

JOY AND JEOPARDY¹

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As we enter the 21st century, the catastrophic spread of disease, hunger, and poverty is matched by an ascendancy of violence perpetrated by brazen and resourced religious groups worldwide. Rather than contribute to the prevailing cultural trend toward cautious detachment, apathy and insularity, it is critical and urgent that we, as a religious community, take seriously our role in the unfolding global drama. The moment extremists chose to use religion to justify grotesque acts of terror and warfare, the moment a child in Africa became more likely to be orphaned by AIDS than to have access to the internet, we lost the luxury of a safe and self-absorbed communal agenda.

I approach my analysis of the future of the Conservative Movement asking: What spiritual message does Judaism offer in an age of poverty, disease and war? What is the relevance of Torah in an American Jewish community that is increasingly characterized by indifference, preoccupied by material acquisition, and no longer looking to the synagogue for community or moral guidance? More broadly, what kind of world do we want our children to grow up in? And what are *we*, as a community compelled by Torah, bound by *halakha*, and humbly devoted to the *Kadosh Barukh Hu*, going to *do* about it?

The Talmud tells a story of Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Yonatan, who were walking down the street when they came to a fork in the road.² One path led by the entrance of a place of idol-worship and the other led by the entrance to a place of prostitution. One rabbi said to the other: “Let us take the path leading by the entrance to the place of idolatry, the inclination for which has been abolished.” The other responded: “Let us take the path leading by the place of prostitution, defy our inclination and have our reward.” Both paths led to the same physical destination. The question was whether Rabbis Hanina and Yonatan would have the courage to take a path that, though more dangerous, would ultimately render them a more meaningful experience. The religious message of this text is clear: if fear is the primary motivating factor in our decisions, we risk missing out on the color, the nuance, the richness of life.

¹ Foreshadowing the break in the Anglican Church over the consecration of Gene Robinson as the first openly gay Bishop, the Rev. Ed Bacon preached: “Nothing of profound joy ever comes into human history without great jeopardy.” Sermon delivered at All Saints Church, Pasadena, California. December 24, 2003.

² Talmud Bavli, *Avodah Zarah* 17a-b.

The story of Rabbis Hanina and Yonatan beautifully articulates the halakhic and ideological promise of Conservative Judaism. Ours is a community of Jews whose love and reverence for the tradition has the potential to manifest itself in bold, thoughtful action, rather than stagnation or cowardly reaction. If we are to live religious lives of purpose and meaning, we *must* be willing to take risks, to engage new ideas, to stretch ourselves. We do this not with arrogance, but with deep humility. We do this not because newness is fundamentally more worthy; we innovate in an effort to make our religious lives real, authentic and compelling rather than allow them to become echoes of something that once spoke to our ancestors. This is not to suggest a reckless legal approach that impulsively defaults to the current liberal political agenda. Rather, it is to recognize that at the heart of the Conservative movement is the mandate to ask uncomfortable and inconvenient questions, because comfort and convenience are not religious values, but intellectual honesty and resolute action are.

It seems to me that one of the great tragedies of our community has been our profound inability to articulate the fundamental connection between a halakhic, Torah centered and (as David Hartman would say) God intoxicated life on one hand, and a serious concern for and engagement in the world on the other. If our movement is to maintain any significance, it will be because we are able to share a relationship with Torah and God that compels Jews to take seriously not only their own spiritual and religious lives, but also their personal and communal responsibility in a global world. To accomplish this, we must actively resist a Judaism that makes us choose between the body and the soul. Why is it that the communities most serious about learning and davvening are not at the forefront of the anti-genocide campaigns? Why is it that activist communities are often devoid of both serious learning and meaningful prayer?

The unique brilliance of Abraham Joshua Heschel was that he married the possibility of deep personal piety with global responsibility. Not only are the two integratable, but they are arguably impossible without one another. Why did the Rabbis choose Isaiah's exhortation "*Is this the fast I desire?*" for Yom Kippur?³ To teach that to be a human being means to be able to move from religious ecstasy to concrete acts of compassion. Why do we celebrate the miracle of our deliverance from genocide at Purim by giving unconditionally to the poor? Because our destiny intimately links us to the most needy in our communities, and our greatest joy comes

³ Isaiah 58:5. *Is this the fast I desire: a day for a man to starve himself? Is it to bow down his head like a rush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Do you call that a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD? No, this is the fast that I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, to untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?* (Isaiah 58:5-7).

from assisting them.⁴ Why do we begin the story of our liberation from slavery in Egypt with the words “*Ha lah̄ma anya* – This is the bread of poverty and persecution... Let all who are hungry come and eat”? Because we know that *hashata avdei* – despite the fact that we are free from Pharaoh, we remain enslaved as long as slavery and affliction persist in our world.

We need to have the courage to say that there is no authentic religious life without a deep sense of responsibility in the world. No longer can we relegate the conversation about the pursuit of justice and human dignity to Mitzvah Day and the Social Action Committee. Our challenge is to make demonstrably clear that decisions about what we eat not only impact our relationship with God and the Jewish people, but also cultivate a gratitude and wakefulness that makes it impossible *not* to think about those who have nothing to eat. Our unique mandate is to prioritize kashrut *and* hunger, Shabbat *and* fair labor laws, the problems of the individual soul *and* the problems of global poverty. A person’s ritual observance should directly inform her engagement in the world. This is not ethical humanism or liberalism – it’s just Judaism.

