The Use of Traditional Scholarship to Build Bridges and Mend Rifts

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“The Disciples of the Wise Increase Peace in the World”:

The Use of Traditional Scholarship to Build Bridges and Mend Rifts

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Introduction

At the end of five different tractates of the Talmud, we find the following teaching:

> Rabbi Eleazar said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: The disciples of the wise increase peace in the world, as it says, And all your children shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children [*banayikh*] (Isaiah 54:13). Read not *banayikh* [“your children”] but *bonayikh* [“your builders”] (*Berakhot* 64a, cf. *Yevamot* 122b, *Nazir* 66b, *Keritot* 28b, *Tamid* 32b).

Genuine Torah scholars are supposed to be builders of society and increase peace in the world. When rabbis and scholars are seeking heaven and communal unity, their Torah scholarship is the ideal tool to unite diverse people.

The Talmud celebrates the diversity of the Jewish people by coining a blessing:

> Rabbi Hamnuna further said: If one sees a crowd of Israelites, he should say: Blessed is He who discerns secrets (*Berakhot* 58a).

Rather than considering conformity a blessing, the Talmud idealizes diversity as something for which God deserves praise. We seek Jewish unity, but not conformity.[1]

Command of a multiplicity of opinions, the hallmark of a Torah scholar, can be used to teach the many legitimate avenues into Torah. The sixteenth-century commentator Rabbi Samuel Eidels (Maharsha) explains that God revealed the Torah in the presence of 600,000 Israelites because the Torah can be interpreted in 600,000 different ways![2] Although the cliché “two Jews, three opinions” may be true, a more telling adage would be, “one learned Jew, dozens of opinions.” When Torah scholars learn sources in depth, they realize that every single point is debated by the greatest rabbinic minds. The dazzling range of possibilities teaches uncertainty, and also that people can hold significantly different opinions and still be unified under the roof of the Torah.

We live in an age of terrible fragmentation. Whereas debates are hardwired into Jewish tradition, rifts are detrimental to the Jewish community. Often, rifts arise when each side adopts a partial truth from within tradition to the near-exclusion of another partial truth held by the other side. Good Torah scholarship, in its attempt to navigate the two halves, offers an opportunity to build bridges and mend these rifts.

In this essay, we will briefly survey a few areas pertaining to (1) relations between Orthodox Jews; (2) relations between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews; and (3) relations between Jews and non-Jews. The guiding principle is that a faithful commitment to Torah and unity coupled with the range of opinions from within tradition offers models to build bridges and mend rifts without demanding

conformity.

Within Orthodoxy

Religious Authority of Midrash

Jewish tradition venerates earlier rabbinic scholarship and places a premium on the Talmud and other midrashic collections. Simultaneously, the *peshat* school from the post-talmudic Geonim down to the present has established that the biblical text remains at the center of inquiry, and non-legal rabbinic teachings are not binding. The scholarly pursuit of truth in Torah is imperative.[3]

Many within the Orthodox world adopt only half of that truth at the expense of the other. One side dogmatically embraces selected talmudic and midrashic teachings as literal, and insists that this position is required as part of having faith in the teachings of the Sages. Another group dismisses the talmudic traditions as being far removed from biblical text and reality. The first group accuses the second of denigration of the Sages, whereas the second group accuses the first of being fundamentalists who ignore science and scholarship.

The truth is, this rift has been around for a long time. Rambam (1138–1204) lamented this very imbalance in his introduction to *Perek Helek* in tractate *Sanhedrin*. He divided Jews into three categories:

> The first group is the largest one.…They understand the teachings of the sages only in their literal sense, in spite of the fact that some of their teachings when taken literally, seem so fantastic and irrational that if one were to repeat them literally, even to the uneducated, let alone sophisticated scholars, their amazement would prompt them to ask how anyone in the world could believe such things true, much less edifying. The members of this group are poor in knowledge. One can only regret their folly. Their very effort to honor and to exalt the sages in accordance with their own meager understanding actually humiliates them. As God lives, this group destroys the glory of the Torah of God and says the opposite of what it intended. For He said in His perfect Torah, “The nation is a wise and understanding people” (Deuteronomy 4:6).…

Such individuals are pious, but foolish. They misunderstand the intent of the Sages, and draw false conclusions in the name of religion.

Misguided as this first group is, at least it is preferable to the second group, which also takes the words of the Sages literally but rejects their teachings as a result:

> The second group is also a numerous one. It, too, consists of persons who, having read or heard the words of the sages, understand them according to their simple literal sense and believe that the sages intended nothing else than what may be learned from their literal interpretation. Inevitably, they ultimately declare the sages to be fools, hold them up to contempt, and slander what does not deserve to be slandered…. The members of this group are so pretentiously stupid that they can never attain genuine wisdom…. This is an accursed group, because they attempt to refute men of established greatness whose wisdom has been demonstrated to competent men of science….

