

A Debate Between Me and Myself on Orthodoxy and Academic Jewish Studies

Introduction

Over the next couple of weeks, I intend to conduct a correspondence with myself regarding the relationship of Orthodoxy and Academic Jewish Studies. The two protagonists will be "Avi", a sober yet hopeful realist, and "AIWAC", an unrepentant pessimist on the subject. Each post will contain a challenge and a response.

I wish I could claim the main reason I'm doing this is for the "greater good". After all, the relationship between Orthodox thought and academic Jewish Studies is THE elephant in our intellectual room. With all due respect to Rabbi Slifkin's struggle on evolution and discussions of "Torah U-Madda", the main challenges have long since moved from hard sciences to the humanities and social sciences. Pretty much all debates on the subject and crises of faith I've seen on O-blogs concern matters within the purview of these areas (TMS/DH, the nature of TSBP and halacha, censorship of Rabbinnic sources and more unpleasant sides of *galut* communal life &c).

In truth the main goal is my own personal catharsis. I have been struggling with this issue for many years and have never found an adequate platform to express my frustrations and dilemmas. Nor do I really have anyone to talk to on the subject who would understand what's going on. Hence, this series of posts, the sole principle of which is to let my problems move from my mind to cyberspace. Maybe I'll be able to finally feel a little better once I've let it out.

Round One

For my non-Orthodox readers out there, *pardes* is a metaphor for the study of metaphysics and theology (some include mysticism). It was considered a religiously very dangerous pursuit by the Talmudic authorities - of the four great Rabbis who "entered" this field in the story, only one came out with his wits and Judaism intact (one died, one went insane and a third left Judaism) - Avi/AIWAC]

Dear Avi,

I have been following your posts closely. You are quite correct in saying that "Torah and Chochmah", or the relationship between Orthodoxy and the humanities is THE last major intellectual stumbling block for integration in to the modern world. Your efforts in the past few months regarding coping with Bible Criticism, for instance, are admirable.

However, I feel you are fighting a losing battle, one in which you are hopelessly outmatched. For every Yehuda Elitzur, there are at least five (if not more) James Kugels. Indeed, it is more than likely that the latter is simply saying publicly what many Orthodox *maskilim* feel in private. The difficulties involved in this field make the *pardes* of yore seem downright inviting.

Even if we would set aside the issue of literary and historical Bible Criticism, the sheer volume of problems created by modern scholarship for Jewish history and thought make the ideal of "Torah and Chochmah" a fool's errand. It is pointless to compare modern scholarship to the scholarship of Chazal and the Rishonim. The two are different both in the degree of criticism and scope.

Look at S., of [On the Main Line](#), someone who has a vast knowledge of the relevant sources and periods. He has said repeatedly in various comments that scholarship post-Enlightenment is anathema to Orthodoxy. Who are you to disagree?

Give it up and save yourself the trouble. This is one field we can't deal with.

Yours, AIWAC

Dear AIWAC,

Thank you for your letter. I certainly hear your concerns (I myself often feel deep despair on the issue) and am aware that this is the attitude of many in the OJ-world, not just extreme RW know-nothings. Indeed, many of the self-same *maskilim* no doubt feel the same way. Nevertheless, I must demur from your diagnosis as well as the proposed cure (i.e. isolation).

First, let's get something out of the way right now. The fact that the numerical odds are against me and those like me does not in any way deter me. I will not be bullied into a position simply because, say 80% (or even 90%) of Orthodox scholars say otherwise. Nor will I concede to

the argument that because S. is very knowledgeable, I must bow to his authority and accept his verdict. I have several years of formal academic training and informal academic study in ancient and modern history under my belt. I have more than earned the right to an informed opinion, even if it runs counter to others.

Now, let's get to your main argument – that the scope and tone of modern scholarship precludes Orthodoxy absorbing or even confronting it. It is true that how we do so will require careful and controlled consideration. It will take time and will probably be a lot slower than the pace of scholarship. Nevertheless, I believe it can be done.

The first thing we'd need to do – before we so much as look at a manuscript, pottery shard or book – would be to establish "coping rules", a framework that would help us navigate the myriad problems and issues and remain with our sanity and religiosity intact. I don't know what such a framework would look like, but I think I can make some initial suggestions:

1) Define rules of acceptance of evidence and interpretation –

Not everything that has an academic stamp and copious footnotes merits attention. Furthermore, the very nature of even the hard sciences is that they can be falsified. *Al ahav kama ve-kama*, the humanities and social sciences. We should have a discussion where we lay down ground rules as to what we accept as absolutely compelling evidence and what is simply "likely" or probable or sophisticated speculation. [Prof. Elitzur's article](#) is especially valuable in this respect.

