

Re-Form Judaism: Rigidity and Religion

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At my ordination

at Temple Emmanuel in New York City

I sat in my black robes,

ivory tallit, yarmulke,

in a row of thirty others similarly clad.

long banners of jeweled light.

streamed through the stained glass.

One by one, the names of people

I had studied with for years

were called,

and they went

to the open ark

where they became rabbis.

The man sitting next to me,

a quiet classmate who

had never spoken a word to me

in the five years

we studied together

outside of the context of

library searches

and Talmudic inquiry,

was next to be ordained.

He suddenly became nervous.

His brow began to sweat.

He was panicking.

He had never spoken a single word to me

so I was taken aback when he started

talking a frantic blue streak

under his breath.

He said,

“I could not break the glass at my wedding.

I couldn't break the glass.

I couldn't break it!

I kept stomping on it,

and stomping on it

and people started to laugh,

but it would not break.

I just couldn't do it,

the rabbi eventually had to turn it around.

he actually had to bend down to turn the glass

I said to the caterer,

‘Why didn’t you give me a thinner glass?’
it was, it was like a coffee mug
I swear, they must have put
a coffee mug down there
I nearly broke my foot
and my bride was so embarrassed
and I couldn’t break it,
I could not break the glass.”

“Why are you telling me this now?”
I asked.

“Because I tend to mess up holy moments.”

His name was called and he stood up.

I quickly grabbed his sleeve and whispered,
“Don’t worry. The glass is very fragile this time.”

I didn’t speak to him again
for years and years
until September 11th last year,
when I returned home from work
and found his voice on my message machine.

“It hit me today,”
he said.
“What you told me.
The glass IS very fragile
this time.”

Talmud tells a parable
of an oak tree and a blade of grass
who are in a terrible windstorm.
The blade of grass joins the wind
in a dance, bending and weaving with it,
but the oak remains tall and proud.
The humble blade of grass survives the storm
exhilarated,
but the oak tree is felled,
split in two.

That little the blade of grass,
which can be torn with a
twist of our fingers,
could survive when an oak could not.

What killed the oak?

It seems that when one is most proud, most tall,
that one is most fragile.

I remember after Seminary one day
going to the top of the World Trade Center
north tower,
with a friend
to the restaurant
Windows on the World
the young professionals coming up from their offices
to have martinis and cosmopolitans
overlooking the five boroughs
in their suits
and buttoned oxfords,
looking most proud,
most tall,
Waitresses sailing by
with trays,
who knew how fragile?

I had been a waitress while in school
and it interested me how the entire restaurant
would be reflected
in the wine glass
on my tray
how the bend of the glass captured
every corner, every booth
as if little me carried the whole world,
all these people in my fragile bubble,
a crystal ball,

I was, as you might imagine,
probably the world's worst waitress
I'd suddenly remember that you asked for a knife
three weeks later
in the middle of a psychology exam.
I once put an extra E in egg plant
on my dupe
so that it said egg planet
and the cooks never let me forget it,
"Hey, you,
earth to egg planet,
what are you thinking about all the time?"

It didn't bother me.
I wasn't proud or tall then.

I didn't have far to fall.
Things were less complicated.
I could still dance with storms.

When we all saw
that apocalyptic vision
of the airplanes hitting the towers
in the year that followed
people said to me
Religion did that.
How can one still believe,
how can you hold onto faith,
how can you speak of God,
hello, earth to God planet,
how can you stand to be a part of religion,
when that is what religion is capable of doing.

And I wondered,
what did it mean to me
knowing that religion did that?
Was it religion that killed those people?

The Torah begins with the verses
*In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth,
the earth was unformed and void,
and a wind from God hovered over the waters.*

A wind from God,
God's Presence is often compared to wind,
and so in the Talmudic story,
is it God who killed the oak?
A wind from God?
Was it religion that killed the oak,
was it religion that killed those people
or was it rigidity?

During my interview for Rabbinical School
one of the eight interviewers said:
"We see your parents are Jewish,
you lived in Israel for a year,
but you never went to Jewish camp,
you didn't have a bat mitzvah...
you really were not raised in a religious environment.
Is that correct?"

What is a religious environment?
Is it a rigid environment?
I thought of the endless hours I spent
nested in a bin of rags
beside my father's drawing board.
The hosts of dust angels
sailing through the pink and gold light
somersaulting in his breath
or his hand's sudden inspired reach for petal pink acrylic.
His minyan of ink-dyed fingers.