The first group is reverent to the Sages, whereas the second group is open to science and scholarship and therefore rejects the Sages and their teachings. Both groups fail because of their fundamental misunderstanding of the Sages.

Rambam then celebrates that rare ideal scholar, who combines those two half-truths into the whole truth:

> There is a third group. Its members are so few in number that it is hardly appropriate to call them a group…. This group consists of people to whom the greatness of our sages is clear…. They know that the sages did not speak nonsense, and it is clear to them that the words of the sages contain both an obvious and a hidden meaning. Thus, whenever the sages spoke of things that seem impossible, they were employing the style of riddle and parable which is the method of truly great thinkers....[4]

In addition to Rambam's insistence on the fact that the Sages did not always mean their words literally, we must add that the greatest *peshat* commentators, from Rabbi Saadiah Gaon to Rashi to Ibn Ezra to Ramban to Abarbanel and so many others, venerated the Sages without being bound by all of their non-legal comments. These rabbinic thinkers combine reverence for the Sages with a commitment to scholarship and integrity to the text of the Torah.[5]

Openness to Non-Orthodox and Non-Jewish Scholarship[6]

Jewish tradition's commitment to truth should lead us to accept the truth from whoever says it. Rambam lived by this axiom,[7] and many great rabbinic figures before and after him similarly espoused this principle.[8]On the other hand, it is difficult to distinguish between knowledge and theory. Scholarship invariably is accompanied by conscious and unconscious biases of scholars, some of which may stray from traditional Jewish thought and belief.

This tension is expressed poignantly in an anecdote cited by Rabbi Joseph ibn Aknin (c. 1150–c. 1220). After noting the works of several rabbinic predecessors who utilized Christian and Muslim writings in their commentaries, he quotes a story related by Shemuel Ha-Nagid:

> Rabbi Mazliah b. Albazek the rabbinic judge of Saklia told [Shemuel Ha-Nagid] when he came from Baghdad… that one day in [Rabbi Hai Gaon's] yeshiva they studied the verse, "let my head not refuse such choice oil" (Psalms 141:5), and those present debated its meaning. Rabbi Hai of blessed memory told Rabbi Mazliah to go to the Catholic Patriarch and ask him what he knew about this verse, and this upset [Rabbi Mazliah]. When [Rabbi Hai] saw that Rabbi Mazliah was upset, he rebuked him, "Our saintly predecessors who are our guides solicited information on language and interpretation from many religious communities—and even of shepherds, as is well known!"[9]

All scholarship is valuable, but all scholars are necessarily biased. There is no easy solution to this dilemma, and rabbinic scholars continue to espouse different approaches for the proper balance in this issue.[10]

Sins of Biblical Heroes

In recent years, particularly in Israel, there has been a raging debate regarding the sins of biblical heroes. One side insists that even ostensibly egregious sins, such as David and Bathsheba-Uriah (2 Samuel 11), Solomon and idolatry (1 Kings 11), and others should not be taken at face value. On the contrary, numerous rabbinic sources insist that these biblical figures did not violate cardinal sins as the plain sense of the text suggests.

Others maintain that the biblical texts speak for themselves. The Bible exposes the flaws of its greatest heroes, teaching that nobody is above the law, and nobody is perfect. There also are many rabbinic sources in support of this position.

In this instance, each side of the debate represents a half-truth. One group properly teaches a deep sense of awe and reverence for our heroes, whereas the other group correctly insists that nobody is above the Torah, and even the greatest figures are vulnerable to sin. Both of these messages emerge from the biblical texts and rabbinic tradition. However, people who adopt only one or the other half-truth cannot even engage with one another. The first group accuses the other of irreverence, whereas the second group protests that the first ignores the biblical text and its commentaries, and also justifies the immorality of religious leaders in the name of tradition.

Responsible rabbis and educators carefully integrate those two half-truths into a balanced picture more in tune with the biblical texts and rabbinic tradition, teaching that nobody is above the Torah, while maintaining proper awe and reverence for our heroes.[11]

Orthodox and Non-Orthodox Jews

Judaism includes the basic tenets of belief in one God, divine revelation of the Torah, and a concept of divine providence and reward-punishment. Although there have been debates over the precise definitions and contours of Jewish belief, these core principles are universally accepted as part of Orthodox tradition.[12]

The question for believing Jews today is: How should we relate to the overwhelming majority of Jews, who likely do not fully believe in classical Jewish

beliefs?

