

The Philosopher's Mistake

Draft of a letter to Professor Shimon Kaplan²¹ - 8th of Tammuz, 5712²²

Difference between America and Poland; every discussion must begin with a premise; on the premise that the Torah is Divine there is no room for discriminatory analysis, if it is not Divine there is no point analyzing it; Rights to the Holy Land

I was pleased to receive your reprinted article, from the quarterly JUDAISM, on Hermann Cohen's Philosophy of Judaism. I appreciate your thoughtfulness, which was especially welcome after such a long silence.

Inasmuch as you do not write any personal news, I presume that both you and Mrs. Kaplan are well, and that everything is in good order.

With regard to the article, it is, generally speaking, gratifying to note that in this so-called materialistic America a great deal is being written on the subject of Judaism. ~~From whatever point of view such articles are written.~~ ²³ ואף אם קצת חלק מהמאמרים אינם כתובים בעין טובה הרי בכל זה the very fact indicates an healthy interest in the subject. Unlike conditions in Poland, etc., where heresy was the chief antagonist of religion, here in this country it is rather agnosticism and simple ignorance that we have to contend with. Therefore, ~~every~~ something done to arouse interest in our faith is commendable, and there can be no danger of overdoing it.

As for the contents of the article, it is, obviously, impossible in the course of a letter to dwell at length on such a subject. Hence I can only limit myself to one general observation which is relevant to any discussion on religion, a question which is now **also** particularly timely in connection with developments in our Holy Land.

The observation I wish to make ²⁴ אע"פ שהיא פשוטה is this: Before embarking on any **scientific or** philosophical discussion, it is necessary first to ascertain the premise on which the question is going to be discussed. Having taken a certain premise as the basis of ~~our~~ the discussion, ~~we~~ **one** must confine ~~our~~ the discussion to the methods applicable to that premise.

²¹ Dr. Shimon (Simon) Kaplan (26 Kislev 5654 - Purim 5739) was a Russian-born professor at St. John's college, Annapolis, Maryland.

²² The subsequent version of this letter is printed in *The Letter & The Spirit* Vol. 2, p. 39. Translations of the Rebbe's Hebrew corrections are taken therefrom.

²³ Although not all articles are written in a favorable vein,

²⁴ Though simple enough,

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The observation I wish to make ^{is} this: Before embarking on any philosophical discussion, it is necessary first to ascertain the premise on which ~~xxxxxx~~ the question is going to be discussed. Having ~~xxxx~~ taken a certain premise as the basis of our ^{the} discussion, we must confine our ^{the} discussion to the methods applicable to that

Where the choice lies between two premises which are contradictory and mutually exclusive, and having chosen one or the other, it would obviously be illogical and contradictory, while accepting the one, to use methods which are appropriate only to the other.

In our case, there are two such alternatives:

[The Rebbe underlines "two alternatives" and notes: ?**one alternative = 2 2 alter. = 4**²⁵]

1) To accept Divine Revelation **on mount Sinai** as a fact, which implies that the Torah was given by G-d, ~~and~~ (that the Holy Land enjoys a special function and Divine Providence), 2) That Divine Revelation is not accepted as a fact, implying that our religion is the product of man's intelligence, ~~and~~ (that the Holy Land is no different from any other land, the State of Israel being the result of heroism, political conjuncture and/or other circumstances all man-made).

If it is accepted, as we do, that the Torah is G-d-given, revealed at Mount Sinai, then *a priori* all critical **by human intellect** and discriminatory analysis **by it** of the wisdom of the Torah is ruled out, since the Torah represents Infinite Divine Wisdom. **but not the understanding** ²⁶ במדה המבוארת לקמן

In such a case, it would be illogical to say, This part of the Torah I like and accept; that part I do not like and reject, or supplant, ²⁷ חלק זה הי' מתאים רק לזמן מרע"ה ומקומו משא"כ עתה וכיו"ב. For the very concept of Divine Revelation presupposes something which is above and beyond human intellect ²⁸ ולמעלה מזמן ומקום; only to the extent which is Divinely ordained by the Revelation itself can the human intellect grasp it. **רק בפרטים שהתורה עצמה אומרת שתלוי בזמן ומקום**. (This is **also** the basis for the Rabbinical injunctions which have been incorporated in our religious practice as part of the Torah, such injunctions being rooted in **and deducted from and according to** the principles revealed at Sinai. Thus religious problems arising in the use of all modern technical devices, such as radio, television, microphone, etc., can be regulated according to the principles and laws found in the Chumash, Mishnah and Gemara).

On the other hand, if the Torah is regarded merely as a

²⁵ =One alternative means that there is already one option, hence two alternate options would imply two original options, with a total of four.

²⁶ (Which does not rule out a limited measure of understanding, as mentioned below).

²⁷ The other is obsolete, suitable only to the time and conditions prevailing during the life of Moses, which I supplant, and the like!

²⁸ =And above and beyond time and place.

²⁹ And only in such instances where the Torah itself determines conditions of time and place can such conditions be applicable.

human product, no debate is necessary as to its binding force, for, obviously, the human intellect some 3000 years ago could not be binding today.

In point of fact, nevertheless, we find that religious philosophers in the last century**ies** ~~including Hermann Cohen~~, made precisely this mistake. While accepting the premise that the Torah is 'From Heaven,' they have applied methods of thinking and deduction admissible only if the opposite premise were true.

Similar confusion reigns also in regard to the Holy Land, which can serve as a further illustration of the point I make. One often hears it said that Jewish inalienable right to the Land of Israel, despite many centuries of non-possession, stems from the Torah, where it is clearly recorded that G-d ordained it to be Israel's everlasting inheritance. ~~But when possession is regained (though as yet incomplete), a form of government is instituted that goes about its business~~ ~~(though as yet incomplete), a form of government is instituted that goes about its~~ ³⁰ ~~business~~ **ותיכף לזה מדברים ע"ד אורח חיים אשר צ"ל שם, היפך התורה אלא וכאילו** as though the Holy Land were like any other land conquered and held by the force of arms.

So much for my general observation.

I had planned to write you the above in Russian, in keeping with our previous correspondence. However, for the lack of a Russian typewriter, I requested Dr. N. M. to put it in English.

With kind regards, Cordially yours,

³⁰ Yet in the same breath statements are made about instituting there a way of life contrary to the Torah,

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