

Not a Zero Sum Game: Rational Thought and Religion According to Rabbi Dr. Michael Avraham

Introduction

When I mentioned that I finished reading the book presently under review, a friend of mine, who is no intellectual slouch, was surprised that I had managed to get through all of it. I am just as surprised as he is. While I do have a reputation among my peers as a "book-swallower" (in Hebrew: a play-on words of tola'at sefarim - bola'at sefarim), I have never had much success with philosophy books. I have always preferred the concrete to the abstract, the empirical evidence to any discussion of theory. Whenever I got to a theory section in a non-fiction book, I almost always just glazed over until it ended and I could get back to hard reality. Precisely because of this, I am glad I succeeded in making it through this work.

I don't think I will be exaggerating if I say this book is one of the most important original Orthodox works on the interplay between Western logical thought and Religious Judaism (not just Orthodoxy) to come out in Israel in the past several years. In an age where both Rabbis and scholars consistently reanalyze and rehash ideas of past giants such as Rav Kook, Rav Soloveitchik and so on, this book is a breath of much-needed fresh air. I would highly recommend it to anyone – atheist, agnostic, or any shade of religiosity – who is interested in understanding both rational and religious thought in an in-depth manner. It will challenge and enrich you, even if you disagree with its conclusions.

This is not to say the book is flawless. First and foremost, this is a book written for people with some grounding in, and understanding of, philosophy. A few of the arguments are very complex and deal with mathematical-formal logic on a level beyond the present reviewer, and I presume most people. Also, and perhaps more importantly, this book is maddeningly overwritten and difficult to read*. Part of this has to do with the fact that Rav Avraham tries to be exceptionally thorough, covering a very large array of philosophers and arguments to cover all his bases. Even allowing for this, however, there is a great deal of repetition and overkill in much of his writing. Points that were sufficiently proven many chapters ago are constantly bludgeoned in unnecessarily, and could very easily have been trimmed or cut out completely, with perhaps a brief footnote to emphasize the point. I would like to see this book translated into English, but it is going to need a particularly diligent and perhaps draconian editor who will succeed in cutting out all the excess verbiage.

Even before we get to the main argument itself, the intellectual breadth of this book is very impressive. Rav Avraham demonstrates true mastery of both the sources of Western philosophical thought and the works of halacha and Jewish thought. Kant, Putnam, Russell and Leibniz star next to Rav Shimon Shkop, the Rambam, Rav Moshe Avigdor Amiel and others. Even more refreshing is the degree of intellectual honesty present. The arguments of both sides are brought out, elaborated on and taken seriously; they are not mere window dressing. Neither is anyone immune from criticism; if Rav Avraham believes someone's argument to be wrong or insufficient, he says so, regardless of whether the origin is Kant or Rambam.

Having said all, you're probably wondering: what exactly is this book about?

More on that in the next part.

* This is in strange contrast to the clarity and brevity of the authors' series of lectures on [halacha and its authority](#) and the [midot hadrash](#).

Part One: The Analytical Conundrum

Rav Dr. Michael Avraham's book is at once more modest and yet more ambitious than one might expect from a book on faith. It is more modest in the sense that it is not out to 'prove' the tenets of Orthodox Jewish faith. People expecting to find 'all the answers' to problems will be sorely disappointed.

Yet this book is also much more ambitious in that it aims to make us question and examine how we think about and understand the world. It aims to challenge the very modes of thought we take for granted in learning about the world and ourselves. Instead of spoon-feeding us with ready-made opinions, it aims to provide us with tools for sharpening our own perceptions and forming our own positions. This is very much a book for thinking grown-ups – whether religious or secular, or something in between.

To accomplish this task, Rav Avraham has to contend with Western philosophy's superstars and most popular trends – including Kant, Leibniz, Descartes, pragmatism, conventionalism and, of course, post-modernism. This is very much a guided tour through enlightenment and post-enlightenment thought, but with a twist, as Rav Avraham aims to show the weaknesses and limitations inherent in much of what serves as

the intellectual basis for much of modern (and subsequently post-modern) thought.

The Emptiness of Analytical Thought

Very roughly put, Rav Avraham argues that post-modernism – the principled negation of the idea of objective truth (or at least of conceiving such) – was the inevitable outgrowth of modern rationalist philosophy. Specifically, it is the result of the quest to achieve full knowledge of the world by way of 'reason alone' (i.e. logical postulates, axioms, deduction &c).

This was the quest for 'analytical' knowledge of the world, i.e. knowledge which is certainly and unquestionably correct, and which is not dependent on our senses or other fallible means. This is as opposed to 'synthetic' knowledge, which makes factual statements about the world (both prior to observation of the world and afterwards), but can never reach the level of certainty of 'analytical' knowledge.