As we will discuss at length in the following essay, there are two medieval models to approach this issue. Rambam adopts a dogmatic approach: Jews who do not fully believe in all central Jewish beliefs are considered heretics and must be excluded from the community. Rambam includes even Jews who are ignorant of Jewish belief or who make honest errors in the category of heretics.

Most medieval rabbinic figures, however, distinguish between heretics who willfully reject Jewish beliefs; and Jews who make honest errors or are ignorant. We must teach the latter, and include them in the community. We ideally want all Jews to learn, observe, and believe in the Torah and tradition. However, we should not exclude as heretics those who fall short unless they intentionally wish to exclude themselves from the community.

The approach espoused by Ra'avad, Duran, and Albo reflects a productive means of addressing today's fragmented society from within tradition. We stand for an eternal set of beliefs and practices, and we embrace and teach all Jews as we build community together.

Jews and Non-Jews

The Torah embraces universalistic values that apply to all humanity. All people are descended from one couple, so there is no room for bigotry (*Sanhedrin* 37a). All people are created in God's image (Genesis 1:26).[13] There is a universal morality demanded by the Torah, codified in the Talmud as the Seven Noahide Laws. The messianic visions of the prophets foresee that all humanity will one day live in harmony by accepting God and the requisite moral life demanded by the Torah.[14]

Simultaneously, God made a singular covenant with the people of Israel through the Torah. Israel plays a unique role as a "kingdom of priests and holy nation" (Exodus 19:6), has a separate set of laws revealed by God, and occupies a central role in the covenantal history between God and humanity.

Many within the Jewish community focus almost exclusively on the particularistic elements of tradition, and consequently look down upon non-Jews and non-observant Jews. Many other Jews focus almost exclusively on the universalistic vision of Judaism, ignoring Jewish belief, law, and values in favor of

modern Western values. Needless to say, the respective espousing of half-truths again leads to rifts within the community.

Tradition teaches a sensitive balance of universalism and particularism.[15] The Torah has a special vision for Jews and simultaneously embraces all of humanity in an effort to perfect society.[16]

Conclusion

We have seen several areas where traditional scholarship can build bridges between half-truths that divide people. Within the Orthodox world, reverence toward heroes and the Sages must be balanced with fidelity to the biblical text, commitment to prophetic integrity, and commitment to truth in scholarship. In relating to non-observant or non-believing Jews, we must espouse and teach traditional belief and observance, but not exclude those who are not fully connected to tradition. The Torah teaches both particularistic and universalistic values, and it is critical to adopt both in a faithful religious worldview. This position enables believing Jews to sincerely love all humanity and to long for universal morality and harmony.

It is easier to espouse a half-truth than to struggle for the whole truth. The perils of this approach are not theoretical, but an unfortunate and avoidable part of our current reality. It is up to the disciples of the wise to build the ideological basis for increasing peace in the world by upholding and promoting the eternal values of the Torah.

Notes

[1] See further in Rabbi Marc D. Angel, “Orthodoxy and Diversity,” *Conversations* 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 70–81.

[2] Maharsha, *Hiddushei Aggadot* on *Berakhot* 58a.

[3] See, for example, Rabbi Marc D. Angel, “Authority and Dissent: A Discussion of Boundaries,” *Tradition* 25:2 (Winter 1990), pp. 18–27; Rabbi Hayyim David Halevi, *Aseh Lekha Rav*, vol. 5, resp. 49 (pp. 304–307); Rabbi Michael Rosensweig, “*Elu va-Elu Divre Elokim Hayyim*: Halakhic Pluralism and Theories of Controversy,” *Tradition* 26:3 (Spring 1992), pp. 4–23; Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 1–20; Rabbi Moshe Shamah, “On Interpreting Midrash,” *Conversations* 15 (Winter 2013), pp. 27–39.

[4] Translation from the Maimonides Heritage Center, https://www.mhcny.org/qt/1005.pdf. Accessed March 15, 2016.

[5] See further in Rabbi Marc D. Angel, “Reflections on Torah Education and Mis-Education,” *Conversations* 24 (Winter 2016), pp. 18–32; Rabbi Nahum E. Rabinovitch, “Faith in the Sages: What Is It?” (Hebrew), in *Mesilot Bilvavam* (Ma’alei Adumim: Ma’aliyot, 2014), pp. 103–114.

[6] See Hayyim Angel, “The Use of Non-Orthodox Scholarship in Orthodox Bible Learning,” *Conversations* 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 17–19; Nathaniel Helfgot, “Reflections on the Use of Non-Orthodox Wisdom in the Orthodox Study of Tanakh,” *Conversations* 15 (Winter 2013), pp. 53–61.

