

# Highlight Reel: Rationality



What does it mean to live *after* rationality?

In one sense, we all live in a world indelibly influenced by the enlightenment, by industrialization, and by the many interactions of the scientific revolution. We live in a world in which things making rational sense is a fundamental belief of sorts, a building block of the contemporary worldview. In this way, we all live *after* rationality.

In a different sense, living after rationality connotes something else: living in a world in which the fragility—the frailty—of rationality are also on display. In life after the 20th century, we've seen the ways progress and increased scientific advancement have led humanity as far backwards as it has forwards. We have all experienced the limitations of rationality, and the ways faiths and beliefs deeper than our cognitive awareness peer through the latticework of our conscious intent. In the political sphere, this understanding has become a sort of truism for people anywhere along the political spectrum. We all understand that humanity is somehow pre-rational, post-rational, and maybe even supra-rational, in our own complex ways. All of us live *after* rationality, in a way.

This past month, we have been thinking about rationality, and the threads that pull rationality, religion, and religious experience together. We have spoken with philosophers, rabbis, teachers, and authors, along with ordinary people on the front lines of the pressures of rationality. As we move on, we turn back to our favorite moments in these conversations. Even in a world after rationality, we all have a lot of learning to do. So let's get it together, and let's learn and live more deeply, together.

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## Zohar Atkins: The Triangle of post-Enlightenment Judaism

Zohar Atkins: "I think, broadly speaking, I see post-Enlightenment Judaism as spawning three different approaches to this topic of Jewish identity in the larger world. One is the *Maskilic* approach, I'll get to the definition in a second, one is the Hasidic, and one is the *Misnagdic*.

So I think actually, if you think of it as a triangle, they each have something in common with one another and they each have something in opposition. I think the *Maskilim*, the enlightened ones, the ones who wanted to maximally assimilate and adapt to rationality, have a lot in common with the *Misnagdim*, because they're both seeking a rational foundation for the truth. They come to different conclusions, but basically, in terms of temperament, they're very similar. And that's why you see a lot of people who grew up Litvish, Orthodox, who go off the *derech*. To translate, people who grew up in a non-Hasidic traditional home and found fault with the rationality of it, they go into academia or law, because there's actually a lot of continuity. So maybe they disagree with the conclusion but the method was familiar.

The Hasidic approach is much more suspicious of reason altogether. And there are a lot of important consequences to that suspicion, from the elevation of a *rebbe* to a place of authority, that in both the *Misnagdic* and in the *Maskilic* traditions, you'd have more suspicion of human authority. Because it kind of deifies that person, and that makes certain people worried about idolatry. You also have the emphasis on singing, on dance, on non-rational modes of experiencing the divine.

So once upon a time, these movements were in dire conflict with each other. Once upon a time, the *Misnagdim*, literally the opposers, thought Hasidism was beyond the pale. Then at some point in the late 19th, early 20th century, they got together and they said, "The greater enemy is the *haskalah*, it's secular Zionism." Now there's broadly a consensus that it's the anti-Zionists who are the bad ones. Again, I'm not speaking as me; I'm just saying the alliances are always changing. But in this shifting sand of who is and what is the enemy also comes the ability to mix and match much more today. And if you want to call that postmodernism, fine, we can call it that. But where I think that's a positive is that yeah, there's probably a grain of truth in all of these. And Hegel would call that a synthesis and a dialectical opposition. Bill Clinton and Tony Blair kind of made that a political philosophy in the form of the Third Way, you have a lot of people talking about triangulation.

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So that's where I kind of stand. I think we need to triangulate between the fact that yeah, Hasidism is absolutely right, that a brain-based approach to religion is just not going to do it for a lot of people. But you know what? Dismissing secular education is also really bad. Both at a practical level, because you're not going to be able to make a living, and at a soul level, because God gave us reason to use it. And we're skeptical beings as much as we're believers, and to just shut down the rational faculty and say, 'That's an impediment to faith,' as Rebbe Nachman seemed to suggest, I don't think that that is... It's certainly not egalitarian. It doesn't honor the range of human experiences. But I also just think it's kind of destructive. So what can I say? I love Rebbe Nachman's stories, I think he's a really deep guy, but there's a reason I didn't put on a white *Na-Nach-Nachman kippah* and go chanting out in Jerusalem as the be all and end all of my Judaism.

