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REL1300

Project Essay

22/04/2016

### Judaism's Encounter with Modernity: Reinterpreting the Torah

The advent of modernity challenged the religious individual's adherence to scriptural texts. As the west began to romanticize a society instilled with freedom and equality, the conservative world turned to Scripture for guidance only to find dated, incongruent principles that could no longer frame the progressive society. These changes would ultimately come to revolutionize Judaism. Since modernity's infancy, the Jewish faith has been affected in many diverse areas including gender relations, opting out, and marriage, and fostered new ways of expressing a Jewish identity. Meanwhile, the Jewish law as composed in the Torah is losing its literal significance. Some surmise the Torah should be interpreted as "teaching" rather than "law", as several fundamental concepts in the Jewish Scripture are at risk of being challenged by the moral compass governing the world today, and need to be reinterpreted for the sake of preserving the Jewish religious tradition.

Judaism is an evolving religious civilization. In order to preserve the traditional Jewish faith and the survival of the Jewish people, there have been many instances throughout history where the belief system has been altered to accommodate the dominating moral principles of the time. Pinnacle to the reformulation of the Jewish faith is appealing directly to the Torah and Yahweh, the sacred Hebrew word for God. This means the concept of God must be malleable

enough to remain compatible with the mentality of the modern naturalist. At the same time, the naturalist conception of God must meet ends with the scriptural depiction of God, which not only limits the naturalist conception with intrinsic details, but also renders God the product of a developing culture from ancient times (Kaplan 332). Nowadays, the liberties that come with reinterpreting the Torah are slowly in the process of redefining the characteristics of the Jewish people. “Uprooted Jews” is a term often used jokingly to refer to contemporary Jews in North America. While Jewish descendents in the West may pride themselves on a remarkable heritage, they know neither Hebrew nor Yiddish, and are far more familiar with non-Jewish culture than the Jewish traditions of their spiritual homeland in Israel. “In the United States today, far more Jews would be able to identify Michael Jordan than the Tana'im who were the authors of the Mishnah” (Ellenson). The estrangement that follows the Jewish way of life is the ultimate repercussion of being distanced from Jewish roots.

In a world that is increasingly being subjected to opinions influenced by social media, “Uprooted Jews” are more inclined to approach the Jewish tradition from the perspective of a globalized world. While most Jews born in the West choose to participate in the Western world by judging the Torah through the lens of the culture they are raised in, a select few reject the Western culture entirely under the impression that such reinterpretation of the Torah diminishes the stature of Judaism. Furthermore, a growing segment of Jewish followers do not consider themselves Jewish by faith in God, but rather through ethnicity and culture (Eisen 16).

Comparing the self-identifying American Jew's perspective on the Torah with the conventional Israeli Jew reveals a number of interesting differences. Needless to say, far more Israeli Jews are observant of the Jewish traditions. With the Torah having been written in ancient

times, varying interpretations of the Jewish Scripture divides the majority opinion of Israeli Jews from that of the modernized American Jew—an opinion heavily influenced by cultural differences. There are three main denominations for the American Jews. Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Each denomination is uniquely distinguished based on their interpretation of the Jewish religious law. The most striking difference across the denominations is the attachment to Israel. 80% of Orthodox Jews have close ties in Israel, compared to a mere 30% of the Reform Jews. Half the Orthodox Jews celebrate Israel's Independence Day, Yom Ha-Atzmaut, compared to 10% of Reform Jews. While the Orthodox Jews are nearly seven times more likely to maintain a personal connection to Israel, statistics show they are only four times as likely as the Reform Jews to participate in activities supporting Israel. The Conservative denomination falls in the middle (Hartman 406).

