

A Holy Curiosity: The Synergy of Reason and Emotion

by Bradley Shavit Artson

WHEN PEOPLE CONSIDER WESTERN THOUGHT, THEY TEND TO FALL INTO two main camps.

The first camp consists of people who single out logic and reason, and who regard that mode as the core of human identity, as the pinnacle of human achievement, and as the mark of our uniqueness as a species. They hold logical thinking to be in opposition to emotion, which they view as tied to animal existence and an inferior state of being.

The second camp consists of emotionalists who are upset by this exaltation of reason. Members of this group insist that it is passion and feeling that liberate our artistic sensibility, imagination, and deepest ability to connect to the world around us, and that reason is somehow sterile, still-born, not really fully human.

The greats of history line up on one side or another of the divide. Let me share with you the names and views of some people who weigh in on this one:

- Pythagoras, the great Greek mathematician, says, "Reason is immortal, all else is mortal."
- Sophocles, in his brilliant tragedy *Antigone*, writes, "Reason is God's crowning gift to man."
- Cicero, the Roman politician and senator, notes, "He only employs his passion who can make no use of reason." Emotion is a fallback.
- And then we have the French weighing in, of course, on the other extreme: Blaise Pascal teaches, "The heart has its reasons, which reason knows nothing of."
- Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin Salanter, the father of the Mussar movement, teaches, "Man is freed by his imagination, but bound by his reason."
- Felix Frankfurter, Justice of the United States Supreme Court, says, "Fragile as reason is and limited as law is as the institutionalized medium of reason, that's all we have between us and the tyranny of mere will and the cruelty of unbridled, undisciplined feelings."
- The last voice I want to share, who doesn't agree at all with Justice Frankfurter, is Albert Einstein. One might expect him to weigh in on the side of logic and reason, but he does not: "I am enough of an artist," Einstein says, "to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited; imagination encircles the world."

Apparently we must make a choice as to who we want to be in the world. We can identify with Mr. Spock, the guy with pointy ears from *Star Trek*. We can struggle to sublimate our human tendency to emotion and embrace our Vulcan commitment to dispassionate reason. In Jewish tradition the person that comes closest to this ideal is Acher, Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya, who—we are told in the *Gemara*—has the capacity to reason so brilliantly that no other sage could understand what he was teaching; who—even as a heretic—could out-logic the Halachic thinking of Rabbi Meir, his student, who was by far the most brilliant *posek* (authority on Halachic law) of his time. And what does that extreme commitment to reason lead Acher to? Nothing but the charge of heresy!

The other choice is to identify with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, a brilliant, juvenile, impulsive

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jerk who gives in to his emotion, produces fabulous music, and screws up every life he touches, including his own. In our tradition, that emotional extreme is represented by Samson, the jock who is able to bring the house down, but who could not contain himself in the presence of a Philistine skirt.

A commitment to unadulterated reason and logic (which views imagination and emotion as somehow degraded and a betrayal of the highest heritage of being human), or a commitment to the exclusive rule of passion (the idea that giving in to one's fantasy and emotions is the best and surest way to connect to the world around us, paired with the view that reason is somehow a paranoid defense against honest feelings): these two commitments seem to be the options that Western and Jewish tradition present us. My job is to make that dichotomy problematic.

The Explosive Tale of Phineas Gage

LET'S TRAVEL IN TIME BACK TO VERMONT IN 1848. THE SEASON IS summer, and a man named Phineas Gage is a foreman on a railroad construction project for the Rutland and Burlington Railroad. His job is to supervise the blasting away of the rock by drilling a hole into the rock, pouring gunpowder into the hole, tapping sand over the gunpowder, and then striking the mix with a three-foot-long, thirteen-pound iron peg with sufficient force to ignite the gunpowder. Because the sand is tamped down hard, the explosion is forced down into the rock, rather than up toward the laborers.