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I'm talking about, why have the Jewish people persisted in or insisted on remaining Jewish...?

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So at the end of the day, I'm probably more on the *Haskalah* and *Misgnadic* side of the spectrum, but in my interventions in the realm of poetry and art and spiritual practice, I do think we need more of the *Hasidic* critique to be integrated. So thankfully we live at a time where the opposition between head and heart is felt by everybody to be a false one. The people on the heart side know that just because you meditate every hour of the day doesn't mean that you're going to solve problems in political philosophy. And at the same time, more and more people who are engaged in philosophical studies are realizing both intellectually and experientially that that's not going to make the world better. If we just give power to the philosophers, we kind of have tried that, that elites don't always know what's best for everyone. So we're in this unknown territory, we're in the desert, and I think that's a good thing ultimately."

**Shmuel Phillips: The Dove's Two Wings**

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“Right at the start of my book, in the introduction, I bring, it’s a *Midrash Rabbah*, which talks about how the Jewish people are compared to a dove. How so? The other birds, according to the *midrash*, when they get tired, they rest on a rock. The dove, when it gets tired, it uses its other wing to push itself up. So it flies with one wing and it supports the second wing. So obviously, this is *midrashic* presentation, which is trying to get over a deeper message.

So Rav Mordechai Schwadron, the Maharsham, goes into this idea and he says, ‘The two wings of the dove in this *mashal* represent the two different dimensions through which we must relate to God. We have the rational, intellectual dimension, and we have the spiritual, experiential dimension.’ And these are both required avenues within all human beings. God has given us the intellect. He’s also given us emotions and imagination. And we’re supposed to serve him with a combination of both. And I do tend more towards the what’s called the rationalist school of thought, that approaches things first through trying to systemize things through reason. But one mustn’t negate the experiential side of us, we must never try to squash the need for this, the spiritual, whether it’s singing or just going out there and feeling that you are part of some, God is above you in some sort of way. There’s some sort of greater presence out there.

So right at the start of the book, I made that point that we must combine both parts of it. And this is a mistake that I feel that some people who go into rationalism, they go into exclusively looking to turn Rambam into an Aristotle, to turn Jews into some sort of cold, philosophical religion, where really there is a lot more to it than that. It’s true. The Rambam will tell you that when you approach God, in particular, first, you must use your reason, your *tzelem Elokim*, your intellect, to try to understand, and to systemize, and to realize that we cannot conceptualize God in any positive way. And to use our imagination and our emotions to try and do that instead of the intellect can lead you to something bordering on idolatry, that leads you somewhere incorrect.

But once you’ve related to a concept, once you’ve related to God through your intellect, and you’ve realized that God is something or someone which is metaphysical, something which is beyond anything that we can really conceptualize, then we can bring in the spiritual and the emotional aspects to relate to him as a human being. So I really feel that we have to have both parts of that in our worship of God. Yes.

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That is precisely where the dove analogy comes in, because where one wing fails, the other one picks up. So we have to have that experiential, that spiritual side, where we relate in almost an intuitive way, an experiential way to Hashem. We *daven*, we sing. We have that dimension to us because there will be points where the rational stage, it will require some sort of leap of faith, not necessarily to think that Judaism is being disproven and you're going to dance your way out of it, but everyone is going to reach a stage where the answers that they're finding are not completely satisfactory. And if their whole Judaism is based on the cold, rationalist, philosophical side alone, that will be far harder to overcome. So God's built human beings with all these different faculties, with the rational faculty, the emotive faculty, imaginative one.

And we serve Him with all of them. Rambam himself tells us that while Rambam champions trying to understand God and the process of Judaism through understanding in the intellectual route, he says that if that's all we have, then the only people who will really conclude that there's a God, who really understand and get from A to Z within religion and conclude that there's a God and the Torah and everything is correct, those people are Avraham Avinu. They're very rare individuals. Rather he says we have to start off, this is in the first section of *Moreh Nevuchim*, our initial connection to God is through tradition, through the experiential side, we're brought up with it. And then once we have this proper basis, this goes back to what you're talking about in terms of education and how we balance these things, but we start off with the tradition of the Torah and teaching things over, and the experience, and then we gradually bring in the intellectual, the rational side to fortify, and to develop, and to improve the way that we relate to Hashem."

