

RATIONALIST VS. MYSTICAL JUDAISM

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The Key Differences between Rationalist and Mystical Judaism

1) KNOWLEDGE

Rationalists believe that knowledge is *legitimately obtained by man* via his reasoning and senses, and should preferably be *based upon evidence/reason* rather than faith, especially for far-fetched claims.

Mystics are skeptical of the ability of the human mind to arrive at truths, and prefer to base knowledge on revelation, or – for those who are not worthy of revelation – on faith in those who do experience revelation.

Examples: Belief in God; the scientific fallibility of Chazal; R. Yochanan's student; *Kezayis*.

2) NATURE

Rationalists *value a naturalistic* rather than supernatural interpretation of events, and perceive a *consistent natural order* over history, including the creation of the universe, the Biblical period, the present, and the future Messianic era. They minimize belief in supernatural entities and forces.

Mystics prefer miracles, and believe them to be especially dominant in ancient history and the future messianic era. They maximize the number of supernatural entities and forces believed to exist.

Examples: The development of the universe and of life; Biblical miracles; *Yeridas hadoros*; Messianic wonders; demons; *ayin hara*.

3) THE SERVICE OF GOD

Rationalists understand the purpose of mitzvos and one's religious life in general as *furthering intellectual/moral goals* for the individual and society.

Mystics see mitzvos as primarily serving to engineer mechanistic manipulations of spiritual or celestial forces, with their reasons being either to accomplish this or ultimately incomprehensible.

Examples: *Mezuzah*; *Netilas yadayim*; *Shiluach hakein*; *Segulos*; outsourcing mitzvos to benefit others; Learning Torah.

Rambam on Knowledge:

The Guide for the Perplexed 3:14: “You must, however, not expect that everything our Sages say respecting astronomical matters should agree with observation, for mathematics were not fully developed in those days; and their statements were not based on the authority of the Prophets, but on the knowledge which they either themselves possessed or derived from contemporary men of science.”

Letter to the Sages of Montpellier: “The summary of the matter is that our mind cannot grasp how the decrees of the Holy One, blessed be He, work upon human beings in this world and in the world to come. What we have said about this from the beginning is that the entire position of the star gazers is regarded as a falsehood by all men of science. I know that you may search and find sayings of some individual sages in the Talmud and Midrashim whose words appear to maintain that at the moment of a man's birth, the stars will cause such and such to happen to him. Do not regard this as a difficulty, for it is not fitting for a man to abandon the prevailing law and raise once again the counterarguments and replies (that preceded its enactment). Similarly it is not proper to abandon matters of reason that have already been verified by proofs, shake loose of them, and depend on the words of a single one of the sages from whom possibly the matter was hidden. Or there may be an allusion in those words; or they may have been said with a view to the times and the business before him... A man should never cast his reason behind him, for the eyes are set in front, not in back.”

Rambam on Nature:

Treatise Concerning the Resurrection of the Dead: “...Our efforts, and the efforts of select individuals, are in contrast to the efforts of the masses. For with the masses who are people of the Torah, that which is beloved to them and tasty to their folly is that they should place Torah and rational thinking as two opposite extremes, and will derive everything impossible as distinct from that which is reasonable, and they say that it is a miracle, and they flee from something being in accordance with natural law, whether with something recounted from past events, with something that is in the present, or with something which is said to happen in the future. But we shall endeavor to integrate the Torah with rational thought, leading events according to the natural order wherever possible; only with something that is clarified to be a miracle and cannot be otherwise explained at all will we say that it is a miracle.”

Rambam on the Service of God:

The Guide for the Perplexed 3:31: “There are persons who find it difficult to give a reason for any of the commandments, and consider it right to assume that the commandments and prohibitions have no rational basis whatever... Far be this! On the contrary, the sole object of the Law is to benefit us. Thus we explained the Scriptural passage, "for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is this day" (Deut. vi. 24). Again, "which shall hear all those statutes (*hukkim*), and say, surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people" (ibid. iv. 6). He thus says that even every one of these "statutes" convinces all nations of the wisdom and understanding it includes. But if no reason could be found for these statutes, if they produced no advantage and removed no evil, why then should he who believes in them and follows them be wise, reasonable, and so excellent as to raise the admiration of all nations? But the truth is undoubtedly as we have said, that every one of the six hundred and thirteen precepts serves to inculcate some truth, to remove some erroneous opinion, to establish proper relations in society, to diminish evil, to train in good manners or to warn against bad habits.”