

Petty Orthodoxy – thetorah.com

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Thetorah.com is a website that looks at the weekly reading of the Torah for people who do not take every word in the Torah literally. In addition to valuing traditional commentators and interpretations, it caters to those who are interested in seeing how academics, scholars of different disciplines and backgrounds, understand the Torah. It is not for the fainthearted, fundamentalists, or those who are unable or unwilling to take a rational point of view.

I consider it to be extremely important in bridging the gap between rationality and faith, belief and acceptance. But more than that, I think it is crucial in reaching out to those who feel that traditional interpretations alone no longer meet their intellectual needs. This is so important in preventing open minds from rejecting Torah as being too doctrinaire.

The biggest challenge today in Jewish life is no longer preserving Orthodoxy. The Very Orthodox world is thriving. It retains most of its alumni. Those who leave get a lot of publicity but they are few overall. On the other hand, we are losing far more through apathy, ignorance, and assimilation. It may well be too late to reach those who have absolutely no knowledge of Jewish spirituality or of Jewish learning. But I think the greatest challenge is to reach out to those with a background, from Jewish schools or observant families, who are turning their backs and minds on a simplistic way of looking at our traditional texts.

We live in a world where people like to think for themselves, to make up their own minds. For better or for worse, ours is an era of individuality. How should religion relate to it? By shutting up the mental gates, closing minds, peddling conformity of ideas? Or by opening up, tolerating, allowing freedom of thought?

Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT) in New York started out to meet these goals. It was a reaction against the creeping influence of non-rationalist rabbis over Yeshiva University. Amongst its alumni is Rabbi Dr. Zev Farber, who is the editor of thetorah.com. Recently some YCT students issued a declaration affirming a belief in their concept of Torah from Sinai as a red line in Orthodoxy, clearly intended to dissociate themselves from Rabbi Ferber and, by implication, putting him beyond the pale. It was just another example of the pettiness within the “broad church” of Orthodoxy. Furthermore, it negates thousands of years of alternative interpretations from impeccable rabbinic authorities.

Trying to impose any auto-da-fé on Orthodox Jews is offensive to me as a rationalist precisely because although there are indeed accepted ideas and fundamental concepts in Judaism; there has always been a powerful rational voice in Judaism that has avoided the rigid constraints of fundamentalism. Although certain concepts are regarded as core components of Jewish identity,

the right to use one's mind, to be able to think for oneself, is a measure of a healthy society and a healthy human being.

What is more, the prime mover of thetorah.com is a Kollel rabbi of impeccable credentials and a member of the Charedi community. If YCT students want to dissociate themselves from men like these, who look beyond traditional sources for answers to serious questions, then I wonder what they are doing in YCT. If thinking Orthodoxy has no room for questions, it will wither on the vine of obscurantism. I am proud to be associated with thetorah.com and Rabbi Farber, and I urge every thinking, committed Jew to rally to its support.

I worry that orthodoxies tend towards pettiness. Whenever any group seeks to define itself by distancing itself from and negating others, it inevitably risks becoming a witch-hunting travesty of its own ideals. In time, it falls prey to internal division and sectarianism. That was why we needed prophets, to keep us reminded of our ideals and goals.

Once one adopts a policy of negativity, of attacking the other instead of asserting the positive, one demeans, discriminates, and humiliates. That becomes the currency, and the result is that one turns in on oneself, petty tensions proliferate, and it becomes a suicidal feeding frenzy. All Orthodoxies are like that, in every religion. In politics it is even worse. And when the two get together it is positively satanic.

Some issues are indeed incredibly complex. Does "Torah from Sinai" mean all of it, part of it, most of it, or none of it? Was it spoken, transmitted, dictated, inspired, influenced, deduced at a specific moment some four thousand years ago, over forty days, or forty years? And in what language and what script? Or was it invented or edited, or compiled, or adopted, or adapted, or reconstructed, or deconstructed, or created, or evolved out of something, nothing, or everything? If many rabbis in the Talmudic era could argue about the details then, why not now? And what really matters? Theological slogans or living a life of Torah and genuine morality?

I'd rather see energy expended purging Charedi Orthodoxy of its culture of corruption, illegality, materialism, and brushing everything under the carpet. Communities can have their own ideas and can choose to be either open or closed. They can refuse to accept anyone who thinks or behaves differently. Or to tolerate those who may or may not completely, partially, occasionally, formally, or informally agree, or not quite, or sort of, or it depends. That's why many of us prefer living in free societies that do not insist that we all believe the same thing. The last thing we need is a "belief test" as well as a "means test" as well as "sniff test" or a "look into my eyes and swear test".

You like my club? You're welcome to stay. You don't like my club? Go somewhere else. But why do you have to rubbish my club? Do you really think the Almighty, who insisted on love, kindness, support, and sensitivity, really cares more about jots and tittles? I don't say that jots and tittles have no use or purpose or benefit. I value and practice lots of them myself. I just wonder how much they are worth being cruel, insensitive, and

aggressive about? Didn't Samuel say that more than sacrifices God wants you to listen to the message?

You want to wear a black coat in summer? Be my guest! But don't rubbish those who prefer not to. You want to believe the world is five thousand years ago? Gezunt! But why insult those who think its older. You want to study Torah only? Of course, why shouldn't you. But don't prevent those who want to earn a living from being able to educate themselves. You don't want to serve in the Israeli army? It's your decision, but stop bullying those religious people who do. And now to cap it, we want to hound people who think for themselves.

Am I to understand that the God of Micah who said, "Be kind, love justice, and walk humbly with your God," really wants people to snub or insult others just because they disagree about how to understand texts or history? Let's focus on the positive, on the good. One should have enough confidence in one's own identity not to need to bolster it by trying to define who is "in" and who is "out."