

Inscribing ourselves on the palimpsest: A personal reflection on Holocaust, history and the dialogue with Torah

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Abstract

In a personal talk I explore some of the themes and issues which confront me in my complex relationship with a Jewish heritage. Contemporary Jewish experience is, for me, a continuous dialogue between contemporary values and attitudes and the wisdom mined in an ancient text. But both gain power and complexity as they are read through lenses of communal history and personal biography. Competing interpretations of the sacredness of the texts are driven by the pressures of community survival as much as by theological understandings. The impact of the current moment is part of the pattern of continuous writing, erasure and re-writing of the text.

At the outset, I want to lay certain cards on the table. I am not an expert in matters of theology. Nor could I describe myself as an expert in Judaism. Some months ago, the Council of Christians and Jews decided to have a public meeting on Fundamentalisms, and my colleagues suggested that that I might provide a Jewish perspective. I hasten to add, not *the* Jewish perspective. I chose to look at the history of Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy from a personal perspective and to raise some of the issues that I face in the dialogue with my religious and cultural heritage in the light of personal and collective history. I commence with some biography.

Although I always knew I was Jewish, it only made sense to me in the context of my parents' refugee background. Both of my parents were refugees from Hungary. My father's family lived in Budapest, the capital of Hungary, and having to make a living as salesman of sewing machines in a large city, my grandfather was quite exposed to a diversity of ideas. He lived the life of an assimilated Jew. My father's bar mitzvah took place in an Orthodox synagogue because his father had some disagreement with the Neologue temple. In the context of the anti-Semitic and highly reactionary

government of Hungary between the wars, my father became active in the workers' movement and lost any belief in God or practical connection with Judaism before the war. From 1938 on the Hungarian government, put young Jewish men into forced labour for the Hungarian army, which, paradoxically, despite the best efforts of the army, the fascist Arrow Cross and the Nazis, accounted for the survival of my father and his three brothers and my mother's oldest brother.

My mother, on the other hand was raised in a small town called Kiskunfelegyhaza, in the south east of Hungary, about 130 kilometers from Budapest. Her parents were immigrants from Transylvania, the seat of the most deeply fundamentalist Jewish practice and while her father was a conscript in the first world war, and was interested in secular ideas, she was raised in a deeply Orthodox family. Her father eked out a bare living by hawking haberdashery in small country towns. My mother had eight brothers and sisters and, to relieve the pressure, at the age of 12 was sent from her little country town to Budapest, to be apprenticed as a seamstress. Her brother was sent to a yeshiva, or rabbinic seminary, but the war put an end to any rabbinic career he may have had in mind, and I might add, any specifically Jewish practice. My mother said she was sure, at the age of 15 that she would be struck dead for carrying a handbag on Shabbat. By the middle of 1944, her parents and four of her brothers and sisters had been transported to Auschwitz and murdered. As had my father's parents and most of their extended families. Hitler didn't make distinctions about the degree to which one was a religious Jew.

The Holocaust meant that my father became more confirmed in his left-wing atheism and my mother, while not an atheist, rejected and was deeply angry at the God who

could or would not, in her eyes, lift a finger to save her parents and half her family, and many like them who believed implicitly in Him and that He would save them. She was deeply scathing about those we Progressive Jews would call the Ultra Orthodox. Her critique was both theological and feminist. She saw contradictions in the obsessive practice of a religion that had women working day and night in domestic pursuits to maintain large families while their religious men begged for a living, refused to participate in the world and prayed incessantly. After my mother's death some nine years ago, I reflected on this in a poem I call The Eyes of God:

The eyes of God.

My mother's eyes

startle and widen

as she looks up through the ceiling

of the intensive care unit

at:

a savage old man

surrounded by seraphim

loved and feared

praised and blessed

feted and honoured in the most minor particulars

who metes out judgment

with a vicious streak.

His glory is sung and swayed and sewn into

the fabric of her parents' lives like the
warp and weft of the
underwear my grandfather
hawked from town to town
from his rented cart.

The robes of His justice prickle
like the thick hand me down
long sleeved gabardine dresses
my mother wore
for her first eleven years of her life
or my grandmother's sheitl that pricked and itched
in the summer sun.

His majesty is worn in their skin
brushed through their hair
with the morning breeze
bound tight around my grandfather's arm
a jewel that crowns his brow
every morning of his adult life

- before they were penned and carted off -

and He watched, impotent or amused,
as they

were delivered
into the care of butchers.

The thin gown slips ignored down her shoulder,
revealing the flat rise of her breast
her skin white
fragile.
my arm reaches round her soft weakened back
and she stares in pure terror
past me
into

the blood-steeped eyes of God.

This genealogy underlies whatever contribution I bring to this discussion. I have been in slow transition from my father's militant humanist atheism for some time. So, he now says, has he. Occasionally, as in the poem, I have verged towards my mother's position. I am now fascinated by the traditions and culture of Judaism and my life has been deeply enriched by reclaiming Jewish identity and participating in a liberal Jewish community.