To make a long (and fascinating) story short, the more philosophers strove for 'absolute truth', the more they despaired of ever getting there. More and more, modern philosophers despaired of making statements that were necessarily true about the world and began to adopt more flexible positions regarding truth. From the pragmatists, who held that truth must be judged within its context, and that searching for the 'ultimate truth' is not the goal so much as finding the truth that works within the human system to the conventionalists (such as Hilary Putnam), who saw definitions as merely being whatever society decided they were (thus lacking any 'inherent' value).

According to Rav Avraham, this was because of weaknesses inherent in analysis itself. These deficiencies are twofold:

1) Analysis cannot really say anything additional about the world, since it is merely a reworking of what we already know from definitions (e.g. 'circles are round', 'the sum of angles of triangles in Euclidian geometry is 180°' are both analytical statements, since they merely re-work what we already know by definition).

2) Any analysis of terms rests on axioms which cannot, by definition, be proven. As such, it is impossible for two people who hold by different axioms to debate anything. There is simply no way to decide such a debate, since both sides are 'speaking in different languages', or

according to different axioms. Since there is no logical way for either set of axioms to demonstrate its superiority, there can be no debate.

'Purely' analytical thinkers are thus doomed to total skepticism because of the above weaknesses. Attempts to develop analytical thought without axioms result in permanent regression (i.e. how do you know a is true? Because of b. How do you know b is true? Because of c, and so on, *ad infinitum*).

As a result, we get postmodernism, which denies absolute truth for this very reason – all statements are made based on unprovable axioms – and how do you know your axioms are any better than mine? Prove it! Indeed, many debates are paralyzed not by rebutting statements, but simply by stating that someone is working based on certain assumptions ("bias") which are considered wrong *a priori* (regardless of the facts). So and so's thought is wrong because they're operating from a gender/race/class/&c bias. Since it is impossible to think 'purely', it is impossible to think at all.

This is the intellectual basis for the 'hard pluralism', according to which there are no truths ('everyone and their truth'). How is it relevant to us?

'What is Judaism' and Analytical Thought

In the previous section we talked about the drawbacks and limitations of analytical thought, i.e. the attempt to arrive at irrefutably true definitions and statements through formal logic and axioms. The problem is simple: analytical statements cannot by definition add information about the world outside of our own assumptions. They merely tell us what we already know in different words, e.g. circles are round. They cannot 'prove' anything beyond what we have already assumed to be true but cannot prove (axioms). This is what Rav Avraham calls 'the emptiness of analytical thought'.

A perfect example of this is the perennial debate over 'What is Judaism'. With modernity, the number of different types of Jews and 'Judaisms' has multiplied several times over. What was once taken for granted, i.e. people 'knew' what a Jew was, has forever been placed in doubt. Back in the day, religious Jews of all kinds and secularists of all kinds debated 'what Judaism is' or at least what it should be – whether national, cosmopolitan, cultural, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist &c. Each fervently believed their position was the

correct one, an 'essentialist' belief contrary to the pluralistic thought of today.

Of course, to the academic scholars and pluralists of today, this debate is utterly pointless. Neither side could hope to decisively 'prove' their case to the other since everyone runs on different unprovable axioms, whether regarding the existence of God, the binding or non-binding nature of Jewish law, the Jewish mission in the world &c. No side can possibly decisively 'prove' their case analytically in a way that would compel everyone else to follow suit.

Indeed, most observers of Jewry seem to have despaired of the very idea of deciding this issue and have instead adopted a very broad analytical approach, summed up best by the following pithy quote (which appears in certain variations in many places):

'Judaism is whatever Jews do'

Sometimes 'separately from others' is added, but the gist is the same.

Now, regardless of your personal opinion on what Judaism is or should be, surely you can see that the above statement is almost entirely empty of meaning. For one thing, it is so incredibly broad so as to be devoid of any coherence. I mean, is there a Jewish way to eat lunch or drive a car? Is conversion to Christianity or Islam also a 'Jewish act'? How's about playing golf or chess? Perhaps you will resolve this by stating that there **are** parameters to what Judaism is, but then we're right back to where we started, in the ostensibly pointless debate (at least from an analytical point of view).

By now, you're probably frustrated at this discussion, since even if you can't 'prove' anything analytically, you still instinctively 'feel' or intuit that there are rules and definitions, a right and wrong understanding of the world. This idea that 'nothing is true' or 'everything is true' may go against everything you believe and learned about the world, even if you could not possibly convince a 'pure' analytical thinker or post-modernist.

