



Faithful to tradition, open to complexity

IN AN era where ideological polarization often drowns out thoughtful discourse, Rabbi Gil Student's book *Articles of Faith* emerges as a beacon of intellectual integrity and nuanced traditionalism. This meticulously curated collection of essays, building on ideas discussed on his widely read blog Torah Musings (formerly Hirhurim), does far more than rehash well-trodden arguments. It engages with contemporary Jewish dilemmas in a manner that is deeply rooted in classical sources and refreshingly independent of partisan dogma.

One of the most striking features of Rabbi Student's work is his refusal to be pigeonholed into any ideological category. While some might attempt to categorize him as Modern Orthodox or "right-wing," such labels fail to capture the depth and independence of his thought. Rabbi Student defies simple ideological categorization, bridging Modern Orthodox and Yeshivish worlds without fully belonging to either.

The author's intellectual independence is evident in his willingness to challenge mainstream ultra-Orthodox positions when he believes them to be misguided, such as his robust defense of Rabbi Natan Slifkin during the so-called "Slifkin Affair." Similarly, his critique of the 2012 anti-Internet *asifah* ("rabbinic gathering") reveals a thinker who understands that rabbinic bans are not the solution to the challenges of technology.

A recurring theme in *Articles of Faith* is the delicate balance between upholding rabbinic authority while acknowledging the realities of a post-modern, digitally saturated world. Several essays grapple with this tension, offering nuanced perspectives on how traditional Jewish leadership can retain its stature in an age where informa-

tion (and cynicism) is readily accessible. One particularly compelling essay touts the indispensable role of the "local rabbi" as opposed to the growing trend of turning to great rabbis from outside the community for guidance about communal affairs. Another penetrating discussion dissects the limitations of AI (artificial intelligence) in *psak* ("halachic decision-making"), demonstrating that while technology can serve as a useful tool, it can never replicate the holistic judgment of a trained *posek*. As the author makes clear, no man-made algorithm or computer program can replace the human intuition, empathy, and *da'as Torah* (T"orah-guided wisdom") of a flesh-and-blood spiritual guide.

Besides the struggles with technology, other contemporary issues discussed in the book at great length include feminism, with a chapter on the *mechitzah* controversy, and another chapter on women's rabbinic ordination. In both of these chapters, the author takes a fairly traditionalist approach, buttressed with relevant sources. However, the essay on women's rab-

binic ordination further exemplifies Rabbi Student's nuanced traditionalism. While he unequivocally rejects the innovation of female rabbis within Orthodoxy, his reasoning extends beyond reflexive conservatism and simple yielding to rabbinic fiat. Instead, he essentially argues that the rupture in communal norms that would result from ordaining women would inevitably lead to fragmentation and undermine the very unity that holds the various factions of Orthodoxy together. This conclusion does not reflect mere reactionism but is a carefully considered stance grounded in both halachic precedent and sociological realism.

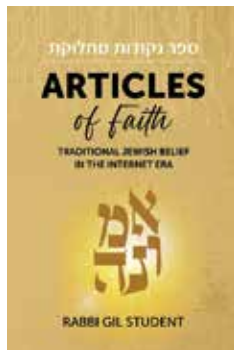
A particularly intellectually stimulating



A Jerusalem man prays, phone in hand.

section of this book engages with the parameters of acceptable Jewish belief. Rabbi Student respectfully but firmly pushes back against Prof. Marc B. Shapiro's *The Limits of Orthodox Theology*, which suggests that historical Jewish thought was far more theologically diverse than contemporary Orthodoxy admits. Rabbi Student argues that the contours of acceptable Jewish belief are not as porous as Shapiro presents them because the rabbis of any given generation have the authority to concretize any principle of belief that they feel necessary in defining who is considered a heretic (especially because of the practical halachic ramifications of that status). Thus, even though the author admits that some legitimate Jewish authorities in earlier times did not accept all of Maimonides 13 principles as popularly formulated or some aspects of those principles, the later rabbinic consensus has the authority to crystallize the boundaries of belief and decide what is considered beyond the pale.