On this fateful day, Gage is in the process of pouring the gunpowder when someone calls his name. He turns around and, without thinking, rests the iron rod in the gunpowder. Witnesses report that they heard a powerful explosion and saw a cloud of smoke, and then a metal projectile soaring through the air. This projectile was the iron rod—now a missile—that had pierced under Gage's chin, ripped through his cranium, and then soared high into the air. Gage was found lying down after this escapade, but sat up, talked, had a drink, sat on the back of a cart, and drove on the back of the cart into town to see the doctor, who was surprised to see a man with a hole in two parts of his head where none had previously existed. Gage's coworkers gathered the iron rod and brought it to the doctor, thinking he might find it significant somehow. From that point on and through the rest of his life, Gage refused to part with the iron rod; he carried it with him everywhere.

Gage was fine, ruled the doctor. He was able to speak, he was able to move, he was able to taste, touch, and smell. He was able to engage in rational conversation. He seemed to be OK. Within two months the wounds had more or less healed, and then people noticed something odd about the man. His friends said, "Gage is no longer Gage." This man, who had previously been hardworking, started to lose one job after another. This man, who had formerly been temperate and kind, was now irascible, obscene, and given to such profanity that women were counseled to stay out of his presence. He spent the rest of his life unable to form relationships, alienated from his friends, and unable to hold a job. For a while he was even part of a "freak show" at the circus.

In a brilliant book titled *Descartes' Error*, Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio from the University of Southern California considers this case and many others. He points out that in case after case in which people's brain injuries somehow tamper with their ability to process emotions, even when their reasoning seems unimpaired, the result is that their logical capabilities are diminished. They are not able to use emotion to guide their decision-making. They are no longer able to reach conclusions. It turns out that the view that logic and emotions are separate and opposing faculties is biologically false. Thought requires the input of emotion. Emotion requires the input of thought. These are two different facets of one integrated process.

So What Does the Blend of Emotion and Logic Mean for Us?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT LOGIC AND FEELING ARE INTEGRATED IN A SINGLE MENTAL process? Recall, please, that the purpose of higher learning is not *(continued on page 78)*



Phineas P. Gage (1823–1860) holds the tamping iron that passed through his brain. Gage appeared to be rational, but his reduced ability to process his emotions made it hard for him to act on his rationality. The author cites this case as evidence that “the view that logic and emotions are separate and opposing faculties is biologically false.”

model of Levantine Religious Humanism, what I have called "The Levantine Option," has made of Israel a Middle Eastern ghetto, which has turned the old shtetl mentality into a national matter.

A siege mentality now pervades many parts of the Jewish world. In religious, socio-cultural, and political terms, Jews continue to suffer from an inability to make peace internally and with the outside world. Where people stand on these issues depends on the Jewish group with which they are affiliated.

The old model of Sephardic Religious Humanism brings together a seriously committed yet moderate form of halachic observance with a liberal attitude toward an outside world that is definitely not deemed *treif* (unlawful) and that will not lead to the rejection of talmudic standards.

Maimonides stood firm in his belief that Judaism must not be an insular culture and for this was anathematized by those rabbis who stand as the model for today's Ultra-Orthodox. He counseled Jews to live in the world as equal and proud members of the human family. It was this Jewish pride that resonated in the Sephardic world throughout the centuries and that has now been lost to the Jewish community.

Such a broken frame calls out for repair and rearticulation.

To repair it, we need to identify the forces that rejected such Religious Humanism and that have suppressed it as a force within Judaism. We cannot bring the Jewish body to proper health unless we can correctly identify the illness from which it suffers. Attempts to sidestep this part of the process will inevitably lead us to failure because of the continued confusion over the conceptual framework and the proper understanding of the categories in which we are functioning.

But the identification of the problem is only half the process.

We must restore the vision of Sephardic Religious Humanism and, with it, the standing of the Sephardim in the larger Jewish world. The grave historical injustices that have been inflicted on the Jews of the Mediterranean and the Middle East in recent times are deeply complex,

yet brutally obvious to all who calmly investigate the matter. We must identify and expunge the Ashkenazi Jewish ethnocentrism that is a critical part of the current problematic from our communities. Such an exclusionary racism is not limited to Ashkenazi Jews per se, as many Jews of Sephardic origin have themselves taken on such a viewpoint, thereby generating a self-loathing that is just as dangerous a problem as that of Ashkenazi prejudice.