Integrating with the social mainstream is ranked among the greatest personal priorities for the modern Jew. However, those with a fundamental commitment to the Jewish existence remain apprehensive about the mass assimilation of the Jewish people into larger societies, claiming negligence of their Jewish identity. The process of assimilation is frequently associated with an absence of observance of sacred traditions in Judaism, and the lack of religious association with other practicing Jews. According to Amyot from George Washington University, the conventional Jewish need to be identified as unique and separated has sparked heated phrases describing this assimilation as “internal erosion and corruption, spiritual Jewish genocide, and the end of American Jewish history” (177). Thus, for those who are highly committed to the Jewish religious faith, Judaism is a matter of identity. Refraining from partaking in the Jewish way of life then becomes a matter of self-disloyalty. Most American Jews lack the religious

convictions found in other parts of the world. Instead, their attachment to Judaism is fortified by being part of kinship groups and organizations (178).

While conflict within the branches of the Jewish community is at best quiet and unnoticeable, the traditional views of the Orthodox Jews is frequently challenged by the Reformers, particularly in regards to marriage, opting out, and gender relations. In the belief that gays and lesbians are equally entitled to religious and civil rights, Reformers have been known to commend homosexuals for their desire for spiritual sustenance. Meanwhile, the Orthodox are known to condemn the same-sex relations as a violation of an explicit commandment of the Torah (Schindler 135). Intermarriage is another controversial topic in Jewish culture. Historically, interfaith marriage was frowned upon and discouraged, as the Talmud, the oral interpretation of the Torah, prohibits it. “You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For you will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods...” (Deut. 7.1). Consequently, Orthodox and Conservative rabbis are forbidden to officiate at interfaith marriages. Amongst Reform rabbis on the other hand, only about half refuse to officiate (Berman 43). A 2013 survey in the United States revealed that 71% of non-Orthodox Jews are intermarried.

Modernity’s encounter with Judaism is summarized by observing the dominating Jewish culture in the West, where the Jewish identity is an individual concept, and passages from the Torah are interpreted in a manner that agrees with local society. Still, this does not mean reinterpreting the Torah is unique to the Reform Jews. A number of Conservative Jews will interpret away certain explicit commandments, and yet insist on other commandments such as separating dishes for meat and dairy products, and refraining from doing any work on the

Sabbath. What characterizes Jewish tradition from rabbinic Judaism to modern Jewish denominations, is the need for constant cautious interpretation of the Torah for it to remain relevant to contemporary issues. This interpretation started with the Israelites present for the divine revelation of the ten commandments at Mount Sinai. The interpretive efforts at this time are considered imperative and even indispensable with regards to the continued revelation of God's will. This human intervention grants rabbis the right to derive and formulate laws not stated in the ancient text that will adapt Judaism to new circumstances.

If God had wanted the Torah to be without any ambiguity, he would have published both the Written and Oral Laws ab initio. If he had wanted the Torah text to be immutable, he would have engraved in stone not the Ten Commandments alone but the entire Pentateuch. Since he didn't exercise either option, it is not unreasonable to assume that just as he intended Jewish religious scholarship (exemplified by—but not limited to—the Talmud) to take charge of the Torah's interpretation, so did he intend it to take responsibility for its textual preservation. (Sokolow e32)

The lasting essence of Jewish tradition can thus be considered a dialectical process between the divine and human creativity (Zetterholm).

A careful observation of the religious differences in Judaism reveals the staggering impact of modernity in Jewish faith and tradition. While the Torah retains its position as law amongst Orthodox Jews, Reform Jews believe the Torah was divinely inspired and—as a living document—should be reinterpreted with each generation. It seems reasonable to believe Judaism's encounter with modernity as outlined in this paper is redefining the Jewish identity and adherence to Jewish Scripture. Though the denominations of Judaism do not necessarily

agree on all facets, they are merely practicing different expressions of the same faith, and are united by a common purpose—the preservation of Jewish traditions. They observe the same festivals, the same prayers, the same history, and the same doctrine emphasizing the teachings of God. Whether the Torah is interpreted literally or with leniency, it is clear that Judaism is continuously evolving into a religious tradition prepared to reflect the impact of modernity.

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