

Apologetics

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We live nowadays in a world where, more than ever before, our ideas and values have come under scrutiny and assault. What makes our times more interesting is that we have ready access not only to ideas that challenge us, but also to ideas that support us. The question is how we can work out which ideas contain value. And which are dangerous, rubbish or simply false.

The trouble is so many of the arguments one hears on behalf of Judaism, are either pathetically simplistic or sophisticatedly misleading. From the arrogant banality of a Yossi Mizrahi to the sophisticated apologetics of Chabad or Aish Hatorah, they sometimes appear impressive but rarely survive rational scrutiny. The range is broad and baffling. And frankly when it comes to mysticism there is no room for discussion altogether.

I remember in my yeshivah days, all the American *bochurim* I came across were enthusiastic about Rabbi Avigdor Miller's book "Rejoice O Youth." I found it intellectually banal. Rubbishing the whole of the non-Jewish world as if there was not one good person there. Blaming assimilated Jews for the Holocaust. And conversely, praising Jews to heavens as if there were no gangsters or sinners among them. Nowadays we have computer analysis and codes that pretend that one can prove the Divinity of the Torah by playing with word patterns and numbers.

Many religious people have *Emunah Peshuttah*, simple faith, for whom there are no questions. Secular skeptics will not entertain any answers. In between come those who wrestle with trying to understand God and the challenges of living a religious life in a very different world to that of the past, or the Ghetto. Some say we cannot reconcile the two worlds altogether. Others think we can.

I was given a book to read last month called, "In Good Faith" by Scott A. Shay, subtitled "questioning Religion and Atheism." It draws on science, logic and a range of non-Jewish theologians, to counter the arguments of atheists and opponents of religion. In between heavy academic philosophy on the one hand and literalism on the other. Yet clearly committed to Judaism and Torah.

The book is well written and intelligent. Giving the sorts of answers that young, bright seekers of balance and fairness will find compelling and helpful in rebutting attacks on their religious beliefs.

And yet it has inevitable limitations for one very good reason. Being religious usually rests on two pillars. Living and enjoying a religious way of life. Which is normally something one is born into or comes to experience, rather than be persuaded of by logic. And secondly God. As Maimonides said, we can only say what God is not. Which was fine because he thought you could

prove God's existence through Aristotelian logic. I do not believe it is possible to prove the existence of God rationally. Even if there was a first cause or a prime mover, that, itself tells us nothing about who or what that original cause was. Besides, even Maimonides's "mentor" Aristotle thought the world was eternal which was why Maimonides switched to Plato on that specific topic. The question arises, what exactly are we expected to believe in? And that is what we have been arguing about for over three thousand years.

God is such a personal, subjective experience (and I use this word intentionally to contrast with an idea or theory). Which is why I believe the Torah does not have a commandment that is worded "you must believe in God." It just states and assumes a reality. God is. And it is up to each one of us to make sense of this in our own way.

I suggest, one needs to experience God and spirituality. Yet talk about what you are feeling is so subjective. And if encounter with God is through feeling, experience, then it is like any other experience in that it cannot be described in words. Only by "tasting it" can one know. How could you, for example, describe the taste of butter to someone who has never eaten any? Which is why no two people can agree on what God is. It is also why mysticism is so attractive to so many.

In the end and throughout history and all the valiant attempts to defend Torah against its detractors, it has only been the passionate commitment, that comes from immersion, living Judaism, that can insulate one from assimilation to whatever degree. And even then, the temptations of the outside world are so powerful that it is hardly surprising if in every generation there are those who prefer the easy way out of joining the masses of pagans beyond?

I also happen to think, controversially, you can and should live a religious life even without God. Even if that might not be the ideal. The Torah is a framework for living, to encourage thinking before acting and recognition of values, time frames and personal states both physical and spiritual. And of course, as you say it is a practical way of connecting with a people, a tradition and a culture.

The biggest challenge to my Jewish identity is the behavior of other religious Jews (whatever the denomination) and abuses of religious power and authority. I like to think for myself and I am fortunate in my education that I can find enough sources in Torah and the Talmud to justify my choices while remaining true to living and delighting in a Jewish life. But most Jews don't have the knowledge or the tools. They need direction and guidance. And the advice I give is to become well enough informed. Jewish knowledge in depth is now so easily accessible on the internet if one lives outside a Jewish area. Now one can access the sources to make decisions and have the confidence to stand by them even if others do not agree or claim that only they are right. And yet without the experience, the feeling, the most crucial element is missing and that is something knowledge in itself misses.

Which is why an alternative to apologetics is experience. And why philosophy is such a weak and limited tool. There are Jewish Philosophers writing today

whom I admire. Who are very good. But if the ordinary person tries to read, say, the impressive Sam Lebens, who lectures at Haifa University they will soon find the jargon and terminology beyond them. Even I, a philosophy graduate, find it hard going. There has to be some better way of inoculating our assimilating youth against following the easy, indulgent popular life, over "the considered way" and towards "the path less travelled."

An article in "The Economist" last month drew on a range of experiments to show that people tend only to pay attention to opinions that reiterate and confirm their prior positions. An opportunity to just listen to an alternative point of view, got virtually no response from those questioned. If this is true of politics, then how much more so is it of religion.

"There is no end to making books." Thus wrote Kohelet, Ecclesiastes thousands of years ago. And it is just as true today. Books and authors that are popular and acclaimed in one era, rarely survive into the next. Not that there is nothing new to be written. But for all the books, however good (or not) it is experience that counts. "Taste it and see" says the Book of Psalms.