Once we look to restore the model of Sephardic Religious Humanism to the Jewish community, we will see the formation of exciting new possibilities for the promulgation of a healthy and robust Jewish identity. Rather than breaking Jews off into separate groups, the Sephardic model of Religious Humanism would enable Jews of all ethnic origins to unite under the rubric of an inclusive and tolerant culture that seeks entente and rapprochement with the world at large, while holding the primacy of Jewish *shalom bayit* as its ultimate aim. ■

A HOLY CURIOSITY

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merely the memorization of large bodies of facts. It is not merely the confident rehearsal of complex behavior. The purpose of higher learning, to quote Ralph Waldo Emerson, is to formulate "an original relationship to the universe."

Forging an original relation to the universe means we do not rely simply on the relationship that others have already established, but instead we fashion our own way—a way that is informed by the best judgments and insights of those who have trod the path of life before us and those who walk it with us. But ultimately, what our education seeks to do is offer us the capacity to craft our own honest relationship to the cosmos, to the world, to God: a heightened sense of wonder and a persistent commitment to each other, to all humanity, to all living things, to the world. In that endeavor, the false opposition of thinking and feeling betrays both efforts, producing instead a caricature of education in which we either resist book-learning, as though that were something somehow separable from living

itself, or so venerate book-learning that we train ourselves to stop seeing the people in front of us and the world of which we are a part.

Neither extreme represents the best of feeling or thinking. It is as Rabbi Abraham Ha-Kohen Kook wrote in *Orot Ha-Kodesh*:

The fierce power of imagination is a gift from God. Joined with the grandeur of the mind, the potency of inference, ethical depth, and the natural sense of the divine, imagination becomes an instrument for the holy spirit.

Imagination and mind together become an instrument for the *ruach ha-kodesh*, the holy spirit. We are called, then, both as Jews and as living beings, to integrate what we feel with how we think, to recognize that logic is so permeated with emotion, and feeling is so intimately connected to analysis, that the two are inseparable and indispensable. Such an enriched notion of thinking/feeling means cultivating both poles as expressions of our truest humanity. Such an integration means honoring the discipline of learning and scholarship as an indispensable contributor to the emotional depth, self-awareness, critical judgment, and moral clarity that being a functioning adult (not to mention a good Jew) requires. And, finally, this enhanced thinking/feeling means honoring the dance of imagination as the indispensable root of character, vision, hope, initiative, and love.

In his book *Surprised by Joy*, the Christian theologian C.S. Lewis recounts a time when he referred to philosophy as a subject that he loved. His companion responded to him, "To Plato, philosophy was not a subject, it was a way." That response seems so Jewish to me! Philosophy as a *derekh*! As a *dao*! What would it mean for us to approach our learning, not as a conglomeration of subjects, but as a *derekh*? To be able to train ourselves to walk on the way, and to grow to walk in wholeness on that way, is the challenge that a fuller learning offers.

Goads Along the Way

WE NEED TO BE WILLING TO ENGAGE IN the disciplined learning that educated

emoting requires. The Mishnah *Zavim* (1:6) tells us, “Not everyone who leads to answer is praiseworthy, except if they give the reason.” The authors of the Mishnah are not disputing that the person who jumps to the answer (Call on me! Call on me!) is right. But what matters most is the *process* of reasoning that allows everyone else to join in the steps of learning. The process of integrated reasoning empowers participation.

In *Massekhet Berakhot* (6b) we are told, “The reward for a halachic discussion lies in the reasoning.” Reasoning. Ours is not a tradition that distrusts logic. To the contrary, we revel in a disciplined mind, and what can only be discovered by using the mind. But I will hasten to insist that to be able to engage in logic well, to be able to utilize reason soundly, requires a great deal of prior learning. When I was a junior in high school, I enrolled in an Advanced Placement course in American history. The teacher, Saul Taischoff, a wonderful pedagogue, stood up and said: “This class is not a discussion; it is a lecture because at this point I know something about American history, and you don’t. You will spend a year listening to my lectures and reading the assignments. At the end of the year you will then know something about American history, and at that point anyone who wants to come into my office and have a discussion about anything about American history will be welcome to do so.” Turns out that Jewish tradition says more or less the same thing, “Learn first, and then reason” (Shabbat 63a). Reason unaided by hard, factual knowledge is fantasy. To be able to reason responsibly requires great learning first.

