

Shabbat shalom! A note of caution – I spent much time this week writing a reply to a student question about the role of psak in politics, which I hope to send out to you soon. The short-term cost of that investment is that this week’s devar Torah is somewhat stream of consciousness and very abstract. Those looking for a more text-based discussion are encouraged to follow [this link](#) to a past Harvard Hillel devar Torah.

It is a peculiar error of modernity that rationalism and mysticism are presumed to be opposites, when historically they have generally been allies. I first learned this by reading Bertrand Russell, but I think the same point can easily be made within Jewish tradition, for example by studying Rambam’s concepts of worship and Providence.

One source of the modern confusion is semantic. Rationalists tend to define those who oppose them as mystics, in the same way that pilpul is often a generic term of opprobrium for methods of Talmud study other than one’s own, so that both mysticism and pilpul may be used to describe methods and position that are polar opposites.

So let me begin by defining my terms. Rationalism, for the purposes of this devar Torah, means “the belief that one can derive all abstract truths and proper situational behavior by formally reasoning from first principles”. Mysticism means “the belief that there are aspects of reality that cannot be accessed through physical experience, but can be accessed through other means”.

Platonists, who believe that abstract ideas are “more real”, than physical objects – which are merely ‘shadows’ of the ideas – are thus mystics by definition. And rationalists, like mathematicians, will always have a tendency to Platonism.

In twentieth century Jewish thought, I have always been struck by those who consider Mordechai Kaplan a rationalist, when his belief in “the force that makes for good in history” seems as mystical as they come. Obi Wan-Kenobi was no anti-mystic¹.

Ralbag’s commentary on this week’s parshah provides another example. Ralbag’s commentary separates literary from thematic analysis; each section ends with a list of “toeliot”, or morals. Here are his eleventh and twelfth morals drawn out of the story of Yehudah and Tamar:

11. This with regard to conceptual understandings. That actions which are intended/prepared for good purposes, even though they are in and of themselves somewhat shameful, the one who puts effort into them will be aided by Hashem the Blessed. Thus you will find that Tamar was aided in this action, such that her aim was achieved, namely that she became pregnant from Yehudah and bore him children, one of whom became the great of the tribe of Yehudah. Now she did this with wisdom, covering her face so that he would not recognize her, and taking security from him to prove to him that it was from him that she was pregnant.

12. This with regard to conceptual understandings. To tell of the strength of Hashem’s Providence toward those He loves, that when they wish to do a shameful act, Hashem the Exalted prepares for them something that will satisfy their thirst without shame, in this case that consorting with prostitutes was shameful for the “shlemim” (= people of integrity) even before the giving of the Torah. This is what Yehudah meant by saying “let her have them, lest we become objects of ridicule”, and Hashem prepared for him someone (Tamar) who had a legal claim on him, in accordance with what was practiced (under the rubric of “yibum” = levirate marriage) before the giving of the Torah.

Ralbag certainly qualifies as a rationalist, and yet here he introduces fascinating forms of Providence without any apparent textual compulsion - his morals are not derived from the text, rather he mines the story for support for principles he already believes. I note tangentially that these morals are dangerous as well as fascinating, and one should

¹ And Kaplan never paid enough attention to the problem of the Dark Side.

avoid ever relying on them prospectively. Even if Ralbag were correct, G-d would not support every intrinsically shameful action that the actor believed was necessary for a greater cause, nor would He prevent the moral harm of any lapse by those believing themselves to be “shalem”.

What rationalism and mysticism share, I suggest, is an unwillingness to tolerate disorder, to believe that there is anything in the universe that cannot be systematized.

To a significant degree this is simply a human characteristic – Kant’s disproof of the argument from design was that the human mind inevitably imposes order on data, that we are incapable of relating to information without organizing it into patterns.

What is often underappreciated is that Kant’s disproof works as well or better against science as against religion. The entire scientific enterprise rests on the presumption that the universe as a whole is consistent, that things happen for reasons other than randomness – but what if that consistency exists only in our minds, which cheerfully filter out anomalies as “experimental error”?

The desire to systematize, to construct a world in which no stray locks of hair fall irrepressibly over our mental eyes, also drives the Brisker derekh in Talmudic learning.

Of course, there are mystics who embrace contradictions, i.e. breakdowns in the capacity of reason to explain the world – the affinities between the writings of Rav Kook and those of Walt Whitman can be striking – but at least in the former case, Hegel provided a model in which the embrace of contradictions could itself be systematized, and thus to intellectually assimilate even more data into a recognizable pattern.

Psychologically, it may be that the perception of order is a necessary condition for happiness. Rabbi Irving Greenberg has explained compellingly that *aveilut*=mourning fundamentally consists of experiencing the world as disordered. I suspect that this insight lies behind Wallace Stevens’ remarkably beautiful and yet incomprehensible (to me) poem “The Idea of Order at Key West”.

R. Aharon Lichtenstein has said that “the greatness of the Rav (as a *lamdan*) was that he knew which details to ignore”. Ordered systems always require ignoring some of the data, and greatness generally consists in knowing which data can be safely ignored.

The risk, in Torah as in science, is that one will choose to ignore the wrong details. In both realms an important antidote is curiosity, the abiding interest in anomalies and loose threads, along with the capacity to temporarily tolerate disorder in the hope of finding a better pattern.

Obviously, that kind of curiosity is more attractive to those who find existing patterns insufficient for other reasons. And for the same reason, it can be threatening to those who find existing patterns deeply satisfying. Nor should we believe that the result of pulling at loose threads is always a more beautiful tapestry – sometimes the result is simply a loose string, or an amateurishly woven jumble.

This conflict of sensibilities may itself be a useful pattern for explaining some of the current issues of controversy within Modern Orthodoxy. May we find the wisdom to know which threads will benefit from pulling and reweaving, and which are best left alone.

Shabbat shalom
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