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Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Book Review

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Rabbi Gil Student, *Articles of Faith: Traditional Jewish Belief in the Internet Era* (Kodesh Press, 2024)

For the past 20 years, we have been treated to Rabbi Gil Student's online presence. Through his website and blog, Hirhurim-Torah Musings, Rabbi Student addresses critical issues pertaining to Orthodoxy and the broader Jewish community. He tackles the most controversial issues from a balanced, erudite, and reverent perspective.

Now, Rabbi Student has collected several of his seminal essays into a full-length book. The volume is an excellent investigation of many of the most important topics that engage various segments of the broader Modern Orthodox community: Torah and science, the role of the internet in the halakhic process, dogma, Bible criticism, women and the rabbinate, religious Zionism, and so much more. Agree or disagree with Rabbi Student's conclusions, any thoughtful individual should read this formidable book and mine its wealth of sources and analysis.

In his essays, "Faith in the Postmodern World" and "A Response to Biblical Criticism," Rabbi Student develops the approach that new theories—philosophical or biblical—cannot be conclusively proven. Drawing from luminaries such as Rambam and Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer (1795-1874), Rabbi Student asserts that unproven theories cannot replace faith. Rabbi Kalischer noted that the theories of great philosophers of the past have since been demolished. This historical reality

should cause anyone who exhibits too much confidence in contemporary theories to pause before accepting them as dogma and rejecting our millennia-old faith. The same holds true for various hypotheses of biblical criticism, which, by definition, remain unproven.

In that essay on philosophy, Rabbi Student articulates a cardinal principle of Jewish learning: “In order to reach the 19th century, we have to start in the 10th so we can see the past on which the present is built” (30). This elegant statement encapsulates the wisdom of Jewish tradition in every arena. Those who decontextualize contemporary ideas are likely to get swept up in them because they have no broader context. In contrast, Jewish thought, halakhah, and all other areas of scholarship and practice engage with the wisdom of earlier authorities, carefully evaluate their views, and then reach decisions fully rooted in the traditional process of Torah learning. Rabbi Student’s essays model that wisdom in the fullest sense.

In his essay “Fundamentals of Faith: Debating the Boundaries,” Rabbi Student critiques a bedrock argument of Professor Marc Shapiro in his exceptional volume, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (2004). Shapiro claims that halakhic authority is restricted to the area of halakhah, but not aggadah (rabbinic teachings without a halakhic ruling).

Rabbi Student carefully demonstrates that Rambam, the *Shulhan Arukh*, and other leading halakhic authorities never drew that distinction. Rather, they distinguish between halakhah and aggadot that have practical halakhic ramifications, and aggadot that do not. That latter category in fact is non-binding, and people may choose from among many opinions. The former, however, is subject to the halakhic process since there are halakhic ramifications. Definitions of a heretic (one who denies fundamental tenets of Jewish belief, or who adopts beliefs foreign to Judaism), therefore, have halakhic significance. Individuals may choose to believe or not believe, of course, but halakhists should and do define the boundaries of authentic Jewish belief.

In his essay, “In Defense of the Local Rabbi,” Rabbi Student carefully asserts the role of community rabbis to make decisions for their own communities. Nobody else knows that particular community as intimately. Of course, community rabbis often must consult leading halakhic authorities to determine the range of halakhic possibilities. Ultimately, however, the local rabbi should make the most appropriate decision from within that range of opinion.

Thoughtful individuals who take Modern Orthodoxy seriously will benefit immensely from Rabbi Student's volume. On a personal level, I wish I had it when I was writing some of my earlier articles. Aside from the many sources that were new to me, Rabbi Student challenges several basic assumptions that I have since revisited (and have revised the drafts of those articles). That is the greatness of Torah, which encompasses a lifetime of learning and growth.

Rabbi Student introduces his book, "The strongest force in the world is the power of an idea" (xxv). These ideas are what are needed to build a stronger and more vibrant community.