2) Sharply differentiate between facts/interpretations and value judgments –

Facts and interpretations are matters for scholarly debate and method. Value judgments are not. Just because something happened historically does not make it legitimate from our POV. Our forefathers were idol worshippers in the First Temple period. This is a matter of historical and archaeological record. This does not mean that it is OK now. We need to draw a strict line between what happened in the past and what's "kosher" now. This does not of course mean that we should immediately de-legitimize whatever our forebears did, just as we should not immediately endorse such. I'm simply saying that the historical facts must go through a "screening process" where we decide whether we accept various acts and attitudes as OK.

3) History of Halacha and Halacha –

What's true for values goes double for halacha. Textual and historical criticism of the Talmud and later commentators is par for the course. So are the discovery and analysis of manuscripts that are often different from the texts we possess today. The question we must answer is when, and how, we should incorporate such findings into halacha?

For instance, does it matter halachically if a statement in the gemara was made by a 1st generation Amora or a stamai? Does the discovery of differing manuscripts compel changes in psak or even *limmud*? What gave these sources their status – their authors or the act of canonization? Once we have answers to these questions, we'll be much better equipped to deal with scholarship on the issue.

Coping with modern scholarship is indeed a difficult task, one that will require much thought and work. I do not, however, believe the endeavor to be impossible.

Yours, Avi

Second Round

Dear Avi,

I wish I could share your hope that we can learn to absorb and deal with scholarship; but I doubt it. For all the high-falutin' rhetoric about the "ideal synthesis" between Torah and Chochma, there sure are a lot of compartmentalizers out there who simply separate between their religious and their professional life. I mean how often have you heard an Orthodox student/professor say or write something along the lines of "I'm from an Orthodox background", thus dissociating themselves from that world? It doesn't hold out much hope for a successful integration when the people doing the integration are either split personas or merely "socially Orthodox". I know, I know, you know plenty of exceptions, but they merely prove the rule.

More importantly, though, I'm worried about what this is doing to you. I've seen the kind of struggles you go through, sometimes daily, [with all the challenges involved](#). I don't know how much more emotional suffering you can go through before you completely collapse. Even assuming that these things need to be dealt with, why do you have to be

one of them? Surely you can focus your love for knowledge, in other, less religiously chaotic and overwhelming fields.

Do yourself a favor and quit before it's too late.

Yours, AIWAC

Dear AIWAC,

I appreciate your concern. I will point out that compartmentalization exists in all fields of life outside the yeshiva, even in "safe fields" like accounting and legal work. I know plenty of baalei batim who "compartmentalize" and/or [become Orthoprax or RBOs](#) who have probably never attended a Jewish Studies class. I also know many who have left religiosity (or are on the verge of such) who have probably never heard of Julius Wellhausen or even know the difference between Conservative and Reform.

Contrariwise, I know many, many students and professors with a deep commitment to Torah and Mitzvot in all fields of academic Jewish studies - some of whom, like [Prof. Zohar Amar](#) and [Dr. Josh Berman](#) actually see it as a religious mission (within academic rules, of course). I've obviously never done a statistical comparison of these two groups. However, my general lay impression is that with the exception of a select few fields (Bible studies being one of them), academic Jewish studies is most certainly not any more "dangerous" than any general exposure to the real world. If you've been sufficiently inoculated and prepared, you should do fine (again, excepting a few areas).

I appreciate your concern for my well-being. I myself am not sure of whether I want to continue torturing myself in my present subject matter, or find something else less nerve-wracking. We'll see. If it really does feel like it's getting too hot, I'll get out of the kitchen into the living room.

Yours, Avi

Final Round

Dear Avi,

Look, I agree that it is necessary to do everything possible to prepare answers and responses to the challenges of modern scholarship, if only to try and head off or at least slow down the rate of Jews going OTD because of it. Indeed, the previous policy of extremely controlled to no exposure (i.e. “don’t ask, don’t tell”) to scholarly and philosophical problems no longer works. Rabbi Dr. Michael Avraham [mentioned once](#) that many of the people who approach him with questions are precisely from the more intellectually closed yeshivot.

