

Judaism: Thinking Big

It is time to start thinking big about Judaism. Great opportunities are awaiting us and too much is at stake to let them pass by. For too long, Judaism has been jailed in compartmentalized and awkward boxes. It is time to liberate it.

Most religious Jews are not aware that Judaism has nearly become passé. They believe it is thriving. After all, we have more learning, more Jewish schools, yeshivot, women's seminaries and outreach programs, and more books on this subject than ever before. Despite this, Judaism suffers from a serious malady. In truth, it is not only Judaism that suffers from this disease, but the whole world. *We lack bold ideas.* We have fallen in love with—and become overwhelmed by—an endless supply of all-encompassing but passive information, which does not get *processed* but only *recycled*. We can access trillions and trillions of sound bites, which expose us to every kind of information, providing us with all the knowledge we could ever dream of. The problem is that this easily accessible information has replaced creative thinking. It has expelled the possibility for big ideas; we have grown scared of them. We only tolerate and admire bold ideas when they provide us with profit-making inventions, when we feel our empty pockets, but not when they dare challenge our hollow souls. We do not discuss big ideas because they are too abstract and ethereal. Novelty is always seen as a threat. It carries with it a sense of violation; a kind of sacrilege. It asks us to think, to stretch our brains. This requires too much of an effort and doesn't suit our most important concern: the need for instant gratification. We love the commonplace instead of the visionary and therefore do not produce people who have the capacity to deliver true innovation.

It is only among some very small, secular elite groups that we see staggering ideas emerging – Hawking and black holes; Aumann and game theory. In the department of Judaism, we rarely find anyone who even comes close to suggesting something new. This is all the more true within Orthodox Judaism. While in ages past, discussions within our faith could ignite fires of debate, incite revolutions and fundamentally change our views about Judaism and the world—as when the Baal Shem Tov founded Chassidism—we are now confronted with an increasingly *post-idea* Judaism. Provoking ideas that would boggle our minds are no longer “in.” If anything, they are condemned as heresy. Since they cannot easily be absorbed into our self-made religious boxes, and they don't bring us the complacency we long for, we stick to the mainstream where we can dream our mediocre dreams and leave things as they are.

Most of our yeshivot have retreated from creative thinking. We encourage the narrowest specialization rather than push for daring ideas. We are producing a generation that believes its task is to tend potted plants rather than plant forests. We offer our young people prepared experiences in which we tell them *what* to think instead of teaching them *how* to think. We rob them of the capacity to learn what thinking is really all about. The plethora of halachic works, which educate

them in the minutiae of the most intricate parts of Jewish law, hardly generate the inspiration of new ideas about these laws. In fact, they stand in the way. There is no time for anyone to process all the information even if they want to. But instead of seeing this as a problem, they and their teachers have turned it into a virtue.

And that is exactly the point. We are faced with two extremes: either our youth totally walk out on Judaism or maintain a lukewarm relationship with Jewish observance; or, they become so obsessed by its finest points that they are incapable of seeing the forest for the trees and they consequently turn into rigid religious extremists.

What we fail to realize is that this is the result of our own educational system. In both cases, young people have fallen victim to the disease of information for the sake of information.

Information is not simply to *have*. It is there to be converted into something much larger than itself; it is there to produce ideas that make sense of all the information gathered in order to move it forward to higher latitudes. Information is not there to be possessed but to be *comprehended*.

Jewish education today is, for the most part, producing a generation of religious Jews who know more and more about Jewish observance but think less and less about what it means. This is even truer of their teachers. Many of them are great Talmudic scholars, but these very scholars don't realize that they have drowned in their vast knowledge. The more they know, the less they understand. Just as a young child may think it is an act of kindness to lift a fish out of an aquarium and "save" it, so these rabbis may be choking their students while thinking they are providing them with spiritual oxygen. Doing so, they rewrite Judaism in ways that are totally foreign to the very ideas that it truly stands for. They are embalming Judaism while claiming it is alive because it continues to maintain its external shape.

Fewer and fewer young religious people have proper knowledge of the great Jewish thinkers of the past and present. And even when they do, the ideas of these great thinkers are presented to them as information instead of as challenges to their own thinking, or as prompts to the development of their own creativity. This is a tragedy. Our current spiritual and intellectual challenges cannot be answered by simply looking backwards and giving answers that once worked but are now outdated.

