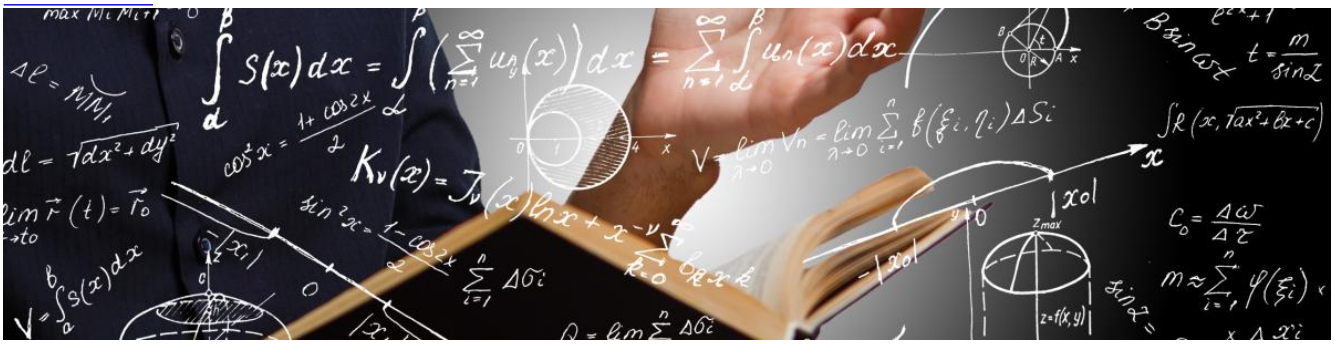
Which Judaism Should We Teach Our Children, and When?

View PDF



Prof. Menachem Kellner was Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Jewish Thought at Shalem College, Jerusalem. He is Wolfson Professor of Jewish Thought Emeritus, University of Haifa. This article appears in issue 39 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Several years ago a group of young, married, highly successful Orthodox professionals (physicians, lawyers, engineers, etc.) invited me to lead them in discussions of Jewish texts at their monthly get-togethers. The project broke up after several months when one of the couples divorced, creating a split in the community. But even before the couple broke up, it was quite evident to my wife (who joined me) and to me that I was not providing the sort of instruction they sought. I thought that I was being asked to teach them as a (then young) professor of medieval Jewish philosophy; it turns out that what they really wanted was the sort of homilies they had been hearing from rabbis and teachers ever since grade school.

I love Rashi, but I am very much aware that he provides an *interpretation* of the Torah, an interpretation full of biblical and midrashic literalism, not to mention superstitious beliefs.[1] We all learned Rashi's Torah when we were in grade school. My wife and I have been consistently surprised over the years to encounter friends and relatives whose professional lives (physicians, lawyers, engineers, etc.) are carried on at a high level of sophistication but whose Judaism remains at the level they were taught in grade school. The same can be said of many rabbis.

Many people are happy living Jewishly like this, and we say, more power to them. But what of those who are not? Some leave traditional Judaism altogether, some live bifurcated lives, and some live as *anusim*, *marranos*, hiding their true views from friends and family. Apropos *marranos*, we once asked a woman we know, wife of a very prominent rabbi, a renowned scholar in her own right, and a forthright feminist, how she "got away" with her "outrageous" views. Her answer was simple: I dress the part I am expected to play—my old-fashioned *sheitl* allows me to think *and say* things not usually expressed by people who look like me. Similarly, I once asked a Chabadnik of my acquaintance, prominent in his community, but whose views on Judaism were closer to mine than to those usually found in Chabad circles, what he told his children. He answered that he never lies to his children, but does not feel obligated to tell them all that he thinks either.

Rav Sa'adia Gaon was well aware of this problem in Baghdad in the eleventh century. He wrote his *Beliefs and Doctrines* for Jews who were not satisfied with "Rashi's Judaism." He did not address his book to those who were satisfied with the Judaism taught to them as children, and warned them not to read the book. I am sure he would have said about them: "More power to you." Rambam was himself also deeply aware of this issue. As is well-known, he wrote esoterically, hiding his true views from "Rashi Jews" *in order to protect them*. He also wrote carefully, modulating the way he expressed himself so that my beloved Lakewood relatives would be sure they understood what he was writing, while I am equally sure that they did not understand what he was really trying to say (for examples, see the first sentences in *Mishneh Torah*—"Laws of the Foundations of the Torah: i.1 and further on, vii.1). If I had a shekel for every time a traditionally educated student said to me after reading a Rambam text black on white, "But it is not possible that Rambam could have written that!" I could have retired years ago.

"Rashi's Judaism" is certainly warm and comforting, something we all need. But it is also disappointing to people who accept modern science as a route to truth, who reject superstition, who believe that all human beings are actually created in the image of God. "Rashi's Judaism" is also challenging for people who accept the values of liberal democracy. I must emphasize, the issue is not one of intelligence or personal sophistication, let alone of Jewish education. The following story illustrates this point:

When a friend of mine was a scholar-in-residence at a prominent Modern Orthodox synagogue years ago, he taught the passage at the end of "Laws of Slaves" in *Mishneh Torah* in which Maimonides emphasizes that Jews and Gentiles are all created equal by God and formed "in the same womb", i.e., there is no essential difference between Jews and Gentiles.[2] In the synagogue there was a sophisticated Torah scholar in his 20s who was also the son of a prominent yeshiva head. He protested this purported equality, and stayed with my friend for almost an hour after the Sabbath arguing that Maimonides did not say this because he could not have said it. The belief in Jewish superiority was an essential part of the young scholar's personal sense of Jewish identity. He had formed this identity under the influence of his parents, their peers, and his peers. The text was merely secondary and after the fact. When he saw the text, he was forced either to distort it or to deny its importance. After my friend proved to him that the universalistic interpretation was correct by citing numerous other Maimonidean texts in the *Mishneh Torah* and in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, this product of the best Modern Orthodox education gave up on Maimonides and said it really didn't matter what Maimonides said because he (and presumably "the Torah world") had decided in accordance with the views of Judah Halevi anyway. His prejudice was so deep that he preferred the opinion of the non-halakhist Halevi to that of the greatest halakhist in Jewish history!

I had a similar experience in my own synagogue in Haifa many years ago. I sought to prove to an older friend in the synagogue, a wonderful man and a learned Jew, that Rambam did not agree with Halevi (or with Kabbalah, or with much of Orthodoxy today, "yeshivish" or not) according to which Jews are inherently distinct from and superior to non-Jews. In contrast, I maintained that Rambam held that when the Torah taught that all human beings are wholly and equally created in the image of God, it meant it. I ended up writing a whole book on the subject (*Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People*, 1991). My friend read the book and then told me that I had made a compelling argument and that, in consequence, his respect for Rambam had declined.

I am not foolish enough to think that Rambam's Judaism, not Rashi's Judaism, should be taught to first graders. But when do our educators start the transition from grade school, to high school, to college, to yeshiva? All too often it appears that the answer today is: Never. I trust and hope that readers of *Conversations* will not and should not be satisfied with that answer.

[1] See Menachem Kellner, “Truth—or Consequences,” *Conversations* 30 (2018): 1–12. https://www.jewishideas.org/article/truth-or-consequences.

[2] On this passage, see Menachem Kellner and David Gillis, *Maimonides the Universalist: The Ethical Horizons of the Mishneh Torah* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2020), ch. 12.