But detailed learning is not enough. After putting in the hard time sitting, memorizing, learning, practicing, rehearsing, drilling—I’m talking here about grammar, vocabulary, concepts, facts, and techniques—and lavishing the time to master these critical tools, dare to imagine! Learning is not simply the compilation of facts. Make plans to soar! Cynthia Ozick tells us “to imagine the unimaginable is the highest use of the imagination.” Dream! As you walk on the path, think about what once was and is no longer; think about what might have been, but

isn’t; think about what ought to be. Then muster your prodigious learning in the service of the dream, in the assertion of the hope!

Above all, cultivate curiosity. Find the world infinitely fascinating. Let the questions spawn yet more questions, so that for each new answer you unveil, a thousand new questions emerge in their shimmering radiance. Find the people you are with, the communities you touch and serve, the books you study, the authors you read, find them all endlessly fascinating, inspiring, and energizing. I quoted Albert Einstein once, and I’m going to quote him again:

The important thing is to not stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.

During the period of the Days of Awe and Sukkot, when we recite Psalm 27, we ask, “Teach me, Holy One, your ways.” Learning is not a subject; it is a way. It is not something that one does, it is a process for transforming who we are, for bringing succor and uplift to our broken, hurting world.

As you sit in your sukkah (ritual tent), muster the courage to drink deeply of the learning that the world offers you. Dream wildly. Make of your logic a passion, and of your emotions, a logic, such that in this new year we can bring ourselves and our battered world one step closer to the kind of wholeness, the kind of nurturing, and the kind of holiness that can only result from human beings unfettered.

Never lose a holy curiosity. ■

QUIET ECSTASY

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this intimacy with the Divine, which as the Qur’an has it, is “as close as our jugular veins” or as accessible as the memory of a beloved departed *bubbe* or *nona* (Yiddish and Ladino for “grandmother”). Kaplan is

remarkably in touch with this most subtle of proximities.

Those who know Kaplan’s previous CDs, *Tuning The Soul and Life of the Worlds*, are familiar with his uncanny ability—shared with musical and poetic luminaries such as Israel Najara of the sixteenth century—to marry melodies from non-Jewish locales (even Mongolia, in this recording!) with Jewish mystical poetry. He also creates new Latvian/Lithuanian-influenced tunes for pouring out the heart, and performs a stunning Eastern European wordless song meant to accompany the dying process. The CD reconnects me to my ancient Ashkenazic roots while expanding upon them with several exquisite “neo-Hasidic” musical creations composed by Kaplan.

And be prepared for a few tracks that reflect the mournful pathos and longing of the Diasporic experience (perhaps best understood as a universal state of profound spiritual disconnection). You may cry a little—OK! I, however, actually find this melancholy (or better yet, “deep soulfulness”) very appealing.

From a little-known *nigun* of Reb Nachman of Breslov, to melodies preserved by the modern musical adept Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, to Turkish, Moroccan, and Spanish chants, Cantor Kaplan has produced an array of quietly ecstatic songs and original compositions that give life to the term “Jewish Renewal.” Kaplan’s jazzy riffs, supported by *ney* (cane flute), *‘ud* (lute), *tar* (frame drum), *cimbalom* (hammer dulcimer), and more seemingly incongruous instrumentation, are set to revelatory and inspiring verses that send me right into the lap—or before the throne, as it were—of the Mystery of Mysteries. It is a very cool album with great aural warmth, clearly derived from the embers of the Kabbalah’s overriding intention of *tikkun*. If you are searching for a collection of songs with which to focus your meditation and Jewish contemplative life, this is truly it! ■

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