Instead of new theories, hypotheses and great ideas, we get instant answers to questions of the utmost importance, offered via a wide variety of self-help books, the authors of which seem to claim that their philosophical information came directly from Sinai. Trivial, simplistic, and often *incorrect* information replaces significant ideas. The information is merely twittered—thus too brief and unsupported by proper arguments—yet still presented as "the answer." By

delivering “perfect” answers, which fit nicely into the often underdeveloped philosophies of their authors, everything is done to crush questioning. *The quest for certainty paralyzes the search for meaning*. It is *uncertainty* that is the very stimulus impelling man to unfold his intellectual capacity. Every idea within Judaism is multifaceted—filled with contradictions, opposing opinions, and unsolvable paradoxes. The greatness of the Talmudic sages was that they shared with their students their own struggles and doubts and their attempts at solving them, as when Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai debated the essential, existential question of whether man should have been created at all (1). Students were made privy to their teachers’ inner lives, and that made their discussions exciting. The teachers created tension in their classes, waged war with their own ideas and asked their students to fight them with knives between their teeth. They were not interested in teaching their students dogmas, but instead asked them to take them apart, to deconstruct them so as to rediscover the questions. These teachers realized that not all paradoxes can be solved, because life itself is full of paradoxes. They also realized that an answer is always a form of death, but a question opens the mind and inspires the heart.

It is true that this approach is not without risk, but there is no authentic life choice that is risk free. Nothing is worse than giving in to the indolence and callousness that stifles inquiry and leaves one drifting with the current. Such an approach shrinks Judaism’s universe to a self-centered and self-satisfying ideological ghetto, robbing it of its most essential component: the constant debate about the religious meaning of life and how to live in God’s presence and move to higher levels.

Outreach programs, although well intended, have become institutions that, like factories, focus on mass production and believe that the more people they can draw into Jewish observance, the more successful they are. That their methods crush the minds of many newcomers who might have made a major contribution to a new and vigorous Judaism is of no importance to them. The goal is to fit them into the *existing* system. That their outdated theories make other independent minds abhor Judaism is a thought they do not seem to even entertain. To them, only *numbers* count. How many people did we make observant? Millions of dollars are spent to create more and more of the same type of religious Jew. Like the generation of the Tower of Babel, in which the whole world was “of one language and of one speech,” we are producing a religious Jewish community of artificial conformism in which independent thought and difference of opinion is not only condemned, but its absence is considered to be the ultimate ideal. We have created a generation of yes men. We desperately need to heed what Kierkegaard said about Christianity: “The greatest proof of Christianity’s decay is the prodigiously large number of [like-minded] Christians” (2).

Insight has been replaced with clichés, flexibility with obstinacy, and spontaneity with habit. What was once one of the great pillars of Judaism—the esteemed

value of spiritual, intellectual and moral dissent—has become anathema. Instead of teaching the art of audacity, we are now educating a generation of kowtowers. There is social ostracism of any kind of healthy rebellion against the conventional. Eliezer Berkovits was ignored when he argued that Halacha had become defensive; the master thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel is completely disregarded by Orthodoxy; Chareidi yeshivot pay no attention to Rav Kook. Above all, we see dishonest attempts to portray fundamentalism as a genuinely open-minded intellectual position while in truth it is nothing of the sort. Great visions of the past are misused and abused. Today we are seeing many people taught that they must imitate so as to belong to the religious camp. Spiritual plagiarism has been adopted as the appropriate way of religious life and thought.

It is true that there are still dissidents in Judaism today—and they are growing in number. There are even some yeshivot and institutions that dissent, but the great tragedy is that these places speak in a small voice, which the religious establishment is unable to hear. Instead, the establishment puts its weight behind the insipid and the trivial, and has fallen in love with the uncompromised flatness of mainstream institutions, which yield large numbers and offer instant answers to people who find themselves in religious crisis.

Original Jewish thinkers today fall victim to the glut of conformists. While these thinkers challenge conventional views, they remain unsupported and live lonely lives because our culture writes them off. Rather than saying yes to new religious ideas, which we are in desperate need of, the conformists pander to the idol worship of intellectual and spiritual submission.

In fairness, it is not much different in the non-Jewish world. Were Socrates, Plato, Kant or Spinoza alive today, they would barely be mentioned in the media other than in some specialized philosophical journals that nobody reads. What our generation does not understand is that without these giants of the past we would still be living in a primitive world without science's contribution of all the knowledge and luxuries that we enjoy today. Whether we agree or disagree with them, it was *these* thinkers who produced the great ideas that laid the foundations for much of what we have harvested through the centuries. Today they would be crowded out by massive quantities of trite sound bites that lead only to self-satisfaction.