But it’s worse than that. The internet has pretty much destroyed any remaining barriers. If in earlier times an inquisitive Jew had to at least shlep to a library and seek out forbidden tomes, now anyone with an internet connection can do so. All the most difficult challenges to Orthodox Judaism are available to anyone at the click of a mouse. In his response to Rabbi Breuer regarding Bible study, Rabbi Dr. Shneyur Leiman [admonished](#) that the issue needs to be carefully controlled for different audiences, depending on age, background and experience. That policy is now pointless, if not outright harmful.

Nevertheless, while I agree that the challenges need to be met, my original point still stands: **little to no good can come from academic Jewish studies for Orthodoxy**. For every positive benefit, there are dozens of problems and dilemmas. One who enters this field or learns its teachings will only be mekayem the passuk “He who increases knowledge, increases pain” (Kohelet 1:8). The only purpose to expose Orthodox Jews to this must be to help them cope with the problems.

No religious good can come from integrating academic Jewish Studies and Judaism. No spiritual or religious growth, no benefit for limud Torah or kiyum Mitzvot. The people who advocated such a synthesis in the 19th and early 20th can at least be forgiven their naivete for thinking the integration could be done. Surely, at the beginning of the 21st, we know better.

Yours, AIWAC

Dear AIWAC,

I thought long and hard as to how to reply to your last letter. The deep pessimism which infused it left a deep and lasting impression on me. If I add this to the powerful feeling of malaise, cynicism and irony one gets when reading blog comments on the O-blogosphere, I get a clear-cut

feeling of despair. For a while, I wondered whether to write this response at all.

I've no doubt that I could have written this response better if I had the time and the willpower to continue to deal with this. I am also certain that there are others more capable than myself who could respond more effectively. However, this is my blog, and as Hillel would say – 'If not now, when?'

Let me start by turning your statement into a question: Does Academic Jewish Studies contribute to Talmud Torah and Orthodox Religious life? Does the benefit one gains from such works outweigh the cost of having to deal with fundamental challenges to the legitimacy and truthfulness of our religious faith and practice? Your response to both questions is of course a resounding NO.

My response is that by changing one word in the above two questions, the answer would become a resounding YES. We need to simply change the word 'does' to the word 'can'. It is said of the Torah itself that Torah can be the elixir of life - or death - depending on the motivations and nature of the person studying it. Academic Jewish Studies is no different. Just as one can learn halacha only to learn how to abuse it, or study Torah only to demean it or belittle it, Academic Jewish Studies can indeed be used as a powerful bludgeon against Orthodox Jewry.

By the same token, however, it can be of great benefit. Surely, I do not need to expound on the incredible contributions of scholarship to our knowledge and understanding of the Jewish world. From uncovered manuscripts, sociological studies to publication of long lost works of poetry, halacha and history, it has opened thousands of windows into our past. Where would we be, sir, without Lieberman's Tosefta Kipshuta, the Daat Mikra series, or the many critical editions of rishonim and acharonim. Where would we be without the many works on the histories of Jewish communities – the baalei batim, the merchants, the families – done under the aegis of academia?

Collectively, the work of Jewish Studies Researchers has made that 'foreign country' more accessible, more understandable, more **relatable** than ever before. Surely, as Orthodox Jewish educators constantly struggle to ensure their students' attachment to Jewish sources and life, we would be remiss to abandon this powerful tool?

I don't agree that Academic Jewish Studies is necessarily more dangerous to religion than, say, philosophical issues like theodicy after the Holocaust or the permissive sexual atmosphere of western culture. Moreover, the benefits of the former are far greater than the usually (or entirely, depending on your POV) negative aspects of the latter two. You claim that the ratio of benefits to problems to Orthodoxy from Academic Jewish Studies is one to scores. For me, at least, and for many students and professors I have met (though by no means all), the ratio is reversed. The knowledge I have gained from these fields has deepened and strengthened my attachment to Judaism in ways that the most brilliant yeshiva Rav could never do.

Yes, there are challenges, but this is the case no matter what kind of Jewish life one leads. Part of being an adult is dealing with, nay grappling with questions and dilemmas, even without necessarily resolving them. I firmly believe that Judaism is just such a 'religion for grown-ups'. Besides, if we were to shut down all intellectual avenues just because of the attendant risks, the result would be a horribly withered shadow of what Judaism once was. Surely we should all, each according to their ability and will, try to learn and understand His world, even though it sometimes means struggle. Would you deny yourself the ability to fly simply because you might crash? The same is the case here in the intellectual sense.

So come with me, and let's fly.

Yours, Avi