

Modern Orthodox Challenges: Resurrecting 'Aql vs. Naql?

Asher Lopatin

Jews in the 21st century face the challenge as never before to make our religion relevant to our lives. But for Modern Orthodox Jews, the challenge can be even more serious. Will the rich heritage that we received and that we observe enable us to be at the forefront of creatively applying Judaism to our lives? Or, will it bind us to old models?

In 12th-century Islam, from Baghdad to Damascus, from Spain to Basra, the philosophical, theological, and legal battle was cleverly described in Arabic as 'Aql vs. Naql. "Aql" referred to independent and creative thinking that understood how a religious, observant Muslim should act in the rapidly changing world of the Medieval Middle East. On the other hand, "Naql" meant sticking to tradition, copying what was done in the past in order to behave properly in the present. Those who believed in Naql (Hanbalites and traditionalists) eventually won out in the Muslim world — at least until the 20th century. They successfully convinced the Muslim on the street that using logic and analogy, and transforming Qur'anic and Muhammadian statements into modern interpretations, was pure innovation (*bid'ah*); and innovation was bad. Thus, certainly Muslim philosophers, but also scholastic theologians — the school of Kalam and thinkers such as Ghazali — were marginalized and eventually forgotten. The traditionalists won out: just follow the ancient teachings in the way they have been passed down since Muhammad and his companions lived them in 632 C.E., and your Islam, submission to God, will be pure.

Is the same 'Aql (modern innovation and transformation) vs. Naql (traditionalist clinging to the authority of past models) going on in 21st-century American Jewish Orthodoxy? The battle in Islam between reason, logic-based thinking, and traditionalist-based thinking was primarily fought between Muslims who never doubted the basic tenets of Islam, and those who believed strongly in following the laws of the Qur'an's tradition. Specifically, the question was: Do we allow individuals the independence to think — that is, look at traditional

sources that are taught to shape and transform their understanding of the ancient, eternal law — or do we try to avoid that independence at all costs, relying as much as possible on imitating and mimicking what existed in the past?

This is the battleground within Orthodoxy today. Can we use creative thinking to make the religious principles and laws, which we see as eternal, relevant and meaningful in today's world? Or, should we try to change as little as possible and cling to models of the past? Modern Orthodoxy used to be the

Mutakallimun (scholastic theologians) of the 20th century: creatively explaining laws of family purity (as in Norman Lamm's *Hedge of Roses*) and Jewish relations to non-Jews (as in Aaron Soloveichik's *Logic of the Heart* and *Logic of the Mind*), while rethinking older practices that might not work in the contemporary climate. As Eliezer Berkovits points out in *Jewish Women in Time and Torah*,

women used to not come to synagogue at all; hasn't that model changed in most segments of Orthodoxy? While women never used to have formal prayer services together, or read from the Torah on their own, should that not change? In fact, Berkovits argues that the attitude should be: "*Lo ra'inu eino ra'ayah.*" "Just because we have not seen it in the past is not proof that it is wrong." New models and practices, borne out from innovative halakhic and philosophical thinking, can be a central part of Modern Orthodoxy. In today's era of the Internet, when everyone around the world shares ideas instantly, a breakdown of prescribed authority is even more real and challenging.

On the other hand, there is a strong pull in Orthodoxy toward avoiding creativity and innovation; practicing the law through strict adherence to previous models. It should be noted, however, that adherents to the "Naql" logic probably are developing new models without even realizing it. In fact, Haym Soloveitchik argues, in "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy" (*Tradition* 28:4, 1994), that the truly traditionalist Orthodoxy, which was a mimetic culture

Is Modern Orthodoxy about applying creative thinking to our eternal laws and traditions?



of merely copying the behavior of the previous generation, does not exist anymore. Rather than following the ways of their ancestors, the Modern Orthodox world follows text (or the decisor who is an expert in the text, frequently a Rosh Yeshiva) as its guide. Nonetheless, the goal is the same: to observe Judaism in the way it was observed since time immemorial, whether through miming the previous generation or following the sacred books. This goal urges individuals to distance themselves from their own independent interpretations of the law, from using reason and logic to adapt practices — even while maintaining them — to today's contemporary environment.

The challenge for Modern Orthodoxy, then, is not which authority — sacred texts or parents and teachers — to follow. Rather, it is whether Orthodoxy is about independent thinking, creativity, and innovation in applying eternal laws and traditions; or whether it is about harnessing the individual observer to models and interpretations of the past, which may strip the law of all resonance and relevance in today's world.

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Reflections of an Orthodox Psychiatrist

Michelle E. Friedman

The doorbell's muted ring signals the arrival of my next patient. I remember that it is the first visit for Leah,* a Hassidic woman. Married and the mother of five children, Leah is barely thirty years old, and she is riddled with fears of physical illness. She is also worried about the stigma of consulting a psychiatrist; over the phone she asked whether any religious people from her community came to see me.

There is no chance Leah will be recognized by the young woman sitting in front of me. I've been treating Claire* for several months. The daughter of affluent, secular parents, she has done battle with anorexia, depression, and heroin. Her resume includes a year at an ivy-league college and a stint in prostitution to support her drug habit. Claire credits her survival to a random encounter with a Hare Krishna outreach worker who was handing out food in a park crowded with homeless derelicts like herself. They have been living together for four years.

Claire leaves. I usher Leah into my office. She settles into the armchair and begins to tell me about herself. Leah defines herself entirely as a mother and homemaker. She speaks of her husband glowingly; he is her best friend. At the same time, she feels suffocated, frustrated by the constrictions imposed by Hassidic culture. Appointments with doctors in Manhattan followed by visits to fancy department stores are Leah's only forays outside her insular community. At home, she surreptitiously reads *The New York Times* and then suffers guilt for her sin of worldly curiosity.

As I listen, I become aware that my feelings toward Claire and Leah are remarkably similar. I even imagine them talking with each other. This improbable fantasy floats at the edge of my psychic horizon until I realize that despite their vastly different lifestyles, both women are yearning for peace of mind in the context of larger meaning. Both define happiness in the context of connection to significant others. So do most of my patients. So do I. And the way I conceptualize my patients' dilemmas and formulate my responses is shaped by my background and my adult choice to live as an Orthodox Jew.

I was always drawn to the feeling world, always trying to piece together and make sense of peoples' stories. My childhood gave me plenty of opportunities. I am a child of secular Holocaust survivors and was raised on a farm in the Catskills. Isolated from the mainstream of Jewish life, I grew up with a keen sense of loneliness, of being different from my peers. When I stumbled across observant Judaism, I was immediately drawn to the warm community that unabashedly celebrated Jewish identity.

My choice of psychiatry as a career seemed inevitable. My training paralleled my progressive involvement with religious ritual observance and text study. In fact, my postgraduate education in psychoanalysis seemed like the professional equivalent of a *kollel*, high-level *yeshiva* education.

Active listening is complex, demanding work. I try to cultivate evenly hovering attention, a multi-channel attunement to the narratives, feelings, and memories entrusted to me. I know how vulnerable