And so it is with Judaism. Most Talmudic scholars don't realize that the authors whose ideas they teach would turn in their graves if they knew their opinions were being taught as dogmas that cannot be challenged. They wanted their ideas tested, discussed, thought through, reformulated and even rejected, with the understanding that no final conclusions have ever been reached, could be reached or even should be reached. They realized that matters of faith should remain fluid, not static. Halacha is the practical upshot of living by unfinalized beliefs while remaining in theological suspense. Only in this way can Judaism

avoid becoming paralyzed by its awe of a rigid tradition or, conversely, evaporate into a utopian reverie.

Parents today who are worried by their children's lack of enthusiasm for Judaism do not realize that they themselves support a system that systematically makes such passion impossible.

What today's Judaism desperately needs is verbal critics who could spread and energize its great message. It needs spiritual Einsteins, Freuds and Pasteurs who can demonstrate its untapped possibilities and undeveloped grandeur. Judaism should be challenged by new Spinozas and Nietzsches; by remorseless atheists who would scare the hell out of our rabbis, who would in turn be forced into thinking bold ideas.

The time has come to deal with the real issues and not hide behind excuses that ultimately will turn Judaism into a sham. Our thinking is behind the times, and that is something we can no longer afford. Judaism is about bold ideas. Its goal is not to find the truth, but to inspire us to honestly search for it. Torah study is not only the greatest undertaking there is, but also the most dangerous, since it can so easily lead to self-satisfaction and spiritual conceit. The leashing of our souls is easier than the building of our spirit.

What we need to do is search for Judaism as it was in its embryonic form, before it was solidified into the Halacha as we know it today. We must return to its great ideas with its many opinions, and develop them in ways that can answer the varied spiritual needs of modern man and inspire his soul.

We need to emulate Rembrandt, the great Dutch painter who, unlike all other painters of his generation, used the raw material of Holland's landscape to perceive hidden connections—linking his preternatural sensibility to a reality that he was able to transform, with great passion, into a new creation. He found himself in a state of permanent antagonism from his society, and yet he spoke to his generation and continues to speak to us because he elevated himself to the point where he could see the full dimensions that art could address, which nobody else had discovered. Just like art, one cannot *inherit* faith and one cannot *receive* the Jewish tradition. One must fight for it and earn it. To be religious is to live in a state of warfare. The purpose of art is to disturb; not to produce finished works but to stop in the middle, from exhaustion, leaving it for others to continue. So it is with Judaism. It still has scaffolding, which I believe should remain while the building continues.

I am not advocating revisionist reform-like positions, often presented just for the sake of being novel. History has shown that such approaches do not work and often lack the genuine religious experience. We should not be overanxious to encourage innovation in cases of doubtful improvement. But the time has come to rethink Jewish education as it is being taught in many traditional places. We

are in need of a radically different kind of yeshiva: one in which students are challenged about their beliefs; where they are confronted with Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers' critiques on Judaism and learn how to respond; where they become aware that it is not certainty but doubt that gets you an education; where it is not rabbinic authority that reigns supreme, but religious authenticity. A yeshiva where the teachers have the courage to share their doubts with their students and show them that Judaism teaches us how to live with uncertainty, and *through* that uncertainty to be deeply religious people. Students need to learn that Judaism, like life, is the art of drawing sufficient conclusions from insufficient premises. A reasonable probability is the only certainty we can have.

There is an urgent need to set up "Tents of Avraham" throughout the land of Israel, where religious and non-religious Jews can study, discuss and argue the great faith positions of earlier and later generations. Where they can engage in the wonder of Judaism, study its struggles, its worries, and its constant search for new understandings of itself. Where there can be honest discussion, even if it leads to considering the replacement of some components that are now seen as fundamental to Judaism. The need to break idols and slaughter sacred cows is itself a Jewish task, which none other than Avraham initiated. No doubt there will be fierce arguments, but we should never forget that great controversies are also great emancipators.

Broad change is not just window dressing, and it can be painful. It is liberating and refreshing but comes with a price. Without it, though, not only is there no future for Judaism; there is also no purpose.

We are in desperate need of bold ideas that will place the Torah in the center of our lives and make us receptive to God's presence through a daring *new* encounter with Him. Let it be heroic. Not staid and comfortable, but painful and hard-won; a deep breath in the midst of the ongoing conflict ever-present in the heart of humankind.

1. Eruvin 13b.

2. M.M. Thulstrup's "Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Imitation," in H.A. Johnson and N. Thulstrup (eds.), *A Kierkegaard Critique* (New York: Harper, 1962) p. 277.