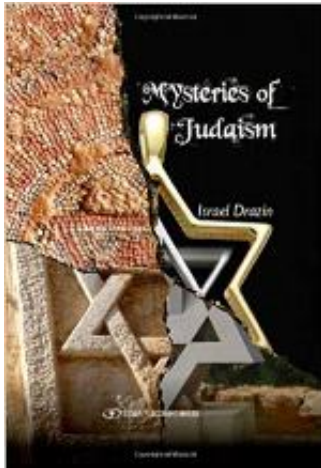


Mysteries of Judaism



Review Essay

Raphael Jospe* | 01.11.2019

Israel Drazin:
Mysteries of Judaism.

Jerusalem/Israel: Gefen Publishing House, 192 pp., \$ 19,71

Israel Drazin's *Mysteries of Judaism* is a provocative book, the purpose of which, as the author states in his preface, "is to illustrate how Judaism today is radically different from the Judaism described in the Torah. Jews today observe rabbinical Judaism, not Torah Judaism." Written in an easy and informal conversational style, the book will certainly provoke thought and discussion among rabbis and lay people in the Jewish community, and non-Jews interested in exposure on a non-technical level to aspects of Jewish life today. Each of its thirty-eight short chapters deals with a different holiday, practice, ritual or belief and how these features of rabbinic Judaism differ from anything commanded in the Torah.^[1] The book's structure thus lends itself to focused discussion, perhaps in the context of adult education. Christian readers may find in the book Jewish parallels to dynamics within their own traditions and communities.

Drazin's main problem, however, is that the book is not likely to be read by those who need it the most, namely in the Orthodox segments of the Jewish community. The book is obviously written in sharp opposition to today's increasing extremism, intransigence, even fundamentalism (to borrow a Christian term), in the various types and branches of Orthodoxy (also originally a Christian term), and growing rejection within many of them of modern culture and secular studies. This phenomenon is characteristic especially of those wings of Jewish Orthodoxy known in Israel as *haredi*,^[2] and also of *hardalim*,^[3] those who combine a religious *haredi* outlook with fervent, even extreme, Israeli-Zionist nationalism, much of it centered on the "Greater Land of Israel" ideology.^[4]

The phenomenon of increasing extremism is not, however, limited to *haredi* types of Orthodoxy. It is also all too evident in the type of Orthodoxy Drazin himself identifies with, often called (or at least formerly called) "modern" or "centrist." This type of Orthodoxy, which Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) originally called "Neo-Orthodoxy," embraces (or formerly embraced) what he referred to as "*torah im derekh erez*,"^[5] affirmation of traditional loyalty to the Torah together with secular education and involvement in modern culture and society. In the second half of the twentieth century it was led by such outstanding figures as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993).

Orthodoxy's most liberal proponents, in what is today sometimes called "Open Orthodoxy," are increasingly subject to sharp criticism and condemnation not only in *haredi* circles,^[6] but even in the supposedly "centrist" or "modern" Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America (of which Drazin is a member). Their Orthodox credentials are questioned, and increasingly even their rabbinical functions – such as regarding conversion or testimony to the Jewish status of immigrants from abroad wanting to get married in Israel – are being challenged by their erstwhile colleagues.^[7]

None of this means that what Drazin is attempting to prove is invalid, but only that the kind of approach he represents and promotes in this book is, regrettably, quite possibly an endangered species, given current trends. Of course, one could argue that it is precisely for this reason that books of this type, exposing Jewish myths, or what Drazin calls "the mysteries of Judaism," are all the more needed as an antidote to what is happening in much of Orthodoxy.

Drazin's point – that Judaism as we know it is rabbinic and not biblical (i.e., "Torah-true") – actually is nothing new, although it is largely denied, or forgotten, if not totally unknown, in all too many segments of the Jewish people today. All forms of Jewish religious life today, whether Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, even the vestigial practices of so-called "secular Jews," are rabbinic. For example, only a minority of the Jewish people today observe the laws of *kashrut*, which are biblical in origin (if not in all their subsequent rabbinic details), but many Jews who happily violate the Torah's dietary laws light candles on the eve of Sabbath and festivals – a rabbinic practice – and celebrate Hanukkah, a post-biblical rabbinic festival.

It is perhaps in light of all of this that that Drazin, who wants to provoke thought and discussion, sometimes engages in hyperbole or goes too far to make his point. For instance, he states that "the only Torah-true Jews today are Karaites . . . and Ethiopian Jews."^[8] That statement, however, is simply not accurate. The problem is that the Karaites, like rabbinic Jews, in order to survive, had to develop a counter-*halakhah* (the religious law of rabbinic Judaism), and the leaders of the small Karaite community in Israel are called "rabbis," perhaps the ultimate irony.