The hours I would listen to him talk
about the canvas' void,
the fragility of man,
the futility of monument,
lines that breathe,
and the supremacy of blank space.
As he spoke, fine slivers of paper
fluttered from his hands and shirt
like petals from a dying flower.

The studio floor
covered in paint, glue,
wood chips, paper, fabric,
razor blades and nails
looking like a forest floor in autumn,
and the studio was as autumnal
in purpose as appearance.
There, creation constantly decomposed
into the rich stuff that churns and nourishes
the red clay of process,
the earth being unformed and void,
until, slowly rising,
resurrected from winter's gray matter
and white fields of rice paper,
it springs out
alive and complete.

What is a religious environment?

I thought of
the artist's certainty

that everything you see is up for interpretation,
the daily, hourly, nanosecond-ly

immersion in interpretation.
The first time I went to the World Trade Center
as a child with my family,
they told me to look at the towers,

“How do you interpret that?” they said.

“Parallel lines,” I guessed,
“Harmony,
negative space?”

“Tilt your head.”

“Oh yeah,
an equal sign.
Now I get it.”

Everything is up for interpretation,
for artistic re-rendering.
This is not a pipe.
A rose by any other name
could be anything you want it to be.

What you see is never what you get,
and the old adage that truth is stranger than fiction
is untrue,
and I can prove it.
Think of the strangest situation you’ve ever been in.
Now imagine that same exact situation,
with all of its strangeness,
but with an orange sky,
green clouds,
you’ve sprouted wings,
and you’re wearing a hat
made out of moonrocks.

You have to admit,
now the situation is stranger.

And isn’t spirituality
at its most basic level
the understanding that there is more to it
there’s more than meets the eye,
the ear,
the fingertips,
that reality is a thin film,

and a religious moment
is when the reel
when the reel
of the real world slips
and you are struck by that white light,
the seamless void
gleaming beneath all that color
beneath the motion picture of your life.

Our sages ask who is rich,
and then answer, he who rejoices in his lot,
he who recognizes however little you have
is just thin film over something blazing
and magical and fathomless
there's a genie in that beat up lamp
a palace in the converted garage
this is not a pipe
that's spirituality
that's mysticism.
In two words, *there's more*.

Immersed in interpretation,
I couldn't even accept
in grade school,
the three sheets of colored cellophane
the teacher passed out.
That this is what all color came down to,
the three primary colors,
red, yellow, and blue.
My hand shot up.

"It can't be true. I've seen what color can do."

"Oh," said the teacher with sarcasm. "You've seen what color can do?"

I started firing the names of paints at her,
Periwinkle?
Ochre?
Plum?
Taupe?
Salmon?
Fuschia?
Fluorescent green?
And to each one she barked back at me,
"Yes, yes, yes. I said all the colors."
And I kept going and going until the class

could no longer contain its hysteria
and the teacher yelled to stop this instant,
but I wasn't asking for the sake
of the amusement.
I wasn't trying to be difficult.
I was genuinely troubled by the notion
that that is what it all came down to.
I came from a spiritual home.
I believed there was always something more.
As the lesson went on,
I sat with my brow knit
pounding out colors in my head,
growing more and more desperate,
red and blue make purple
purple and yellow make brown,
so if the three primary colors make brown
how do you get black?
There's nothing left to add?
Is black a deeper form of brown?
Is black not a color?
It can't all end there.
Suddenly I slapped my hands on my desk and stood up.
The whole class turned
and the teacher put down her chalk
as I seethed at her through clenched teeth.
"Silver."
to which she responded,
Get. Out. Of. My. Class.

And walking out,
I felt positively religious.
I was the priestess of silver
and the world was my kiddush cup.

What is a religious environment?
When I entered Rabbinical school
I didn't gain religion, I already had it.
I didn't become closer to God,
I couldn't have been closer.

Organized religion contains
the old war of fantasy verses formula.
In Rabbinical school you learn formula.

Where you once saw rainbows and said wow,
You learn to say *Baruch Atah Adonai, Zocheir HaBrit.*

Where you once heard thunder and said whoa,
You learn to say *Baruch Atah Adonai Oseh Maaseh Breishit*.

It wasn't the wind that killed the oak.
It was rigidity.
I'm sure of that,
because the same wind did not kill the blade of grass.
It was rigidity that killed the oak.
And it isn't religion in its purest,
windiest,
wildest form
that felled the towers.
It was the rigidity of religion.