### **Simi Peters: The Echo of Sinai**

David Bashevkin: "So how do I extract and find some measure of capital T-truth to ground my faith in, so it doesn't feel like my affiliation with Judaism, as satisfying as it may be, as enjoyable as it may be, is more than just being an affiliate of a country club? Can that still be found and where do you look to find it?"

Simi Peters: "Well, I can give you my answer to that question. My personal answer. And I think my personal answer has wider implications. I hope it does. First of all, one of the things I say in the article is the experiential, 'I like being *frum*' vibe. 'I'm comfortable in the *frum* world' is not enough to ground somebody who doesn't like being *frum*. For one thing, the Jewish community is great, and there's a tremendous cultural richness and a love and warmth and terrific things. There's also a lot of dysfunction. A community could be dysfunctional just like a family can be dysfunctional.

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*Talmud Torah* is very intellectually satisfying, but for some people it's frustrating, it's hard. Keeping *mitzvot* is not always fun. Sometimes even if you're deeply committed. I remember, my first son's *brit*, I suddenly thought, and I'm from a *Chassidish* family, Holocaust survivors, I've been a *frum* girl my whole life, Bais Yaakov girl, the whole thing. I thought, 'they're going to cut my baby!' And I was not a happy bunny. And yet I didn't grab my child and run home.

There's something there that has to hold you through the tough moments. Maybe a good analogy is marriage, and this isn't my answer, but a good analogy might be marriage. You get married, you make a commitment, and then you make it work, because, unless it's really a terrible marriage, obviously abusive or whatever. I think the problem is that people couch these issues in terms of, is it true with the capital T, or even true with the small t? Or why is my truth more important or better than someone else's truth? And I think it would be better if we used the terms 'evidence' and 'judgment' instead of 'proof' and 'truth'. In other words, the question that we, I think what a Jew, what Judaism demands of the Jew, is to exercise judgment all the time.

We have a body of texts. We have a tradition. We have oral texts and written texts. We have a tradition, we have a history, and a heritage. And the question that we have to ask ourselves all along is, how do I exercise my judgment about right and wrong here? Not, is this truth with the capital T, but perhaps, is this right or wrong? Is this meaningful or not meaningful? Is this what I should be doing? And the way that I frame it, and if you read the article, I think you saw this, is for me, the evidence, if you will, that makes Judaism reasonable is a sense of Jewish history. And that has been beaten to death also. Forgive me for a minute while I just clarify what I mean here.

The use of the *Shoah* to create commitment in Jews is I think a perversion of what we're supposed to get out of Jewish history. It's a big problem. Be a Jew because Hitler would've killed you. So you should be a Jew. That's not what's interesting to me in Jewish history. What's interesting to me in Jewish history is why we haven't disappeared. And I'm not talking about antisemitism here. I'm talking about, why have the Jewish people persisted in or insisted on remaining Jewish, even though it really doesn't make sense and it doesn't pay in worldly terms?

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Why haven't we disappeared? Now, I remember my father who was a Holocaust survivor said, somebody had quoted some professor in Harvard saying something very damning about religious belief. And he said, when Harvard is a pile of rocks, there still will be little Jewish boys with *peyos*. And I think that's a true statement. Now, the Rambam, in his *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah*, Maimonides, in his Magnum Opus, talks about the foundations of Jewish belief. And he says that our belief in God is based on the experience at Sinai. That the whole people witnessed God giving the Torah. And when God gave the Torah, that created a tremendous impression upon the Jewish people, and they passed that down to their children.

And it's quite a good argument. And the *Kuzari* has a similar argument. It talks about the fact that it was a mass revelation, and why that is proof of God's existence and the truth of Torah. Now for a postmodern person, and maybe not even just a postmodern person, where basically history is written, how many people have said something like history is written by the victors, or in our case, history is written by the survivors, if you will, that is still not a knockdown proof...

You're invested in this. It's your thing. It's your identity. But there is one thing that I think can't be so easily explained. And again, it's not the fact that we as a people have survived antisemitism, wars, plagues. Jewish history is a nightmare. It's not just that we have survived Jewish history, but that we chose. There are still Jews today. And there have always been Jews. And the number waxes and wanes, and individual Jews have often dropped out of Jewish history. That's not a surprise either. But between those twin poles of emancipation on the one hand, the siren song of assimilation on the one hand, and antisemitism on the other, why are there still Jews doing this?

