

Rational Mysticism

building a contemporary spiritual vocabulary

from the ancient symbolism of Kabbalah

Positing the existence of God can be understood as the assertion that those aspects of our lives most meaningful to us, like spirit, love and morality, are not merely our subjective experience but in fact constitute the root of all existence – the foundation of the world.

And yet for many of us the natural world outside of ourselves seems to function according to mechanistic and impersonal laws wholly indifferent to concepts like spirit, love and morality.

Thus is born a painful dichotomy between the “objective” outside world and the “subjective” inside world. Often, what we understand as *real*, *true* and *rational* relates to the mechanistic and impersonal laws reflecting the outside world, while what we understand as *important*, *meaningful* and *right* draws on our subjective experience.

We are then confronted with a state of affairs in which ideas like God, Torah and Mitsvot seem *important*, *meaningful* and *right* but not *real*, *true* and *rational*.

Rationalistic Jewish Philosophy attempts to bridge the gap between the objective and the subjective by explaining subjective religious experience in objective and scientific terms, like those of psychology and sociology.

Unfortunately, in “translating” Judaism from the *important and meaningful* language of love and spirit to the *true and rational* language of social science, we lose what we sought in Judaism to begin with. Just as a description of the chemical and electronic events in the brain can’t capture the experience of emotions like love and fear, so too a sociological description of Judaism doesn’t capture the experience of cleaving to God. The social sciences may help us understand *what Judaism is* but they don’t help us make sense of what it is to *live Judaism*.

And so what is *real* and what is *meaningful* seem hopelessly at odds.

Like Rationalistic Jewish Philosophy, the Kabbalah seeks to construct a bridge between objective and subjective, outside and inside. But whereas Rationalism sought to explain subjective religious experience in the terms of objective science whose terms are derived from the impersonal and mechanistic outside world, Kabbalah does the very opposite: the natural world is explained through terms – a set of symbols called *sefirot* – which reflect our subjective experience; terms like *will*, *compassion*, *justice*, and *eros*.

The symbolic language of *sefirot* describes at once human consciousness and the natural world. Thus one interconnected and unified discourse bridges the gap between inside and outside, subjective and objective, and seeks to address concepts like God, Torah and Mitsvot as not only *important*, *meaningful* and *right* but also *real*, *true* and *rational*.

Kabbalah accomplishes this unification of the *real* and the *meaningful* by reversing the logic of Rationalistic Jewish Philosophy. Rationalism sought to explain in the objective terms of social science a phenomenon seemingly foreign to the mechanistic and impersonal world of nature: subjective religious experience. Why should this be possible? The Rationalist assumes that it is

because both subjective experience and objective nature co-exist in one unified reality. Thus the scientific terms and categories derived from observing the natural world should apply equally well to subjective experience.

Kabbalah, like Rationalistic Philosophy, assumes the unity of reality and thus does not necessarily reject the assertion that subjective experience may be usefully described in the objective terms of social science. But it contends that the assumption of unity means that the *opposite* is also true: the outside world may be usefully described in terms originating in subjective experience like *will, compassion, justice and eros*. Thus, rather than seeking to understand human emotions like love and joy in terms of the electrical and chemical processes of the brain, the Kabbalah sees those very material processes as instances of love and joy. The prophet Isaiah describes this state of consciousness when he promises to one who loves God that “the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands” (55:12).

Rationalistic Philosophy’s movement from inside to outside may teach *what Judaism is*; the Kabbalah’s movement from outside to inside teaches what it means to *live Judaism*.

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