And that is what is so profound
about the name of this movement
and why I love it so much,
That we call ourselves Reform Judaism
is so incredible,
is so inventive.
Because Re-Form
is the opposite of Tradition.
Orthodox means straight way,
like orthodontist, straight teeth,
straight way, rigid way,
Conservative, to conserve
is to keep things
the way they are,
Reconstructionist
is just too long a word,
Re-Form is just so elegant,
so outstanding.

Re-Form means religion
without the emphasis on rigidity.
It means tradition reinterpreted.
Talmud calls interpretation
"Putting old wine in new flasks."
The word "Israel" means
"One Who Wrestles with God."
It is an active, passionate,
wrestling kind of faith,
it is not a blind faith,
in fact,
it is a faith
that helps the blind to see.

And to Re-Form
is true to Judaism,
authentic to its oldest roots.

It might surprise you to learn that
no Jews observe Torah
as it is written in the scroll.
Those of you who study Torah
with me or one of our Torah groups know
what is in there
is not what we observe.
Not just us as Reform Jews,
All Jews.
there *is* a small group of people
who try to observe Torah to the letter.
But they are not called Jews.
They are called Karaites.

Torah says eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.
Jews don't do that.
Torah says sacrifice seventy bulls on Sukkot.
Jews don't do that.
Torah says the person who does work on the Sabbath
should be stoned to death,
the rebellious son should be stoned to death
the person who gets stuck on the 405 freeway
and misses services should be stoned to death,
Jews don't do that.
Not us, not the ultra-orthodox,
No Jew observes the Torah
as it is written in the Five Books.

So what do we mean when we say Torah?
When we say Torah,
we mean not Torah itself,
but all of Torah's interpretations.
In Talmud it is written,
"Every day a voice goes forth from Sinai."
Every day Torah continues to be spoken.
If you stop with what's in *there*,
you've only read the prologue.

And what is this Talmud we keep quoting,
Talmud says this,
Talmud says that,

Talmud is interpretation.
Talmud is tomes and tomes of interpretation.
It is basically in two parts,
Mishnah and Gemarrah,
Mishnah is the legal interpretation of Torah,
Gemarrah is the interpretation of the Mishnah,
Commentary interprets Gemarrah,
Shulchan Aruch interprets commentary,
the Codes interpret Shulchan Aruch
the poskim interpret the Codes,
and the students interpret the Poskim
and we are the students.

There is a legend
that says that when Moses stood on Sinai,
he saw God drawing little crowns
on each of the letter.
Moses asked,
“Why are you bothering to put little crowns
on the letters?”
And God answered,
“Because one day there will be a rabbi
who will be able to interpret even these little crowns.”
And God was referring to Rabbi Akiva.
And Rabbi Akiva had 48,000 students
who interpreted his interpretations
of those crowns.

Nowhere is Judaism’s celebration
of interpretation expressed more beautifully
than in the Zohar
where it says:
*The Ancient of Days savors the scent
of this new interpretation
and gains great satisfaction from it.
God receives it and adorns it
with three hundred and seventy thousand crowns.
The interpretation moves,
ascends and descends,
and becomes a sky.
When a new interpretation ascends,
and becomes adorned,
and stands before the blessed Holy One,
God protects the interpretation
and conceals the person who made it,
so that the angels should not know*

*and become jealous of the person,
until from that interpretation
new heavens and new earths are made.*
It's amazing that God,
the Unchanging,
The Big Know-It-All in the Sky,
should be impressed or gain satisfaction
or make a new heaven and earth
from something we dream up.

Fundamentalism

says stop the interpretation
and lets get back to the elements
of what Torah, Testament, Quran says
about idolaters
and people who are not like us
but that is not authentic Judaism.
That is not religion,
that is rigidity.
Today it seems we've lost that sense of it.
When we say we are religious about something,
we often mean "rigidly devoted,"
instead of "challenged,
curious, and creative,"
which would be truer to our
wrestling-with-God-religion.