My wife is not Jewish. She is, nevertheless, a very supportive partner and a welcome visitor in our congregation. In the eyes of the Orthodox, because my wife is not Jewish, my daughter is not Jewish. In her own eyes, she is, but like many Jewish twenty-somethings, she barely sets foot in a synagogue. These are the complexities with which contemporary Judaism must deal.

I want to point out that the effect of the severely Orthodox experience on some adherents and of those who wish to pursue a secular lifestyle is powerful and long lasting. What is painful and difficult for us to deal with is that the tenets from which the fundamentalist interpretations of our faiths are drawn and those on which we base a more liberal interpretation remain the same, and the task of the person who lives in the 21st century is to try to separate an essence from the accretions in each of our faiths of traditional practices or those which bear the imprint of times gone past. Actually, our objection to these aspects of the practice of our faiths is not merely a matter of changing times but of entirely different values which sometimes dwell very uncomfortably within the texts from which we seek guidance. Even if one were to acknowledge the divine sanction of the initial text, one must acknowledge the reality of the context in which the texts are written and the similarities and chasm - like differences between those times and these.

Recently I heard Irshad Manji, the author of a book called "*The Trouble with Islam Today*" interviewed on the ABC's *The Spirit of Things*. She pointed out that although radical Islamists, (and, I might add, their equally anti-Islamic opponents) maintain fervently that the Qu'ran and the Hadiths or commentaries contain texts which sanction anti-Semitism and anti-Christianity, the Qur'an also describes Jesus as the Messiah, and more than once. Christ's mother, Mary. The Qur'an even describes the Jews as the exalted nation and in some passages, vindicates the sovereign role of Jews in the Holy Land.

Her comment is one that confronts all of us:

"That Muslims who wish to live by the book have no choice but to make choices about what to emphasise and what to downplay.

Selectiveness is inevitable, she says, which is the main reason why Muslims (indeed all of us) ought to be respectfully suspicious of the verses that are handed to them by their religious leaders. (And, I might add, their opponents) Any verse that is offered up as the definitive verse that pronounces on any particular issue will likely have a contradictory verse in the sacred texts as well.

This is definitely true of the Torah and we progressive Jews find many troubling parts in the text – both in terms of the patriarchal and anti-female perspectives that pervade it and the domination of that text by modes of thinking which we may simply see as wrong. I'll simply cite Leviticus on homosexuality.

So what do we do with those texts which our modern sensibilities find unpalatable? More importantly, what set of values do we use to determine what bits of our texts we choose to emphasise and which we choose to ignore. Are the religious values that we say infuse our faith sufficient to counter their expression in deeply disturbing and, even offensive ways? If we choose to follow what our Orthodox brethren tell us are secular values, how do we justify our claim to be practicing the same religion. Are we merely playing an elaborate game in which our true secularity hides behind the colourful yarmulke and the fringed tallit or prayer shawl. I will come back to this later. First, I want to tell you a bit of history about the themes of continuity and change in Judaism.

Progressive Jews argue that the process of internal critique, of modernisation, and swinging back to older forms - the dance of participation with, and rejection by and of the outside society has been a constant dialectic, so we describe the culture of what

we now call Ultra-Orthodoxy, based on Eastern European Jewish practice, as yet another development of Jewish religious practice.

So much, of course depends on language. Where progressive Jews may refer to the Ultra-Orthodox, the traditionalists refer to themselves as Haredi (derived from *Harada* (fear, anxiety), which could be interpreted as "one who trembles in awe of God"—cf. Isaiah 66:2,5 “Hear³ the word of the LORD, ye that tremble at his word;”). Progressive Jews argue that the attempt to freeze tradition, custom and law in the late eighteenth century is not in fact a continuity but rather a radical re-interpretation of a religious practice that actually reflects a changing and ongoing dialogue with the world.

To understand this, it’s important to understand the following version of Jewish history. (I am borrowing freely from Wikipedia here).

Historically, Jewish religious tradition has persisted due to the mutually reinforcing effects of persecution by the external Christian or Muslim “neighbours” and internal social and religious control. In a predominantly non-Jewish society, the only way for Jews to gain social acceptance was to convert.

With the Enlightenment in Western Europe, some European liberals sought to include the Jewish population in the emerging empires and nation states. For some Jews, meticulous and rigorous Judaism interfered with the new opportunities. The new values of the secular world meant a critical appraisal of texts, customs and tradition. Acceptance by the non-Jewish world and participation meant that Judaism needed to be reformed and made consistent with the activities of the external community. In the words of a popular aphorism of the Enlightenment coined by Yehuda Leib Gordon, a

person should be "a Jew in the home, and a *mentsch* (good person) in the street." (It's only later that the same needed to be said about Christianity).

Many Jews, however, argued that the division between Jew and gentile had actually protected the Jews' religious and social culture and that abandoning such divisions would lead to the eventual abandonment of Jewish religion through assimilation. They insisted that the correct response to the siren call of secular society was to maintain strict adherence to Halacha or traditional Jewish law and custom to prevent the dissolution of authentic Judaism and ensure the survival of the Jewish people.