Take heart. That 'gut feeling' of yours is not just an 'emotional response', so decried by sneering intellectuals. It is what is known as a **synthetic** way of thinking, a method which is just as necessary as analytical thought and without which we could never achieve, or know, anything. We will discuss this way of thinking in the sections to come.

Theism and Synthetic Thought

OK, smart guy, what exactly is this 'synthetic thought' you've been alluding to?

Well, at its most basic, synthetic statements are statements that tell us things about the world around us. They **combine** our minds with that which is outside it (hence the term 'synthetic' i.e. bringing together two or more disparate elements). Our entire life is dependent on this synthetic thought structure.

Synthetic statements are not arrived at solely through the power of reason, but rather through induction, intuition, common sense &c.

There are two types of synthetic statements:

- I) Synthetic **a priori** (prior to experience)
- II) Synthetic **posteriori** (after experience)

Most of us are familiar with the posteriori synthetic statements, except that we simply call them 'facts' and 'theories' about the world. These are statements made by way of observation, induction, experimentation and experience. The entire edifice of modern science is based upon proposing and debunking said facts and theories. All of this is based upon methods of observation and induction which can only occur **after** we have gained the knowledge through sensual experience or via tools which we observe.

All rationalists accept that the information achieved through controlled methods of observation can be legitimately accepted as 'facts'. We may debate their status base on methods of proof, but we all agree that such a thing exists (Rav Dr. Avraham spends quite a bit of effort demonstrating this and refuting relativist ideas based on different points of view. This is not, however, germane to our subject, so we will move on).

Synthetic *a priori* Beliefs

All this is very nice, but what about the first category – the 'synthetic *a priori*'? Is it possible to arrive at truisms about the world which hold even before experience? Put another way, can there be 'synthetic axioms'? Or are we forever doomed to make statements that, while

impressive, can never rest on solid ground, as they are based upon non-analytical methods such as induction?

This is the key point Rav Dr. Avraham wishes to make. In his view, synthetic statements about the world, prior to experience, are not only possible but easy to demonstrate. As SE has clearly understood, all of us have 'synthetic beliefs' about the world around us, even if we can't prove them analytically. All of us, regardless of outlook, possess 'beliefs' about the world – both how it is and how it should be. These are brought about through intuition, common sense and other "non-analytical" forces. This is as true in the moral sense as it with regard to arguments about reality.

Let's go back to my original argument regarding 'What is Judaism'. As I said before, as soon as there were attempts to analytically 'prove' what Judaism is, the efforts led to despair. Yet for decades, secularists and religionists, nationalists and cosmopolitans all debated fervently what Judaism is.

Were they all unaware of the analytical problem? No. They simply instinctively believed or intuited, backed up by whatever evidence, that that is what the 'essence' of Judaism is. They were working with a different type of rules and axioms. Their arguments may have been **analytical** (and synthetic posteriori) but their assumptions were **synthetic** (*a priori*).

God as a Synthetic a priori Belief

Rav Dr. Avraham argues that **belief in a God is a synthetic a priori statement or belief**. It is a belief about the world itself, about its essence that comes prior to any investigation, experience or experimentation. This is why discussion about the 'conflict' between religion and science is utterly groundless. Science is concerned with making synthetic posteriori statements. It is dependent for its conclusions on observation and experimentation, both 'after experience' methods. It cannot, by definition, make statements about the world *a priori*.

Rav Avraham further argues that not only is the belief in a God a synthetic *a priori* statement, it is also the most reasonable one to have, and it ensures a stable structure of thought to exist. In his view, attempts at creating synthetic *a priori* statements without God (such as Kant's transcendental arguments) as a starting point are weak attempts to

dodge the most reasonable basis for reality simply because His existence cannot be 'proven'.

He demonstrates arriving at the recognition of God as a synthetic *a priori* statement primarily through what is called the **epistemological argument** (there are other ways to intuit God, such as the assumption that someone must have created the universe, but these are not the basis here). Briefly, all human beings believe that there is match between our senses and the world. If I see a flower, then I believe there really is a flower there. If I hear music, I believe it is not merely a random series of sounds.

How do we believe this? There is no way for us to 'prove' that this correlation is true, yet we all believe it. For all we know, we live in 'The Matrix'. The idea that there is a "coordinating force" or at least a force that ensures this correlation is a reasonable answer to make. The idea that this force also created the world and thus planned it out that there would be such a correlation is even more so. This is but one of many arguments of how to arrive at a synthetic belief (not merely an 'emotional' or 'irrational' belief) in the existence of a Creator.