Why are we still invested? Why haven't we disappeared? And to me, that's the evidence of Sinai. In other words, for me, the fact is that this Jewish stubbornness, again, as a people, I'm not talking about individuals, but as a people, that God intoxication, that willingness to seek God in history, that we continue and repeatedly we keep dying and we never die. What did Toynbee call us? A fossil? We're more like the Phoenix, right? We don't give up on God. And that to me feels supernatural. That's the real miracle of Jewish history as far as I'm concerned. That the Jewish people are the miracle of Jewish history, their belief and their faith in God and their willingness to maintain this. And I think you can't ignore that.

You can't ignore that. That is the, if you will, echo of the big bang that was Sinai. That for me is the basis of belief. That's enough for me to commit. Because I remember saying this once to a student, she was horribly shocked. I said, look, if I didn't think God really gave us the Torah at Sinai, I'd party. No Shabbos, no *kashrus*, none of that stuff. There's other things to do out there. That's my answer."

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## Samuel Lebens: Teaching Judaism with Courage

David Bashevkin: “What do you think are the questions that need to be better addressed growing up in Jewish educational systems? And what do you think are the broad strokes approaches that we should be doing a better job of emphasizing?”

Samuel Lebens: “Look, my experience has been... When I was in Yeshiva, because I already had my PhD in philosophy, when I was in *kollel*, and people used to... The *rosh yeshivas* used to send me the boys that were in the midst of their crises of faith, ‘Oh, speak to Sam. He’s the philosopher.’ And it tended to be that the philosophical problems, in my experience, were more often than not a hook upon which the young man was pinning something that was deeper, some sort of psychological discomfort, some kind of feeling of alienation or detachment from their family, their community, a way of life, and they were trying to intellectualize it. So they said, ‘Oh, I can’t understand how we’ve got free will if God commands. Oh, I can’t understand evolution.’ And they would find some puzzle and they would hang it on.

But my sensation was, now you have to be respectful of these people and therefore engage with them where they’re at. So it’s important to try and give answers to the puzzles they’re raising. But it’s also important for the pedagogue to understand that there’s something deeper going on, some sort of psychological or social discomfort. And that’s led me to think the following: one, a schooling system that runs away from the deep questions and that doesn’t actively seek to provide people with the intellectual tools to articulate a robust Jewish faith in the face of the challenges of modernity, it’s a bad idea, because these people are going to be exposed to challenges, they’re going to see on the internet, in all sorts of forums, they’re going to be exposed to challenges. And if they were brought up with a kind of superficial Judaism that pretended there were no such challenges or pretended that faith was simple, as soon as they’re faced with the challenges, they won’t be equipped intellectually to cope with this, one thing. But the second thing is to recognize that actually the intellectual tools are not enough, okay? You said the fear is they’ll use these things as target practice. No, they won’t. They’ll only do that if they have some sort of motivation to want to do that. And why would they want to do that? Because they’re feeling uncomfortable, because they’re feeling their Judaism is a burden or a way to, for reasons X, Y, and Z, and then yes, they will use it for target practice. But if they feel comfortable in their *yiddishkeit*, then they’re unlikely to. So that’s about engaging both hemispheres of the brain, again, right? Right from the beginning, you need to give them strong intellectual tools.

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And frankly, the Orthodox world won't have strong intellectual tools unless we create a cadre in every generation of philosophical theologians who are able to articulate boldly and proudly their Jewish faith in the idiom of contemporary science, contemporary philosophy. And that needs to start in our school education. These are not things to run away from, to be ashamed of, to think, 'Oh, there's a *kfira* warning to be attached to all these things.' No, if we project a confidence and a boldness, we'll actually do more, I think, to protect ourselves from people running away from *yiddishkeit* than we do by projecting a kind of protectiveness and a fear.

But because of the two hemispheres of the brain, it's not enough just to be teaching theology and philosophy from an early age, we also need to be giving people those experiences that make a person feel rooted in their community, that make a person feel rooted in the rituals of Jewish life, that make the symbolic landscape of Judaism resonate for them with beauty and meaning. And then, the person will be rooted in that sense that Baruch Pascalberg is interested in, because that person's now so rooted that even intellectually, rationally, the only option that's going to be live for them, given their upbringing, it's going to be Judaism or nothing. And I think it is a dereliction of duty for Jewish schools to rely only on one or other of these brain hemispheres. It needs to be both at once."

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