

# Jewish Response to Postmodernism

**René Descartes**



Premodern

There is One  
Truth and it can  
be reached

**Karl Marx**



Modernism

There is One Truth  
and it can be  
reached

There is One Truth  
BUT it cannot be  
reached

**Jean-François Lyotard**



Postmodernism

All is True

There is No Truth  
at all

**Modernism:**  
Harmony, one  
truth,

WW2

**Postmodernism:**  
Controversy,  
disharmony, many  
truths

# Faith Shattered & Restored

***Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, (Rav Shagar)***

In recent years many moral questions have arisen from the legitimization of ethical and moral pluralism and multiculturalism. Does the democratic West have the right to preach its own ethics to peoples who, for reasons of religion or tradition, oppose it? Is it incumbent upon the West to rail against such customs as widow burning and female genital mutilation, or is railing against these practices a vestige of patronizing Western colonialism?

Hence the paradox as to the proper response to acts of violence that are moored in certain cultures: On the one hand, our own values require us to uproot such atrocities and prevent them from occurring; on the other, we are aware, on a philosophical and anthropological level, that every society has its own culture and values, and that, from the point of view of some societies, violent acts such as honor killings protect the community and its values; it is even seen as immoral to refrain from such behaviors. From this vantage, one can argue that not only must we avoid preventing others from engaging in actions that we consider immoral, but that we should enable such actions, perhaps even fund them if necessary. Indeed, the Israeli anthropologist Dan Rabinowitz reports on such a trend:

In some cities in England that feature sizable populations of African immigrants, and especially from places where it was customary to mutilate the genitals of female babies and children, city council members faced a difficult dilemma. The immigrant citizens, who constituted a significant electoral power, demanded that the practices be included in the list of elective surgeries covered by National Health insurance.<sup>3</sup>

These citizens, who lead a Muslim lifestyle, demanded that the municipality not only allow them to circumcise their daughters, but finance the procedure.

Thus they will save a lot of money, spare their daughters the risk inherent in carrying out the mutilation without medical supervision and basic hygienic conditions, and, most important, have the opportunity to preserve their culture proudly and publicly. There was at least one city in which the procedure was added to the list of treatments covered by public funds.

On a theoretical level, such dilemmas pose interesting intellectual puzzles, but how, in our postmodern world, should we conduct ourselves in practice? Can I, as an



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ethical person, ignore the point of view of a member of another culture? Can I ignore a perspective capable of justifying the world of values that gives rise to such action, which according to my values is a despicable crime? Furthermore, in accepting the critical outlook that opposes the imposition of white, European values on a world that, to white Europeans, may appear primitive, can we avoid cherishing the other's point of view?

## **RABBI NAḤMAN AND THE UNANSWERABLE QUESTIONS**

In one of his better-known discourses, Rabbi Nahman of Breslov detects a contradiction at the very base of human experience. He refers to this contradiction as "conundrums without answers" or "conundrums from the void" (*kushiyot mehaḥalal hapanui*).

Rabbi Nahman opens with the assertion that "due to His mercifulness, the Lord, blessed be He, created the world, for he wished to reveal His mercifulness." It is a difficult claim. As the poet Yehuda Amichai wrote in his poem *El Malei Raḥamim*, "Know that if not for the God full-of-mercy/There would be mercy in the world, / Not just in Him." Had God created a better world, perhaps there would be no need for mercy toward Him and us. Yet I think Rabbi Nahman really claims not that the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world so He would have someone to whom to show mercy, but rather that the fundamental note of creation, the thing it reveals, is mercy. It is not mercy evoked by a specific, concrete condition - for instance, a person in a difficult situation; rather, mercy is linked to the basic paradox of creation as a whole, and specifically to human existence. Rabbi Naḥman explains this conflict through the kabbalistic idea of *tzimtzum*:

"This constriction (*tzimtzum*), which made way for the void (*halal hapanui*), will be comprehensible only in the Messianic Age, as one must note that it comprises two diametrically opposed aspects. The *halal hapanui* came about through the constriction, for He withdrew His divinity from there, so to speak, and no divinity remains there, so to speak. Were that not the case, it would not be a void, everything would be infinitude (*ein sof*), and there would be no space in which to create the cosmos. But the truth is that there is nevertheless divinity there, too, for indeed nothing can exist without His vitality. That is why the void will remain utterly inscrutable until the Messianic Age."

How does this tie in to the question of postmodern justice? I contend that the aforementioned contradiction is among the conundrums for which Rabbi Nahman said there is no solution. Let us revisit the ethical dilemma raised above: Do we have the right to intervene and impose our values on, for instance, Druze who harm a woman for betraying the laws of the sect? As noted, we can always employ - indeed, we cannot avoid the reflexive point of view, which looks at everything in context. To fully embrace this outlook is to concede that: my truth possesses no more value than the truth of a member of any other culture, and that I have no right to intervene in his world. It is a point of view embodying the perspective of the divine infinitude, which can contain all opinions. Yet I am still a specific person with my own specific truth, an individual who believes in his truth and who thus cannot deny it, nor does he wish to do so.

**Rav Kook Ideology:**

1. The world is harmonious. All controversies serve one total goal. We just need to reveal the harmony that is out there.
2. We all serve this goal, even if we don't mean to.

**Rabbi Nachman Ideology:**

1. The world is not harmonious. All controversies are severe and stuff.
2. The controversies are essential to forming a stable society.
3. The controversies are also essential to our faith. We can grow in our Avodat Hashem.