History or Heresy

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Students of the Talmud may encounter some strange and troubling passages, especially within its aggadic sections.

This is hardly a new phenomenon. Skepticism regarding Talmudic realia — scientific, historical, and other non-legal observations recorded in the Talmud — far predates the modern period. The reliability of Talmudic medicine, for example, was questioned by the Geonim of Babylonia as early as the tenth century.

Much of this material can be understood only in historical context. When the sages commented on nature they drew on popular beliefs or used the limited observational techniques of their age. The rabbis acknowledged their own scientific shortcomings; they conceded, for example, that Gentile astronomers had bested them in a debate about the sun's path at night.

Superstition in the Talmud can be especially unsettling. Again, our response must be to invoke history. It should go without saying that the references to demons, witchcraft, evil spirits, the evil eye, incantations, amulets, magic, and astrology that are scattered throughout the Talmud and midrashim derive from ancient Near Eastern or Hellenistic culture, and that these phenomena have no basis in physical reality.

The premium that the sages placed on reality is on display in those passages where they struggle to reconcile popular ideas — the realities of their day now considered superstitious or pseudoscientific — with traditional Jewish values.

Tractate Shabbat records a debate on the question of astrological influence over the Jewish people. Despite the pervasiveness of astrology in the ancient world, the rabbis were uncomfortable with the moral implications of astrological determinism. But they could not dismiss astrology as nonsense; it appeared as real to premodern people as any other force of nature. After examining both sides of the issue, the Talmud concludes that although the nations are subject to the stars, “Israel is free of astrological influence.” This limited the impact of astrology and preserved Israel’s moral freedom.

Demons appear frequently in the Talmud. Near the end of Pesachim we find a lengthy digression on demons and witches, once thought to inhabit the margins of society (one demon was familiar enough to be known as Joseph). But the Talmud’s bottom line on the subject is explicitly subversive: Demons are out there, but they harass only those who pay them too much attention. The rabbis regarded demonology to be largely at odds with Judaism. Short of denying their existence, which would have been impossible in the Talmudic era, the rabbis made demons essentially irrelevant.

Rather than cause for embarrassment, I find such Talmudic discussions inspiring. They grapple honestly with contemporary cultural issues and demonstrate a refusal to disengage from reality.

The sages transmitted a timeless tradition, but they did not live outside of time. They did not float above history. They lived and breathed the realities of their environment — a sign of spiritual and moral courage rather than weakness.

Despite a persistent anti-rationalist tradition, the greatest Jewish thinkers and halachists from Maimonides to Samson Raphael Hirsch insisted that talmudic science was a product of its time, rather than a binding part of the Oral Law.

This bears emphasis and repetition because it is currently under attack as heresy.

An increasingly vocal school of thought claims that all unqualified scientific statements of the sages were divinely inspired and must be accepted as truth. A corollary to this position is that modern science is transitory and unreliable compared to the divine wisdom of the sages. Its proponents maintain that those who say otherwise are disloyal to Jewish tradition.

This new talmudic fundamentalism is a major departure from mainstream traditional Jewish thought. Whatever its motivation, it is an ideology that is

tragically out of touch with reality. It also smacks of intellectual desperation, as if to say that observant Judaism had better hang on for dear life to the divinity of the entire Talmud — including its realia — or it will slide down a slippery slope to assimilation.

History attempts to uncover the realities of the past. Fearing that history will not only explain tradition but explain it away, tradition once viewed history as its natural enemy. But denying history is no longer an option, and giants of tradition and history have shown us how to marry the two.

Despite those determined to drive a wedge between tradition and reality, there is reason to be optimistic. We can be certain that “truth shall spring up from the earth,” even when it occasionally finds itself underfoot.

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