[7] In his introduction to *Pirkei Avot* (*Shemonah Perakim*), Rambam writes, “Know that the things about which we shall speak in these chapters and in what will come in the commentary are not matters invented on my own.... They are matters gathered from the discourse of the Sages in the Midrash, the Talmud, and other compositions of theirs, as well as from the discourse of both the ancient and modern philosophers and from the compositions of many men. Hear the truth from whoever says it.” Translation in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, Raymond Weiss and Charles Butterworth (New York: Dover, 1983), p. 60.

[8] See, for example, Ephraim E. Urbach, “The Pursuit of Truth as a Religious Obligation” (Hebrew), in *Ha-Mikra va-Anahnu*, ed. Uriel Simon (Ramat-Gan: Institute for Judaism and Thought in Our Time, 1979), pp. 13–27; Uriel Simon, “The Pursuit of Truth that Is Required for Fear of God and Love of Torah” (Hebrew), *ibid.*, pp. 28–41; Marvin Fox, “Judaism, Secularism, and Textual Interpretation,” in *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marvin Fox (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), pp. 3–26. See also Hayyim Angel,

“The Yeshivah and the Academy: How We Can Learn from One Another in Biblical Scholarship,” reprinted in this volume.

[9] *Hitgalut ha-Sodot ve-Hofa’at ha-Me’orot*, ed. Abraham S. Halkin (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1964), pp. 493–495. In Hagigah 15b, God Himself initially refused to quote Rabbi Meir in the heavenly court since Rabbi Meir continued to learn from his teacher Elisha b. Avuyah, though the latter had become a heretic. However, Rabbah instantly rejected God’s policy, stressing that Rabbi Meir carefully sifted out the valuable teachings from the “peel.” Consequently, God reversed His policy and began quoting “His son” Rabbi Meir in the heavenly court.

[10] See further discussion in Hayyim Angel, “From Black Fire to White Fire: Conversations about Religious Tanakh Learning Methodology,” reprinted in this volume; Hayyim Angel, “The Literary-Theological Study of Tanakh,” afterword to Moshe Sokolow, *Tanakh: An Owner’s Manual: Authorship, Canonization, Masoretic Text, Exegesis, Modern Scholarship and Pedagogy* (Brooklyn, NY: Ktav, 2015), pp. 192–207; Hayyim Angel, “Faith and Scholarship Can Walk Together: Rabbi Amnon Bazak on the Challenges of Academic Bible Study in Traditional Learning,” *Tradition* 47:3 (Fall 2014), pp 78–88; Rabbi Shalom Carmy, “Always Connect,” *Conversations* 15 (Winter 2013), pp. 1–12; Rabbi Shalom Carmy, “A Room with a View, but a Room of Our Own,” in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), pp. 1–38.

[11] See, for example, Rabbi Amnon Bazak, *Ad ha-Yom ha-Zeh: Until This Day: Fundamental Questions in Bible Teaching* (Hebrew), ed. Yoshi Farajun (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2013), pp. 432–470; Rabbi Shalom Carmy, “To Get the Better of Words: An Apology for *Yir’at Shamayim* in Academic Jewish Studies,” *Torah U-Madda Journal* 2 (1990), pp. 7–24; Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, “A Living Torah” (Hebrew), in *Hi Sihati: Al Derekh Limmud ha-Tanakh*, ed. Yehoshua Reiss (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), pp. 17–30; Rabbi Yaakov Medan, *David u-Vat Sheva: Ha-Het, ha-Onesh, ve-ha-Tikkun* (Hebrew) (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2002), pp. 7–24; Rabbi Joel B. Wolowelsky, “*Kibbud Av* and *Kibbud Avot*: Moral Education and Patriarchal Critiques,” *Tradition* 33:4 (Summer 1999), pp. 35–44.

[12] See Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004). Review Essay, Rabbi Yitzchak Blau, “Flexibility with a Firm Foundation: On Maintaining Jewish Dogma,” *Torah U-Madda Journal* 12 (2004), pp. 179–191.

[13] See Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, *In His Image: The Image of God in Man* (New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2015).

[14] See especially Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2002). See also Alan Brill, *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); Alan Brill, *Judaism and World Religions: Encountering Christianity, Islam, and Eastern Traditions* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); Alan Brill, "Many Nations Under God: Judaism and Other Religions," *Conversations* 2 (Autumn 2008), pp. 39–49.

[15] See Rabbi Marc D. Angel, "The Universalistic Vision of Judaism," *Conversations* 12 (Winter 2012), pp. 95–100; Rabbi Marc D. Angel, *Voices in Exile: A Study in Sephardic Intellectual History* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1991), pp. 197–207; Rabbi Marc D. Angel with Hayyim Angel, *Rabbi Haim David Halevi: Gentle Scholar, Courageous Thinker* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2006), pp. 189–198.

[16] See Hayyim Angel, "'The Chosen People': An Ethical Challenge," reprinted in this volume.