In Islam,
debates can be traced back hundreds of years
between those who favored interpretation,
and those who argued it as heresy.
Debates were particularly intense
in India and Arabia,
with India arguing innovative theology
and Arabia demanding anti-intellectual literalism,
fundamentalism.
The reformists in India
wanted to draw on the entire intellectual
history of Muslims,
much like we do in Judaism,
they believed in something called *tatbiq*, dialectical thought,
while in Arabia,
the Wahhabis insisted on *taqlid*,
imitation and blind adherence,
and burnt books that contained innovative thinking.
Khalid Duran explained:

*“In the tenth century
traditionalist scholars argued that there had already
been enough independent reasoning
by the pious forebears.*

*If the new generations continued in this vein,
there was a danger of straying from the path,
because by now the age of the Prophet
had become remote.*

*For this reason
the Gate of Independent Reasoning
must be closed.”*

Worship is through imitation and blind adherence.

In Judaism, we say that when we pray,

we speak to God,

but when we study,

God speaks to us.

And so just to pray,

to imitate the pious forebears,

to repeat the written words of the masters,

is not to be in dialogue with God.

To dialogue,

to hear God’s answer

and challenge to you,

one must also study,

open the Gates of Independent Reasoning,

wrestle,

and interpret one’s way toward revelation.

To imitate is to be caught up in a vicious circle,
with no hope for tomorrow.

Tomas Cahill wrote in *The Gift of the Jews*:

All religions are cyclical, mythical,

and without reference to history

as we have come to understand,

all religions except Judaism.

The Jews were the first people

to break out of this circle

[of blind acceptance and imitation],

to find a new way of thinking and experiencing,

a new way of understanding and feeling the world,

so much so that it may be said with some justice

that theirs is the only new idea that human beings have ever had.

And the ability to interpret and reinterpret,

to break the circle,

is the foundation of society’s betterment.

He goes on to say that

the abolitionist movement,
the labor movement,
the civil rights movement,
the antiapartheid movement,
the free speech and pro-democracy movements
could not have risen out of the ideology of the cyclical East.
Cahill points out that it is so remarkable
that the Torah would begin with the words
In the beginning,
staking its faith in the passage of time,
in history unfolding.
In the promise of change.

Kanan Makiya, Professor of Middle Eastern Studies said
Religion did drive those planes into those towers,
Not any religion,
but Islam in particular.
I have always thought there were dark corners in religion.
I took that for granted.
The frightening thing is rather that in the Arab world,
we have let the darkness of religion flourish.
I think rigidity is the dark side of religion.
Of ALL religion.
The settlers in the West Bank
are not more religious than us.
They are more rigid.

It is said that Torah was given
with black fire and white fire,
and the mystics say that the white fire,
the negative space between the letters
is the true word of God.
Words are superimpositions on
an otherwise seamless reality.
The words lift,
the reel slips,
and there we find
 that white light,
 the seamless void
 gleaming beneath,
 pure conscious,
revelation
from a God in motion,
God is a verb,
A Supreme Be-ing
God is not stationary,

God is not rigid,
but fluid,
God is a wind hovering over the waters.

Rabbi Irwin Kula said
*“My genuine experience of life
is that there is nothing out there,
this is all there is.
And when you see the seamlessness of it all,
that’s what I mean by God.
And 9/11, I guess,
if you ask me what did 9/11 really do,
it made me understand the truth of that,
that everything is one.
Not that there is some guy hanging out there
who has it all together, who we call One,
but that it is all one.*

*We all know it deep down!
We’ve all had those experiences,
whether its looking at our child in a crib,
or whether its looking at someone we love,
or looking at a mountaintop or looking at a sunset, right?
We’ve all had those experiences
and we recognize whoa,
we’re much more connected here.
That’s what those firemen had.
They recognized.
Now they didn’t have time to think about it, right,
because actually, if you think about it,
you begin to create separations.
They didn’t think about it.
All they knew was we’re absolutely connected.
We’re absolutely connected to the 86th floor.
Well, that’s where God is.
And that’s not where God is.
God isn’t anywhere.
That’s what we mean when we say God.
And yet these insights of connectedness and oneness,
which make us feel so at home in the world,
are so difficult to hold onto.
And so inevitably we wind up living lives
of isolation and loneliness.”*

(Margot Adler, NPR Correspondent)

“When people are dust,

*when you utterly lose your sense of a human being
as a human being,
when you feel that you can go into a building
and kill 3,000 people
and it doesn't matter because you are so focused
on what you think is perfection and good,
maybe that's a definition of evil.
It's a kind of estrangement.
It's an estrangement from your connection
that these people are just like you."*

It is in the luminous connections between all things
that we find the fingerprints of our Creator.

The terrorists could only take down those towers
because they had built so many towers of their own.
So many walls
that the face, voice, heart, soul of the other
was completely alien to them,
separate from them.