"*Sola Scriptura*" (a Protestant term), taken to its logical individualist extreme, has never worked, not in Judaism and not in Christianity, and one cannot successfully build an institutional movement on the basis of radical individualism. As the great poet and philosopher Judah Ha-Levi (1075/1085 – 1141) pointed out in his book *The Kuzari*,^[9] the very act of reading and vocalizing the unpunctuated and unvocalized text of scripture is, itself, already an interpretation requiring the guidance of oral tradition.^[10] The Karaites, in short, rejected the "oral Torah" of the rabbis, but had to evolve their own non-biblical traditions.

As for the Ethiopian Jews, the *Beita Israel*, they are the only Jewish community in the world who simply did not have the Torah. Their scripture, like that of the Ethiopian Christians, was the Bible in the ancient Ge'ez language, which in turn was translated from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Jewish community in ancient Alexandria).

In short, if we are to accept Drazin's "Torah-true" terminology, either in some regard all forms of Judaism today are indirectly (certainly not directly) "Torah-true," since the Torah is the foundation of subsequent structures and ideological constructs, however different and changed; or no forms of Judaism today are "Torah-true" in any strict or meaningful sense.

There are also cases of judgment calls which are questionable, but as such, could also serve as the basis for interesting discussions (again, perhaps in the context of adult education programs): do we agree with Drazin's conclusion, or should we come to a different conclusion? Where does continuity leave off and discontinuity take over? Drazin approvingly cites a colleague to the effect that Rabbi Akiva (2nd century, C.E.) "invented" the four commemorative fasts, namely the fast-days commemorating calamities in Jewish history and progressive stages in the destruction of Jerusalem.^[11] However, in the Tosefta passage in question, the rabbis were discussing the four fast-

days mentioned in the Bible (Zechariah 8:19), many centuries before Rabbi Akiva. The rabbis may have given new meaning and forms to these fasts – but that does that mean that Rabbi Akiva, or the other rabbis of his day, “invented” them?

On a different note, Drazin describes various ideas as “superstitious and contrary to Jewish teaching.”^[12] It would be helpful, although probably futile, to attempt to define the difference between religion and superstition. The only definition I know that works, perversely, is “What I believe is religion; what you believe is superstition.” Or, to put it differently, one person’s religion is another person’s superstition.

Gershom Scholem correctly pointed out that rationalist historians (like Heinrich Graetz, 1817-1891) underplayed or deliberately downplayed the mystical elements in much of Jewish literature, culture and religion, thereby distorting the history of the Jews. For every rationalist philosopher (and Drazin never hides his rationalism and admiration, for example, for Maimonides),^[13] there must have been dozens, if not hundreds, of mystics or believers in mystical forms of Judaism. As scholars, we cannot deny the facts. As (rationalist) Jews we’re entitled to lament those facts.

Coming back to Drazin’s thesis, that Judaism as we know it in all its contemporary forms, is rabbinic and not biblical (i.e., “Torah-true”), as mentioned above, the point is not new, but is forgotten, or unknown, or denied, in many segments of the Jewish community, especially in Orthodox circles. The fact that there are solid precedents for Drazin doesn’t undercut what he’s trying to do; it reinforces what he’s doing, and hopefully will provide further ammunition against those who, perhaps inevitably, will react with fury to what they regard as his *apikorsut* (roughly: heresy).^[14] All these precedents are familiar to scholars, but what Drazin is doing is to bring concrete examples of the abstract point to the attention of whoever is willing to listen in the community. The precedents, however, will help put Drazin’s efforts into perspective.

Two examples will suffice, one from traditional medieval literature, and one from radical modern Jewish thought. Rashi (1040-1105 C.E.), in his commentary on the Torah, links the weekly Torah portion “Naso,”^[15] which describes the sacrifices of the leaders of the twelve Israelite tribes at the dedication of the *mishkan*,^[16] with the following weekly portion “Be-ha’alotekha,”^[17] dealing with the commandment for Aaron, the high priest, to light the *menorah* (candelabrum). Since Aaron did not participate in the dedicatory sacrifices of the twelve tribal leaders, Rashi suggests that he was compensated by giving the honor of lighting the *menorah*. Nahmanides^[18] questions Rashi’s explanation: Aaron participated in many other ceremonies, especially the sacrificial cult, so what was special about his lighting the *menorah*? Nahmanides’ answer was that lighting the *menorah* is uniquely important, because after the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the sacrificial cult, Jews would continue to light the *menorah* of Hanukkah. In short, lighting the *menorah* would take on an entirely new significance in Jewish life.

Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983)^[19] differentiated traditional “transvaluation” (such as we saw in Nahmanides) from contemporary “revaluation.” In both cases, age-old forms are given new “value” and meaning. The difference is that today we engage in conscious and deliberate “revaluation,” and are aware of the anachronism inherent in the process. In contrast, traditional “transvaluation,” for example, by the Talmudic rabbis of Biblical practices, was an unconscious process by people who were unaware of the anachronism involved. One of Kaplan’s many books, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (1936) engages extensively in such “revaluation,” and provides a clear philosophical precedent for Drazin.