This is a critical moment for our community. The future of Conservative Judaism depends on our ability to articulate an ethic of passionate, committed involvement in the world, courageous encounter with the other, and real, soulful relationship with God. We can make ourselves supremely relevant, inspiring a new generation of Jews to become agents of change on the world stage. Or we can write ourselves out of history by arguing that what matters is the preservation of the status quo, of training *Conservative* professionals, building *Conservative* institutions, raising *Conservative* children. While I am immensely grateful to the movement for building a context for my religious life, I did *not* spend six years at the Jewish Theological Seminary because I fell in love with the Conservative movement. I went to Rabbinical School because I fell in love with God, Torah, and Israel. I believed that seriously engaging our tradition would lead me to a deeper sense of self, an understanding of what it means to be a Jew and a human being, and a foundational language for my work in the world. I do *not* believe in the movement for the movement’s sake -- Conservative Judaism is a path, not a destination. To make it more than that is a great distraction from the holy work we must do.

It seems to me that a movement created specifically with an eye to the critical role of history in lived religion and the ongoing vitality and relevance of the tradition in a changing world should be well suited to address the social, political and cultural upheaval of the day. But in order to begin this conversation, we must radically rethink our priorities. Rather than devote our time and resources to contemplating the future of the Conservative movement, I challenge us

⁴ Mishnah Berurah (OH 694:3): “There is no greater or more wonderful joy than to make happy the heart of a poor person, an orphan or a widow. And in this way, we are imitating God.”

to write, think, and argue about the future of the world. In the spirit of Rabbis Hanina and Yonatan, I offer a risky proposal: I challenge every Conservative Jewish professional – rabbi, cantor, educator, administrator -- to eradicate the word “Conservative” from our lexicon for an entire year. Without the label of the movement, we will be forced to articulate what we really believe in. Who are we? What do we care about? What keeps us up at night? If we end up communicating an integrated, halakhically serious religious life of spiritual, intellectual, social and political commitments, I guarantee that people will flock to our synagogues and institutions.

What does a dynamic, courageous agenda for the 21st century look like? It is one in which our conversations and ruminations on halakha and history define our obligations and role in the world. We must affirm the relevance and immediacy of our halakhic commitments not only in the *beit midrash* and the synagogue, but also on the streets. Our voices should reverberate throughout the public conversation on:

1. **POVERTY.** Hunger and malnutrition are global crises, striking millions worldwide. In the United States alone, over 36 million people suffer from hunger, and in Israel, 22% of Israeli citizens are food insecure. Can *hilkhot tzedakah* help us carve out a serious response to this predicament?
2. **DISEASE.** The HIV/AIDS pandemic and the spread of other diseases (many easily treatable with the proper resources) are creating global social, economic and human rights disasters with catastrophic impact, particularly in the developing world. How can our tradition’s call to the universal recognition of human dignity guide us in responding to this devastating crisis?
3. **THE ENVIRONMENT.** Climate change, the destruction of natural resources, the proliferation of toxic chemicals – the environment is in grave danger, and our grandchildren will likely be living in a very different world than ours if we do not make great changes, immediately. Can the wisdom of Torah guide us through such a campaign?
4. **CIVIL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES.** In the wake of September 11, the United States has faced unprecedented security concerns. However, attempts to address those concerns often challenge some of the core freedoms of this country. Can our tradition help us responsibly navigate our way through the legitimate conflict between keeping citizens safe and protecting the rights of even the stranger in our midst?
5. **GENOCIDE.** Only decades after the liberation of Auschwitz, the horror of genocide again burst into human history. Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, now Sudan -- what is the

- responsibility of the Jewish community in responding to the intentional and systematic destruction of entire populations of people? How can we create communities that take seriously *lo ta'amod al dam re'ekha* – *Do not stand by as your neighbor bleeds* (Leviticus 19:16) and Never Again? What are the parameters of obligatory intervention?
6. **PEACE AND RECONCILIATION.** In a world besieged by violence and terror, what insight does our tradition offer in helping individuals and communities reconcile, reintegrate and proceed toward living in social harmony? How can we expand the Jewish paradigm of reconciliation and forgiveness to address the resolution of international conflicts?⁵

The absence of a serious, passionate, non-fundamentalist religious voice is a glaring void in the world's political and religious discourse. Torah has something to say about each of the pressing issues of our day, and it is *we* who must say it. We will know that we have succeeded in creating a meaningful, challenging and vital Judaism when we celebrate not only the leaders and institutions that double their memberships or receive endowments for beautiful buildings, but also those who take their congregants on human rights delegations to El Salvador to work on sustainability in the developing world, those who raise money for water and sanitation projects for Jews and Arabs living in the Negev and those who write op-eds in support of the working poor. *This* is the path that lies before us. The only question is: do we have the courage to walk it?

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⁵ This is clearly not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather the beginning of a conversation.