One of the most influential leaders of Haredi Judaism was the Chasam Sofer, from Hungary. To those who argue that Judaism could change or evolve, Rabbi Sofer replied *Hadash asur min ha-Torah*, "Modifications are forbidden by the Torah." For him any movement to "modernize" Judaism, or doubt the verbal revelation of the Written and Oral Torah, were outside the pale of authentic Judaism. The fundamental beliefs and tenets of Judaism should not, and could not, be altered.

In the context of 21st century Judaism, this debate is not academic. Not only does it shape the religious debate in Israel and the Diaspora, but it permeates our thinking about the nature and future of Judaism. In Israel, the debate between Haredi and secular Jews is a significant factor in the social, religious, and foreign policies of the nation. In its ugliest manifestation it led to the murder of Yitzhak Rabin. It fuelled the debate over the establishment of settlements in disputed territories, the military service of Haredi youth and the recent withdrawal from Gaza. The impact on personal lives extends to the non-recognition of marriage, and conversions. In Israel, the influence of the religious parties is a permanent fixture in politics. For more than 40 years, fundamentalist and apocalyptic interpretations of the task of Jews and the

return to Israel have helped to shape policy on the relations with Arab and Palestinian neighbors.

In the Diaspora, it helps to shape our dreams and nightmare about the future of Jewish communities. Like liberal Christianity, we Reform Jews face the reality that increasingly fundamentalism is speaking to the needs of young people. A fundamentalist certainty packaged in contemporary technology is a powerful attraction in a deeply uncertain world. The growth area in Jewish practice is not in reform or Conservative Judaism but in the holistic solutions offered by the more charismatic version of an ultra conservative or fundamentalist form of Orthodox Judaism.

The charisma of certainty can be a lot more enticing than the constant need to read Torah “as if” it does not contain words and sentiments we would rather it didn’t. Yet, for me, one of the major enticements of Judaism is that one is enjoined not to leave one’s brain at the door.

My predecessor and long time Jewish co-chair of the Council of Christians and Jews Dr Evan Zuesse in his essay “Jacob Neusner and the Rabbinic Treatment of the ‘Other’, and another entitled “Tolerance in Judaism: Medieval and Modern Sources,” argues that traditional Judaism, based on Torah and Talmud and Midrashic responses is multi-perspectival and therefore innately more tolerant of difference within the faith than the fundamentalist or literalist Orthodoxy of either Christianity or Islam “That is why the Talmud is constant conversation,” Evan says “and why diverse opinions are positively encouraged, preserved and given halachic significance and validation.”

It is true that learned debate over the meaning of the words of the Torah is not only sanctioned but a Mitzvah. And yet the very religion that enshrines debate and

discourse can become the focus of a terribly restrictive and inflexible moral code enforced on adherents but also on secular society.

Moreover, the sociological source of the differences between Progressive Judaism and Orthodoxy remain. The demographic reality is that Jews remain a tiny minority in every country in which we live, except for Israel and that the call of a secular world to forget religion and assimilate is strong, as is the fact that propinquity to a diversity of non-Jewish partners is accelerating the incidence of inter-marriage.

The latest demographic surveys show a slight decrease even in the numbers of Jews in the United States. So the particular fortresses of fear in which the Haredi Jews lock themselves is a defence against a real problem. Jewish birthrates and assimilation are reducing the numbers of Jews.. In my own behaviour, views I hold and choices I make I demonstrate the very fears that drove my Transylvanian ancestors to enfold themselves in a deep piety.

Let me offer this slightly specious hope. It depends on the metaphor of homeopathy. Homeopathy argues that a beneficial substance can be administered in microscopically minute concentrations in water and, paradoxically, be just effective as when it is provided in much more concentrated amounts. The remedy is taken in an extremely dilute form; normally one part of the remedy to around 1 billion (or trillion, depending on whether you use the long or short scale or the Us or UK version of large numbers) parts of water. That's 1 with 12 zeros after it.

After all, despite my long separation from the God of my grandparents, I am here now. I made the choice, I think when my daughter was born, and again when my

mother died, that I would not let the laser light of Judaism that shone through generations of my ancestors die with me.

What do we do with those texts that confront us? We acknowledge them and we wrestle with them. We participate in the dialogue with our past and, attempting some humility about the contingent nature of our own positions, we add our own notes to the debate . We see them as part of a history that is always there for the present to reflect on and create dialogue with.

A palimpsest is a document on which texts are erased so that new things can be inscribed upon them. The layers of meaning contribute subtly, irritatingly, but richly to the entire whole. Both the fundamentalist texts and my Progressive amendments and questionings are part of the rich palimpsest of Jewish thinking and feeling. Both will remain to goad us into a painful dialogue with our own past. It reminds us that there is no safe and unassailable place from which to condemn the past and no safe and unassailable place from which to elevate the present. The Torah and our commentaries on it form just such a palimpsest and my ongoing, painful and irritating dialogue with it is my heritage and my legacy.