This discussion is not merely academic; it speaks to a broader struggle within contemporary Orthodoxy: how to maintain



fidelity to tradition while engaging with a world that often views religious dogma with skepticism. Rabbi Student's answer is neither wholesale rejection of modernity nor uncritical assimilation but a thoughtful synthesis – one that demands intellectual honesty without sacrificing halachic and *hashkafic* integrity. Under that rubric, this book does not shy away from some of the most contentious debates in today's Orthodox world:

In the essay "Biblical Criticism & the Oral Torah," Rabbi Student provides a robust defense of the traditional understanding of *Torah min HaShamayim* ("divine origin of scripture") while engaging – without outright dismissing – the challenges posed by academic scholarship.

In "Science and Torah: Revisiting the Slifkin-Meiselman Debate," he argues for a model of reconciliation that neither ignores scientific discovery nor compromises fundamental tenets of faith.

In "The Abrahamic Family's Observance," he offers a compelling case for the traditional view that the patriarchs kept the Torah, countering those who mock this view as rejecting a legitimate rabbinic tradition.

In "Citing Non-Orthodox Scholars," through a particularly nuanced discussion, he delineates when and how it may be appropriate to engage with scholarship from outside Orthodox circles without legitimizing theological and antinomian deviations.

Other essays are dedicated to the question of how contemporary Religious Zionism can fit between secular Zionism and haredi anti-Zionism, and the age-old question of when one is obligated to forgive even the worst sinners (like terrorists).

Rabbi Student thoughtfully engages with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's universalist ideas, highlighting a traditionalist yet broad-minded vision.

Throughout the book, Rabbi Student's analysis is firmly grounded in a mastery of classical halachic literature and contemporary scholarly discourse, allowing him to navigate complex issues with both authority and nuance. Time and again, he returns to fundamental questions that lie at the heart of Orthodox engagement with modernity: What is the boundary between *aggadah* and binding Halacha? How do we

reconcile the Chatam Sofer's famous injunction *chadash assur min haTorah* ("innovation is forbidden by the Torah") with the undeniable reality that Jewish practice has always evolved in response to changing circumstances? His treatment of these tensions avoids oversimplification, acknowledging that while the *mesorah* ("tradition") must be preserved, not all adaptations constitute unacceptable breaches.

This careful balancing act culminates in his final chapter, where he offers a pragmatic approach to religious decision-making: Rather than expecting every individual to independently weigh halachic controversies – or, conversely, demanding blind conformity to a single authority – he advises readers to seek out a rabbi whose approach resonates with them intellectually and spiritually, and to follow that guidance consistently. Crucially, he argues that as long as one remains anchored in authentic tradition and submits to rabbinic authority (rather than cherry-picking opinions to suit personal preferences), then the specific path one takes on disputed matters is of secondary importance. This theme, though not always stated explicitly, underpins the entire book: Fidelity to the halachic process matters more than rigid uniformity in outcome.

Perhaps the book's most pressing, over-arching concern is how to sustain religious conviction and rabbinic authority in a post-modern world saturated with skepticism and unfiltered information. Rabbi Student recognizes that the Internet's democratization of knowledge and erosion of traditional hierarchies poses a unique existential challenge to communal norms. Yet, as noted earlier, he resolutely opposes reactionary solutions like sweeping bans on technology, arguing persuasively (and prophetically) that such measures are impractical and counterproductive. Instead, he advocates for a more sustainable approach: deepening one's study of *mussar* and ethi-

cal self-refinement to cultivate an internal compass that resists the pitfalls of the digital age. In his view, the antidote to modernity's chaos is not retreat but resilience – forging individuals whose commitment to Torah values is so deeply internalized that external temptations lose their power.

Rabbi Gil Student is no armchair theorist. As an ordained Yeshiva University graduate, an active member of the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), and a prominent figure in the Rabbinical Alliance of America/Igud HaRabbonim, his insights are informed by decades of communal leadership. In addition to dedicating himself to Torah scholarship and publishing (including editorial roles at the Orthodox Union), he has long worked in the finance

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Learning in Jerusalem's Midreshet Lindenbaum, 2018.

industry – a background that perhaps contributes to his pragmatic, analytically rigorous approach.

As a longtime reader of Rabbi Student's writings – dating back to his early, anonymous blogging days – I can attest to the enduring relevance of these essays.

In summation, *Articles of Faith* is more than a compilation of essays. In some ways, it is a meaningful manifesto for thoughtful, principled traditionalism in an age of upheaval. Rabbi Student's voice is one of rare clarity: deeply committed to Halacha and *mesorah*, yet unafraid to engage with complexity. For anyone grappling with the intersection of tradition and modernity, this book is not merely recommended – it is required reading. ■