offering and see whether they will offer it [on the altar]. So he sent with him a fine calf. While on the way he made a blemish on its upper lip, or as some say on the white of its eye, in a place where we [Jews] count it a blemish but they do not. The Rabbis were inclined to offer it in order not to offend the Government. Said R. Zechariah b. Abkulas to them: People will say that blemished animals are offered on the altar. They then proposed to kill Bar Kamza so that he should not go and inform against them, but R. Zechariah b. Abkulas said to them, People will say that one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals to be put to death! R. Johanan thereupon remarked: Through the humility of R. Zechariah b. Abkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt and we ourselves exiled from our land

5. Mesilat Yesharim c. 20 – משילת ישרים 20

The weighing of Saintliness entails great danger because it is within the power of the evil inclination to draw many good things far from one, as if they were evil and to draw many sins near to him, as if they were great mitzvot. And truly, a person may not succeed in this path without three things:
1. His heart must be the most honest of all hearts in knowing that his position comes only from a desire to serve God, and for no other reason.
2. He must seriously weigh his actions and try to improve them in accordance with his goal.
3. Finally, he must hope to G-d for success in the effort

Thus, what you must understand is that one may not look at acts of piety merely on the surface, but rather one must consider their consequences, for there are times when the act itself may seem good, but due to its negative consequences, he must abstain from it. And if he were to nevertheless go ahead and take that act, he will be a sinner and not a hasid.

We thus learn that one who prepares to attain true piety must weigh all his actions by their results and by the ensuing circumstances, according to the time, the society, the subject and the place.

It was also such incorrectly weighed Saintliness in the incident of Bar Kamtza (Gittin 56a) that was responsible for the destruction of the Temple... As our Sages of blessed memory have said (Yevamoth 656), "Just as it is a mitzvah to say what will be listened to, so is it a mitzvah not to say what will not be listened to." It goes without saying that one should attempt to be in the forefront in the pursuit of mitzvot and to be among those who occupy themselves with them. But sometimes this may lead to quarrels, which might result more in shame to the mitzvah and desecration of the Name of Heaven than in honor.
At the time that Moses ascended on high, he found the Holy One (Blessed is He) sitting and fastening crowns on the letters.

He said to Him, “Master of the World! For whose sake do you labour? He said to him, “There is one who is yet to come, at the end of many generations, and his name is Akiva ben Yosef; he will expound upon every tip, hook of the laws”. He said to him, “Master of the World! Show me!” He said to him, “Turn around…” He [Moses] went and sat at the back of eight rows, but he could not understand what they were saying. His strength was failing by the time he [Akiva] had arrived at a particular exposition. His students asked him, “Master! Where are you getting this?” He said to them, “It is a Law given to Moses at Sinai!” His [Moses’] mind was calmed. He returned and he came to the Holy One (Blessed is He).

He said to Him, “Master of the World! You have a man like this and you give the Torah to me?” He said to him, “Silence! Such is my will…”
comprehend more in less time than the earlier authorities. For in their day, the various branches of knowledge were still in their infancy, largely unknown, and required much effort of the part of the investigator in order to discover the basic principles of knowledge. We, however, are the beneficiaries of their research. All their discoveries and proofs are laid out before us like a set table.

And it states, “Shmuel said to the nation God who did with Moshe and Aharon,” and it states, “God send Yerubaal and Bdan and Yiftach and Shmuel.” Yerubaal – this is Gideon…Bdan is Shimshon…And it states, “Moshe and Aharon among his priests, and Shmuel among those who call to His name.” The verse equated the three lightest in the world with the three weightiest in the world, to tell you: Yerubaal in his generation, like Moshe in his generation. Bdan in his generation, like Aharon in his generation. Yiftach in his generation, like Shmuel in his generation. To teach you that even the lightest of the light, if he is appointed a leader over the community, he is like the mightiest of the mighty. And it states, “And you shall come to the levitic priests, and to the judge who will be in those days.” And would it enter your mind that a person would go to a judge that does not live in his days? Rather it means, that you cannot go to any but he who is a judge in his day. And it states, “Do not say, what has happened, that the first days were better than these.