What it comes down to, then, is the difference in Orthodoxy itself between the Hatam Sofer^[20] and Rav Kook,^[21] the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the *yishuv*, the Jewish community of what was then British Mandatory Palestine. Sofer borrowed a phrase from the halakhic principle that new grain may not be eaten until the *omer*^[22] offering of grain had been brought to the Temple as of the 16th of Nisan. He voiced his unrelenting opposition to modernization of any kind (Emancipation and

Enlightenment), using the phrase “*hadash asur min ha-torah*,” (“anything new is prohibited by the Torah”). Sofer’s attitude itself, however, is “new” and an innovation, given the history of age-old rabbinic innovations, so perhaps we can reverse the phrase and say “*asur – hadash min ha-torah*” (the attitude that everything is prohibited is itself new and not based on the Torah). Conversely, Rav Kook, who was certainly no liberal (for example, he opposed giving women the vote), was able to recognize the new conditions created by Zionism in Israel, saying: “*ha-yashan yithadesh vehe-hadash yitkadesh*” (“the old will be renewed, and the new will be sanctified”).

This is the challenge we and our children face, and that Drazin is attempting to provoke us to consider, because the real issue is not what will happen with the Orthodox, who (despite some of their claims), don’t have an exclusive claim to the Torah or to its correct interpretation, but what will happen with the Torah and with *kelal yisra’el*, the Jewish people as a whole.

Footnotes

[1] The last five chapters deal with women in Judaism, and argue for radical change in their status and treatment.

[2] The term, from the root meaning to tremble, is found several times in the Bible, eg., Isaiah 66:5, “listen to the word of the Lord, [you] who tremble at his word,” although perhaps in this context it could better be understood as to revere. The term applied alike to the Hasidic and non-Hasidic (Lithuanian-style) *yeshivah*-based Ashkenazi Jews and to the Sephardic “Shas” political party. The phenomenon is usually referred to as “ultra-Orthodoxy” or “sectarian Orthodoxy” in English.

[3] From the Hebrew word for mustard, *hardal*, but short for *haredi le’umi*.

[4] The “Greater Land of Israel” ideology regards the entire land as the exclusive patrimony of the Jewish people, and favors unlimited Jewish settlement of all the territories known by their biblical names Judea and Samaria, also called by others the “West Bank,” and in many cases proposes extension of Israeli political sovereignty to many or even all of those areas.

[5] The phrase is found in Mishnah Avot (known as “The Ethics of the Fathers”) 2:2 in the name of Rabbi Gamli’el the son of Rabbi Judah the head of the Sanhedrin, and refers to the need to combine the study of Torah with a worldly occupation and involvement.

[6] On 27 May 2014, at a gala of Agudath Israel of America in the presence of New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, the movement’s head Rabbi Yaakov Perlow condemned the Reform and Conservative movements, and called Open Orthodoxy “heretical.” A video of this may be found at <http://daattorah.blogspot.co.il/2014/05/rav-perlow-head-of-aguda-condemns.html>.

[7] In recent years, the Rabbinical Council of America acquiesced to the Israeli Chief Rabbinate’s demands that only certain of their rabbis would be recognized by the Israeli body and authorized by the R.C.A. to perform conversions.

[8] See pp. xv-xvi.

[9] The book, written in Judeo-Arabic, is a fictional dialogue between a Jewish representative and the King of the Khazars, and takes its inspiration from the conversion of the Khazars to Judaism several centuries earlier.

[10] In the *Kuzari* 3:35, (written or completed in 1140), Judah Ha-Levi states that in reading the unvocalized and unpunctuated consonantal text of Scripture, we require tradition merely in order to be able to pronounce its words; tradition is all the more necessary in order for us to comprehend its words.

[11] See p. 54.

[12] See p. 85.

[13] Drazin has written extensively about Maimonides.

[14] The term *Apikoros* in rabbinic literature comes from the name of the philosopher Epicurus, but is used loosely for a Jew who denies basic traditional beliefs and affirms doctrines deemed heretical, and/or throws off normative Jewish practices.

[15] Beginning with Numbers 4:21.

[16] The portable tent “tabernacle” in the wilderness.

[17] Beginning with Numbers 8:1.

[18] Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, 1194-1270.

[19] Kaplan’s thought and writings had an immense influence on wide segments of the Jewish community, far beyond his own Reconstructionist movement, and also transcended the Conservative movement whose rabbinical students he taught for decades at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Kaplan’s innovations, such as “Bat Mitzvah” ceremonies, in many ways became the norm, even among what was once called “modern Orthodoxy.” Kaplan, of course, is explicitly borrowing Nietzsche’s phrase, with the difference that Nietzsche was seeking the overthrow of Christianity, whereas Kaplan sought to reinforce and reinvigorate Judaism by contemporary reevaluation of traditional practices.

[20] Rabbi Moses Sofer, 1762-1839.

[21] Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, 1865-1935.

[22] The *omer* is a sheaf of grain, and in this context refers to new produce brought to the Temple in the 7-week period between Passover and the Festival of Weeks (*Shavu`ot*, Pentecost). The new produce (*hadash*) could not be used until the offering was brought to the Temple.

Editorial remarks

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