The more rigid we are about the lines
drawn between us,
the more I am able to recognize that you
are not me,
and your pain isn't mine,
and then I can hurt you.
But you are me.
We see the lines between us,
of course, because we have mortal eyes.
We were designed with a timeline
that begins and ends
and so I can't ever completely escape my lines.
But every now and then I get a flash
of the seamlessness of it all,
and that's God.
That's what we mean by One.
Put a line through One thing
and you have two.
Rigidity wrecks the seamlessness
of religion.
All is One.

What did the Jewish mystic say to the hotdog vendor?
Make me one with everything.

To deny that connectedness
is to deny our common Creator.

The waitress who forgot your knife three weeks ago?
that is your rabbi.
The person who does not have access to clean water?
that is your father.
The 86th floor?
That is your home.
The melon that fell off of the truck?
That is your heart.
The flood in Prague?
That is your pulse.
The homeless in the street?
That is your responsibility.
The face looking back at you from the mirror?
That is God's image.
And when the person you're feuding with looks in the mirror?
That is also God's image.
The blade of grass?
That is your soul.
All of humanity?
That is your ministry.

When the prophets thousands of years ago
stood on the Temple rocks
and chanted the very words
that our students chanted this morning,
when we read the translation the themes seem archaic to us
ancient words of condemnation, fear, and consolation
we can draw lines between us and them,
but in truth to the ancient ear
they didn't sound much different than

*Hey Jules Its Bryan,
I'm on the plane and it's hijacked,
and it doesn't look good.
I just wanted to let you know
that I love you
and I hope to see you again.
Mommy, the building is on fire.
There's smoke coming through the walls,
I can't breathe.
Honey
something terrible is happening.*

*I don't think I'm going to make it.
Take care of the children.
Goodbye.*

That is living Torah.
That is the voice that comes from Sinai.
And that is what we bow to when we bow to Torah.
We bow to the promise of connectedness
when we are at our dire worst.
That is religion.
The wild, windy, sweeping, seamless One.
That is what I see now
when I come over the George Washington Bridge,
where the towers were and there's only sky.
The earth is unformed and void.
Seamless nothing,
No-thing,
in which every-thing is equal.

In Deuteronomy chapter 30
it is written:
*Surely this Torah
which I enjoin upon you is not too baffling
nor is it beyond your reach.
It is not in the heavens,
that you should say
"Who among us can go up to the heavens
and get it for us?"
It is not beyond the sea,
that you should say
"Who among us
can cross
to the other side of the sea.."
No, the thing is very close to you,
it is in your mouth,
it is in your heart.*

The Union of American Hebrew Congregations
keeps saying that there is a shortage of rabbis.
Well, I am going to help them out,
I am going to ordain all of you right now.
But don't tell them,
It will be a secret year-long trial.
I want you to be my rabbis for a year,
because Deuteronomy says *it is in your mouth,*
you speak Torah,

I speak formula.
You have religion,
I have rigidity.
Your creative homes,
your morality is the religious environment.
You are what God said you would be
when God took you out of Egypt,
you are a nation of priests.
You are interpreters.
You are re-form-ers.
And maybe that is what religion needs right now,
no more formulas,
no more fundamentals,
no more rigid cages to separate me from you,
no more settlers,
no more murderer-martyrs,
no more Catholic priests
continuing to crucify kids
because the rigidity of the church protects them,
Religion doesn't need to be
any more tall, any more proud.
Religion doesn't need any more rigidity,
rigidity needs religion,
and you have it.
Innately, organically.

We'll reconvene next year,
and review how you served
the world.
How many blessings you gave,
how many curses you averted,
how much hope you inspired,
how much you gave away.
Be the rabbi in your work, in your homes,
be the rabbi
you want your rabbi to be
and lead us.

At my ordination,
when my name was called,
I went up to the ark,
the president of the college
put his hands on my head,
just as Moses had laid his hands upon Joshua,
and his forehead against mine,
and blessed me

as I bless you,
as you begin to serve your ministry
which is all of humanity ~

May God bless you and keep you.
May God's Face shine upon you and be gracious to you.
May God's Face lift to you and grant you peace.

The lady in the corner booth wants her wine.
She wants her old wine in a new flask.
Serve her.
Serve everyone.
And remember, fledgling rabbis,
to be careful, and steady,
as you carry the whole world on your tray.

Balance.

Grace.

Humility.

The glass is very fragile this time.