

2010 Confirmation Class Message

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I spent the week before last in New York at a conference with several hundred other rabbis. I mention this today, when we celebrate the confirmation of our students because I want them to know that although each of the rabbis had spent at least five or more intense years studying Judaism in depth, one of the primary purposes of our annual gathering is to study. The study sessions are offered throughout the day, and constitute the bulk of our deliberations. We do this because Judaism has always maintained that study of Judaism is an important part of what it means to be a Jew and what Jews are supposed to do.

Dr. Arnold Eisen, the dynamic and brilliant new chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, challenged us to think in a stirring address about the question of how is God manifested in the world? In other words how do we find evidence of God's imprint and how does that help us find meaning in our lives?

Underlying his inspiring message was the question: What does it mean to be a Conservative Jew in America in the 21st century? Part of the answer he suggested is that it means to wrestle with our texts and to recognize the different voices within traditional and contemporary Jewish writings. He cited great modern Jewish thinkers, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Mordechai Kaplan, Solomon Schechter and others in presenting his case that it means to blend modernity with tradition. To be a conservative Jew is to accept modern critical scholarship and participation in the outside secular world while not rejecting what Judaism has to offer.

When conservative Judaism was first founded in Germany in the 1800's, it was called "Positive Historical Judaism" because it meant being open to critical thinking while still being governed by *halacha*, Jewish law. By way of example of this blending, and this eternal struggle between modern scholarship and wrestling with reality, one session I attended referred to how the language and imagery of the Biblical description of what happened at Mt. Sinai parallels ancient Ugaritic texts of other people.

The new *mahzor*, the High Holiday prayer book of the Conservative movement, was introduced. A committee of rabbis worked on the book for 12 years, and its dedication featured the introduction by a cantor of a new way to sing a *piyut*, a poem written by Yehuda HaLevi over 700 years ago. As I listened to the beautiful music, the melody seemed so natural I couldn't help but wonder if this is what HaLevi must have been singing to himself when he wrote the song, or were the words waiting 700 years for someone to compose this melody, or was the poem waiting patiently all this time for this tune to be discovered?

In various settings some of the rabbis commented on how the writings and ideas of Judaism influence their thinking, while others would refer to the impact of what a particular teacher, or writer or thinker, or book had on their outlook and understanding of Judaism.

In one session two distinguished theologians debated if their interpretation of a passage was radical or revolutionary, and then proceeded to show us how the debate they were

having about how to understand revelation, what happened at Mt Sinai when God gave the Torah to the people of Israel had actually been going on among rabbis throughout the millennia. Then they even suggested that the dispute was imbedded in the Bible itself, since the inception of the Jewish religion, making the debate therefore over 3,500 years old

The question centered on something I had not previously given serious consideration: What did the people hear at Mt. Sinai? Was it God's voice? Was it God's actual words, or some other kind of sound? The question arises because of the ambiguity of the Hebrew word "*kol*", which is what the bible says the people heard from God. "*Kol*" can mean voice, but it also means sound. Was it then precise, or was it more ambiguous and subject to interpretation? The difference and how you answer that question leads to very different conclusions. Throughout the ages, across hundreds of years our greatest sages and rabbis had different ways of answering this with different implications as to how free one is then to interpret or innovate.

And as I was at this conference, which was so intellectually exciting and stimulating, I kept thinking about you guys, about our confirmation class and about the ceremony we celebrate today. I thought about our tenth graders because we have studied some of these very same texts. I thought about you and today because I want to share my enthusiasm with you, and because it has everything to do with what I want to impart to each and every one of you.

I want you to be a part of the eternal conversation. I want you to be drawn in to it and to participate in the debate, and not to be detached from it.

You can go through life with your headphones on, attuned to your iPod. Yet while you are tuned in to your music, you may run the danger of being tone deaf to the grandeur around you. You can live your life tied to your blackberry and to text messaging as slaves to technology, and be oblivious to the great ideas and debates which have raged throughout history and which precede you. My plea to you is not to be indifferent to this great heritage that is yours and that is so vital and alive, so ancient, yet so relevant.

I mentioned earlier that the Bible may have drawn upon the literature of other great ancient, now defunct civilizations, and that it may have multiple authors reflecting different approaches. Rather than be disturbed by this discovery which may seem to imply a lack of originality or uniformity, or which could be misconstrued as plagiarizing, or seen as challenging the divine origin of the text, the fact that other peoples used similar language and structures upon which our Torah is based serves to validate the authenticity of the claims to antiquity.

One must ask which text has influenced and had an impact on the world, and continues to do so - the ones from the Sumerians and others of the ancient Near East, or the Bible? Which one is still alive and held dear, and which is a relic studied by devotees of ancient languages?

At a Purim shpiel when I was in rabbinical school many years ago, I jokingly presented a Styrofoam cup to a teacher of Akkadian and Ugaritic and said, "We present this ancient Kiddush cup to our distinguished professor of obsolete languages..."

But Hebrew is not obsolete and is still spoken, and the document known as the Tanach is still in use. While the writings of other ancient civilizations shed light on our understanding of the meaning, original intent and background of the Bible, it is the Bible that is still venerated. It is the Jewish Bible that remains the most important and best selling book of all time, and forms the basis of morality and serves as a set of guidelines for all time. Think about why that is so, and why some texts are found only in rare book rooms, or as cuneiform tablets in museums, while the Bible is still read, and the answer should be obvious. It is because there is still a people alive today, who study and cherish that text, who debate and argue about it, which means, who take it seriously.

As Professor Neil Gilman said in commenting about a scholarly debate, "It is not cut and dry. The final determination has not been made, and it is not finished. The debate is not over." And then in celebrating the contentiousness of the interpretations, he declared, "The ambiguity leaves room and allows us to breathe theologically, and this kind of approach and method of inquiry typifies the approach of JTS and of Conservative Judaism."

I have often spoken about Judaism as a treasure, and as a precious heirloom. Part of my purpose in my teaching is to open up the text to you, to give you a glimpse of this precious legacy that is yours. But I want you to understand that it is not just an heirloom. It is not just a fossil or relic, the kind of thing that is taken out and looked at on rare occasions. It is alive. It is vibrant. It is open to debate. It offers a way of life, a way of looking at the world, a way of making decisions. As we proclaim whenever we read from the Torah in services, "*Etz Hayim hee..*, It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it, and all of its supporters are happy. All who uphold it are blessed. Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and its paths are paths of peace."

The message is this: You must continue to be a part of the debate and the ongoing discussion. You must continue to interpret it and to create it, for it is yours, and it is the path to a life of fulfillment and meaning!

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