



Hakirah: The Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought (Volume 20)

Asher Benzion Buchman, Yaakov Elman, Bezalel Naor, H. Norman Strickman, Eliyahu Krakowski, David P. Goldman, Alan Kadish, J. Jean Ajdler, Aryeh Leibowitz, Mitchell First, Marvin J. Heller, Daniel Kleinman, Daniel Weltman

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Different branches of Judaism can be distinguished by the degree to which they identify either with the rational or with the mystical schools within Jewish philosophy. In this edition, we focus on these two distinct types of thought but also examine how they are often found in tandem, merged in the minds and works of great thinkers. “Pahad Yitzhak: A Joyful Song of Affirmation” studies the classic work of Rav Yitzhak Hutner which combines the Brisker approach with the mysticism of Maharal and Hassidic Masters to “produce a theological/psychological system that incorporates elements of many strands of Jewish thought” that “form the essential elements of an optimistic, humanistic message.” In “Kabbalah—Escape from Reality or Affirmation of Life?” the author responds to a well-argued article that claims that Jewish mysticism poses dangers to contemporary Jewish society with the counter argument that “Jewish mysticism in the hands of an ethical genius such as a Rav Kook... invigorates rather than vitiates our existence.” Two articles in a special section on free choice argue that the rationalism of science complements man’s search for answers that are in the realm of the mystical. In “God, Man, Chaos and Control: How God Might Control the Universe” the author posits that modern scientific theory can be used to explain the mechanism by which G-d allows for free choice. The author writes, “As our scientific knowledge grows, we have faced criticism and concern from some religious thinkers who believe that science is an affront to religion. However, an educated approach to these big questions reveals that not only is there a history of using scientific lenses to better understand religion, an advanced knowledge of the complexities of our world magnifies the awesomeness of God.” Another essay, entitled “The Jewish Idea of Freedom,” maintains that the Jewish concept of freedom, rooted in creation and man’s free choice, is the first such concept in human history “and still the most radical.” The author goes on to explain how, in the modern era, the Jewish idea of freedom was reborn in the political sphere through the 17th-century revolution in political thought that preceded the American Revolution. But more surprisingly, he demonstrates “the contribution of biblical and rabbinic thought to the contemporaneous scientific revolution.” The importance of understanding the difference between scientific principles and mystical ideas is investigated in “Misinterpreting Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi,” where the author shows that charges of racism against R. Yehudah Ha-Levi are based on confusing the concept of “inyan Eloki” with modern genetics. The misinterpretation of the views of R. Yehuda Ha-Levi is central to another article, “What Must a Jew Believe? Dogma and Inadvertent Heresy, Revisited,” where the author notes that Ha-Levi accepts the view that Jewish identity is defined by belief in certain key principles. “In fact, not only staunch rationalists like Rambam, but also ‘anti-rationalists’ like Ha-Levi, Nahmanides, and Maharal expounded what they saw to be the principles of Judaism.” Tradition and Innovation is the focus of other articles in this volume. In our History of Halakhah section, in an essay entitled “A Short History of the Jewish Fixed Calendar,” the author presents evidence against the traditional view that the Jewish calendar was fixed 1800 years ago, detailing how the discovery of new documents in the Cairo Genizah seemingly disproves this belief, and demonstrates the changes that he believes occurred in different eras until the calendar came into its present form. A Jewish Law article, “Torah Authority,” examines the sources of authority that allow the Rabbis to legislate the calendar as well as other decrees. Similarly, “The Mysterious Origin of Lag Ba-Omer” claims that the holiday was a late innovation, not an age-old tradition related to

Rabbi Akiva and Rav Shimon ben Yochai.

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