

Breslov Repair Kit – Sophistication

written by Chaya Rivka Zwolinski
July 24, 2012



One of the biggest obstacles in the search for truth is other people, especially those who make fun of religion with “sophisticated” jokes... –*Advice, Rebbe Nachman’s Wisdom 81, BRI*

Sophistication can be very harmful. Thinkers are easily trapped in their own wisdom. Keep well away from the wisdom of those self-important people who believe they know great truths about serving God. Their wisdom is nothing but foolishness. All their sophistication is quite unnecessary in serving God.

The main thing is to be pure and simple and to have faith in God and His Tzaddikim. True, you have to be careful that you are being pure and simple as opposed to idiotic. But sophistication is entirely unnecessary. Simplicity, purity, and faith can bring you to great joy. –*Advice, Likutey Moharan II, 5:15, BRI*

Do you think of yourself as sophisticated? Then you must be enlightened, broad-minded, wise, erudite, charming, cultured, educated, civilized—right?

But Rebbe Nachman warns about the true meaning (and the Latin root) of sophistication: sophistry. Sophistication is charming, but slick and tricky; it employs superficially

plausible but dishonest methods of reasoning. Sophisticated thinking relies on human stratagems, and doesn't hesitate to commit fraud. A sophisticate twists himself into intellectual pretzels in order to justify his non-Torah convictions, even using Torah to do so.

When I first began to be Torah observant, I tried to make Torah fit in with my pre-existing beliefs including political ideologies. After all, I had been involved in activism. To my surprise, as I immersed myself in Torah, my beliefs underwent a radical shift. I felt as if my psyche was shrugging off an overcoat that was too skimpy, a bit threadbare. Even dirty. I was now free to be my true self—so naturally I began to drop the socially acceptable cant from my vocabulary. I also began to see my radically secular upbringing for what it was: brainwashing.

(Maybe like me you, too were a typical American child of isms. *Isms are ideologies and philosophies, the kind that Torah says will eventually lead us to question the very existence of God, chas v'Shalom.)

As soon as I “discovered” Torah Judaism, I realized I had been profoundly betrayed by my isms; they had been nothing but smokescreens which had all along prevented me from exploring foundational, unresolved psycho-spiritual issues. They obscured true meaning. Eventually I quit my isms (or they quit me). But, with all the passion of a woman wronged, I began to don an equally sophisticated—that is, concealing—cloak of alternate isms that *still weren't Torah*. Sure, I could find justifications in Torah for my new collection of causes, but still, they were isms.

At some point I decided it was time for an old-new approach: Since Torah is truth, I would do my best to rely only on it to inform my worldly dealings. *Everything* had to be put to the test—I would cling no longer to my rigid assumptions of what was right. I questioned whether my isms muddied truth with

falsehood (and found they even concealed anti-Torah beliefs.)

If you are finding this topic relevant, it's likely because you are the kind of Jew who wants to help others and do good. You are someone who wants the world to be a better place. You're the kind of person who is always looking for ways in which you can help make that happen. But still your isms, like mine, must pass the Torah test.

The problem with isms which makes each and every one suspect, even the ones that "feel right," is that by aligning with them, we become sophisticates. But when looked at close-up, even the most seemingly noble man-made ism stands in direct or partial contradiction to God's laws, or at the very least, distorts them. The mother of all isms, determinism, is what each ism longs to become.

Torah is, among many other lofty things, a system of healthy boundaries. Isms almost always subvert or dissolve these boundaries (sometimes, quite subtly). For example, Torah tells us—explicitly, clearly, and repeatedly—what *morality*, *justice*, and *righteousness* consist of. But so do isms. Because we're only human, we'll recognize only the connections to Torah and gloss over the discrepancies.

Once you take on a non-Torah ism, no matter how benevolent it seems, it's only a matter of time before you find yourself considering doing things a Jew shouldn't be doing (dissing other Jews is the one that seems to come up most often). By participating in or building non-Torah movements, even if "mixed" with Torah, you will find it challenging if not impossible to distinguish between what is kosher and what's not. You might end up relying on the chochma (wisdom) of humans, perhaps even humans who are unfamiliar with Torah, rather than Torah. You might choose your ism over a fellow Jew or community different than your own.

Another problem is that the pressure from other ism-loving

people can be intense. You end up having to align with people who probably don't put Torah first (assuming they even know what it is). After all, ism-pushers are usually charismatic and they appear most sagacious and compassionate. But don't forget: that's because they're sophisticated!

It's not always easy to keep in mind the Rebbe's words: "*One of the biggest obstacles in the search for truth is other people...*" but if you want to be true to Torah and true to yourself, you must check in with Torah and yourself, not others. *Hisbodedus* is the best way to shake off the layers and ask yourself: Am I rationalizing my attachment to my isms? Do I feel special, privileged, and superior because I align with an ism or do I know I'm special because I am loved by Hashem?

Some sophisticates might justify their belief in an ism by taking quotes from Torah and applying them in self-serving/self-deceiving ways. Perhaps they aggrandize themselves, even at the expense of their fellow Jews or feel it's *diplomatic* to be politically correct. Adherence to a non-Torah ism is often bound to the yetzer hara (evil inclination) of gaava, or arrogance. This yetzer is super-smart, popular, and insidious. It cloaks itself in feel-good terminology and brilliant wit, and usually wins kudos from an adoring public. It tells us that we know better than the simple Jews. It blinds us.

We're told that the Rebbe would serve God with the utmost simplicity, eschewing sophistication at every turn. "It was not that he was incapable of sophistication. Nothing could be further from the truth. For he was an outstanding genius, capable of great depth, even as a child, as all who knew him could attest. But still, he made no use of his brilliance when it came to serving God. His devotion would be as simple as possible." – *Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom*, 13, (BRI)

But what about the wisdom in those isms? The Rebbe is

perfectly clear: “ ...The Holy Torah is the only true wisdom. All other ideas are nothing in comparison.” – *Advice, BRI*.

See *The Sophisticate and The Simpleton, Rabbi Nachman's Stories, BRI*.

*A small sample of isms: Socialism, Capitalism, Liberalism, Conservatism, Environmentalism, Vegetarianism, Statism, Social Justice, and so on. In all honesty, there are aspects of Torah truths in most of today's non-Torah isms—but if you pretend the non-truths aren't problematical, than you're immersed in ~~sophistry~~ sophistication.