

CROWNS OF TORAH

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO RE-FORM JUDAISM?

TORAH BLESSING

DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

Rabbi Buchdahl quotes Israel's Minister of Religious Services, David Azoulay, who referred to "Reform Jews as people who 'try to fake and do not carry out the religious law properly, and give it other interpretations.' He went on to say, 'The moment a Reform Jew stops following the religion of Israel, there's a problem... I cannot allow myself to call such a person a Jew.'" She then writes:

For many Reform Jews, this comment, aside from being insulting, hits us in an undeniably vulnerable spot. Many of us feel a nagging insecurity about the authenticity of our brand of Judaism. Some wonder if we are, to use Azoulay's words, "faking it," because we don't keep kosher or a strict Shabbat, we don't *daven* three times a day, we don't wear fringes or wigs. We Reform Jews often look over our shoulders and worry that we're not quite as Jewish as those other folks who live by a strict Jewish code. Some of us instinctively assume that they are the true guardians of the religion, and that we have taken the path of least observance.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Does this resonate with you? Can you think of a time when you have felt uncomfortable or inauthentic based on your Reform Jewish identity? Do you ever feel you are "faking it"? What situations prompt this feeling?
- (b) Do you consider traditionally observant Jews to be "the true guardians of the religion"?

VOICES FROM OUR TRADITION:

Rabbi Buchdahl refers to the following story from the Babylonian Talmud to demonstrate Judaism's longstanding acceptance of authentic change and adaptation:

When Moses ascended to heaven [to receive the Torah] he found the Holy One sitting and fashioning crowns for the letters. [Moses] said to Him: "Master of the world, who requires you [to do this]?" [God] replied: "There is a person who will come to be after many generations, called Akiva ben Yosef; he will one day expound heaps upon heaps of laws from each and every crown."

Moses said before God: "Master of the world, show him to me."

[God] replied: "Turn around." He turned around and [found himself] behind the eighth row [in the Talmudic academy--behind the regular students arranged in order of excellence in the first seven rows]. Moses did not understand the discussion and was dazed. When [Akiva] came to a certain point, his students asked him "Whence do you know this?" Akiva replied, "[This is] a law [given] to Moses from Sinai." (*Halacha l'Moshe miSinai*).

Then Moses was calmed.

But Moshe turned back and stepped before the Holy One and said: "Master of the world, You have such a person, yet You give the Torah through me?"

God replied: "Be still, that is how it entered my mind."

— Babylonian Talmud, *Menachot 29b*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Why do you think Moses was calmed when Rabbi Akiva claimed that the law he was explaining – which Moses himself did not understand – was given to Moses at Sinai? What, if anything, do you think we are to learn from his reaction?
- (b) This text was compiled by rabbis who were the intellectual heirs of Rabbi Akiva. What does this tell us about how the Rabbis saw their role? Does it have any bearing on how we should think about change within Jewish tradition?

Consider this additional story, also from the Babylonian Talmud:

For three years there was a dispute between Beit [the School of] Hillel and Beit [the School of] Shammai, the former asserting, "The law is in agreement with our views," and the latter contending, "The law is in agreement with our views." Then a *bat kol*, a voice from heaven, announced, *Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim Chayim*, "These and those are the words of the Living God," adding, "but the law is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel."

Since both "*Eilu v'eilu* are the words of the Living God," what entitled [the members of] Beit Hillel to have the law fixed according to their rulings? Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai, and were even so humble to mention the words of Beit Shammai before their own.

— Babylonian Talmud, *Menachot 29b*.

The Union for Reform Judaism offers this commentary on the text:

These and those: two conflicting opinions can both be valid. And some conflicting views cannot exist without the other. The phrase *eilu v'eilu* emphasizes the incompleteness of any single opinion. The *v'*, which means “and,” is essential, uniting and complementing the two opinions without choosing one or compromising the integrity of either. Both “are the words of the Living God;” the debate between Hillel and Shammai is a *machloket l'sheim shamayim*, “an enduring dispute in the name of heaven.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What makes a disagreement “an enduring dispute in the name of heaven”? Is the difference of opinion between Rabbi Buchdahl and David Azoulay such a dispute?
- (b) What do we learn from this story? Are you satisfied with the answer given by the *bat kol*? Or do you want someone to win on the merits of their argument?
- (c) In both Talmudic stories, the people doing the interpretation are great rabbis. Do you feel empowered to interpret the teachings of the Torah and to apply them to your life? Does that even seem like an important or appealing undertaking?
- (d) What is one question concerning Jewish belief or practice that you would like to decide for yourself?