting that only one approach exists.

The rabbi's book, though encyclopedic in its scope, noticeably omits such recent, and current, social issues as abortion, feminism, and approaches to homosexuality. Also absent are references to the year-long divide over reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic; opposition to such measures as protective masks, vaccines and social distancing after the book's writing; Rabbi Slifkin sheds light on the thinking of largely hareidi (i.e., mystical) opponents of life-saving medical practices, whose behavior and high death rate (the worst example were the tragic deaths at the Lag B'Omer celebration at Meron) has given the frum community a collective black eye.

The book offers limited concrete advice on how to reverse the anti-intellectual trend, but offers a necessary insight into why it is taking place. And he puts the topic into the context of Orthodox thought, which traditionally has not mandated -- beyond Rambam's widely accepted Thirteen Principles -- required beliefs. "Scripture does not list required beliefs ... there is no Code of Beliefs, no Ten Commandments of Belief. …Building up the community does not refer to matters of belief, but rather to practical acts -- the study of Torah, the fulfillment of mitzvot, the loyalty to the halakhic community. Being a Jew is primarily about how one lives, not how one thinks. And that, in turn, is why rationalists and mystics can co-exist.…The goal of this book is not to delegitimize the mystical approach ... [it] seeks to give voice to the rationalist approach."

Rabbi Slifkin's book is likely to earn wide opprobrium, if not an outright ban, in parts of the hareidi community. But that will be familiar territory for him.