And that which my dear correspondent wrote asking how we are permitted to rely in practice on such innovative insights as those I have presented, particularly when such a view contradicts the position of some latter-day authorities, I say: Has there already been an end or boundary set for Torah study, God forbid, that we should only rule according to what is found in existing works, but when questions arise that have not been posed in our traditional works we will not decisively resolve them even when we are able?! Certainly, in my humble opinion, it is forbidden to say this, as certainly Torah study will continue to flourish now in our time; therefore, everyone who is able must rule decisively on each halachic question posed to him, to the best of his ability, with diligent investigation in the Talmudic sources and the works of halachic decisors, with a clear understanding and valid proof, even if it is a new application of the halacha which has not been discussed in our Jewish law works. And even for a halacha which has been discussed in our Jewish law works, the one issuing a ruling must certainly understand the issue, too, and reach a conclusion in his own mind before issuing a ruling, and not rule solely based on a ruling that can be found on the topic in other halachic works, as that is considered as one who decides points of law merely from reading law books, about which it is said, “Those who merely recite the Mishnah bring destruction upon the world, for they decide points of law from their
20. Rabbi Prof. Eliezer Berkovits, Crisis and Faith (1976):
Every written law is somewhat “inhuman.” As a code laid down for generations, it must express a general idea and an abstract principle of what is right, of what is desired by the lawgiver. But every human situation is specific and not general or abstract. The uniqueness of the situation will often call for additional attention by some other principle which has its validity within the system.

21. Rabbi Prof. Eliezer Berkovits, Not in Heaven
Not only does the method of authority not work, it actually defeats the eternal validity of the Torah. The Torah is eternal because it has a Word for each generation. Every day the Torah should seem as new to you as if it had been given on that day, says the Midrash. One can find the Word that has been waiting for this hour to be revealed only if one faces the challenge of each new situation in the history of the generations of Israel and attempts to deal with it in intellectual and ethical honesty.

22. Rabbi Prof. Eliezer Berkovits, Not in Heaven
Halakha, as the human way of life in accordance with the Torah, does not aim at absolute truth, nor does it run after the fata morgana of universal truth. Neither of them is accessible to human beings. Its aim is “earthly truth” that the human intellect is able to grasp and for whose pursuance in life man must accept personal responsibility.

23. Mosheh halachah: hor ha'mitzen ha'dorim, ani shevul, peh ha'dor
It is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name. Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, recitation of the texts (Sotah 22a; see commentary of Rashi there). And even if one’s decisions sometimes go against those of eminent latter-day rabbinic authorities (acharonim) so what? We are certainly permitted to disagree with latter-day authorities, and sometimes even with medieval authorities (rishonim) when one has valid proofs, correct reasoning in particular — on matters like this, our sages stated, “A judge has but only what his eyes see [before him]” (as explained in Bava Batra 131a; see Rashbam there) — so long as one does not contradict the undisputed opinion of the Shulchan Aruch and commentaries which have been widely accepted in our community; on these types of matters it has been said, “[our predecessors] left room [for us] to distinguish ourselves.” Most of the responsa of the latter-day authorities indeed utilize innovative insights to decide numerous questions of practical import. However, one ought not be arrogant in one’s instructive rulings — this should be avoided whenever possible, but in cases of great need, and certainly in serious matters regarding the ending of marriages as this case, we are certainly obligated to rule [leniently], even if we merely deem it plausible to be lenient, and it is forbidden for us to be among the “humble” and [thereby] cause Jewish women to remain unable to marry, or cause fellow Jews to stumble in prohibited activities, or even simply cause a Jew’s financial loss — See Gittin 56 which states, “Because of the humility of Rabbi Zecharya ben Avkulas, thebeit hamikdash was destroyed;” why does it say “his humility” and what does that incident have to do with humility?...This indeed is what results [from these types of failures to act], and we are compelled to rule [leniently] even for practical application when we deem it appropriate with evidence and clear understanding, and particularly in a serious matter of leaving a woman without a husband or avoiding a severe temptation.

17. Rashi Sotah 22a s.v. shemorin halacha mitoch
For they decide points of law from their texts — this comes to [explain] that they destroy the world with erroneous rulings, since they do not know the reasoning behind the Mishnah, they are led to draw incorrect comparisons;

18. Rashbam Bava Batra 131a
Do not draw conclusions — to rule from [previous rulings]; rather, [rule] as your intellects are inclined, for a judge has but only what his eyes see..

19. R. Tzvi Hirsch Chajes (Galicia, 1805-1855) to Gittin 56
...But perhaps because of Rabbi Zekharyah’s extreme humility, he could not bring himself to act on these ideas. He was concerned that others would suspect him of acting against the halakah. And he thought that the powers of deciding how to act and relying on emergency measures was given only to the leading figures, and that he was not one of them. So, he thought he was not fit to do anything great out of line with the Torah, relying on the justification of maintaining order and standing in the breach.

And because of this they said specifically “his humility” — meaning that his refusal to stand by his own judgment was the reason for the destruction of the Temple.

24. Jaroslav Pelikan - The Vindication of Tradition
(Scholar of the history of Christian theology. Yale University)
Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name.