Notice that none of this 'proves' the 13 ikarim or any other theological position. As I said before, this book is more modest in its ambitions than that. Its purpose is merely to demonstrate that **religious belief** is perfectly "rational". It may not be **analytical**, but then true analysis can only lead to wholesale skepticism. Since almost all of us hold to synthetic positions about the world, a priori as well as posteriori, belief in a Creator and a Planner of the universe is no less and possibly more "rational" than negationary positions.

So what else can this analytical-synthetic divide teach us?

'The Decline of the Generations' and the Analytical-Synthetic Divide

In the previous section, we discussed the importance of **synthetic** thinking, and how it complements **analytical** thinking. It is a necessary complement, as without it we would never actually know anything about the world itself. It operates according to a different type of thinking, based on intuition, induction &c, but it is nevertheless no less "rational" than the more "definite" analytical thinking.

OK, but how can you clearly demonstrate this difference?

Rav Dr. Avraham did precisely that by using the Orthodox concept of 'the decline of the generations' as a demonstration of the move in Judaism from synthetic thought to analytical thought. I will try and summarize this argument here.

The Decline of the Generations

The concept of the 'decline of generations' has been analyzed and dissected by various scholars and authorities. However, I think it best to refer to the general, popular concept:

Each new generation in Orthodox Jewry is inherently inferior in intellect and spirituality to the previous one. This means that we cannot by definition second guess or undermine decisions or statements made by authorities in generations past. This is due both to the weakening of oral traditions (masorot) and the higher spiritual and intellectual level of the previous generations.

This is an argument that simply doesn't stand up to rational scrutiny. While it's true that many oral masorot have been lost, we have methods of historical reconstruction that can help make up for that loss. In some cases and with some periods, our knowledge even surpasses those of many previous generations in terms of many subjects such as linguistics, *realia*, historical background &c.

The same goes for sources. Put simply, your average yeshiva student has quick access to many more sources than many local and even national authorities had. The revolution of the Responsa CD and its many siblings means that more Jews have easier access to more sources than ever before.

Nor does the argument of intellectual degradation hold. Indeed, in a day and age when most Orthodox Jewish children receive far more intensive education than ever before, to argue that their forbearers were "smarter" is a hard sell. The same goes for learning methods – was not Brisk, Telz &c considered a step UP (or many steps up) from the pilpulistic traditions of the past? How can this be if we insist that previous generation was inherently smarter than us?

From the Synthetic to the Analytical

Rav Dr. Avraham has a novel interpretation of what 'The Decline' actually means. Put simply, we have been moving steadily from a religion with rules based on **synthetic thought** to one based on **analytical thought** and **formal logic**. While the latter is more impressive and ostensibly "airtight", the former is potentially closer to the truth. To quote how he formulated it [in a shiur](#) on the subject – we may be smarter than previous generations, but they are more correct.

A good example of this is Shabbat. Jews kept Shabbat from Sinai to the Second Temple period without being fully aware of the 39 melachot principle. So how did they determine what's assur and what's muttar? Simple – they knew it by force of intuition, what the late Prof. Jacob Katz called "the religious instinct". It was a powerful intuitive sense of what was right and wrong and what entered what definition. These methods might not stand up to analytical scrutiny, but they were nevertheless borne of a deeper, more correct understanding of the Mitzvot[1].

The further we go along the Jewish historical timeline, the more formal and analytical it became. From the development of "midot hadrash" (some of which far exceeded R. Yishmael's thirteen) to various other principles, intuition and common sense gave way to increasingly formalistic rules to ensure "airtightness". Indeed, Brisk might be considered the pinnacle of such attempts to completely remove Torah Shebe'al Peh from reality and intuitive thought.

One of Rav Kook's foremost students, the Rav Hanazir, described the difference between analytical thought and synthetic thought thus: analytical (or Greek) thought is like **vision**- it is crystal clear, yet superficial. We know exactly what we're seeing, but we only see the surface. Greek thought also imposes its own concepts on the world הַרְכֵּי
כַּגִּיחַ.

Synthetic, or Hebrew thought, is a **hearing** logic. It is less clear than vision, yet it also allows us to reach beyond the surface, to truly grasp the essence of things. The Torah student who uses solely analytical methods will never get further than the surface, since he or she is uninterested in what it has to say, but rather what we want to get out of it. Only by listening to the Torah on its own terms can we begin to reconnect, regain that intuition that has been lost.

So is it possible to revive **synthetic** thought in Israel? I don't know, although Rav Dr. Avraham is [certainly trying](#).

What say you, dear reader?

[1] A good example of this is the issue of פסיק רישא דלא ניהא ליה. According to formal logic, there is no reason why דלא ניהא ליה should not include not wanting to violate Shabbat. Yet intuitively one can understand why such a loophole cannot exist.