

## **A Tale of Two Rabbis**

I suppose the job of any clergyman must be very difficult. After all, the person who is bold enough attend a divinity school, college or Yeshiva is looked upon as one who can speak with G-d one moment, and with his or her congregants the next. It is a job that I would not relish, although I considered it more than once myself. In the Jewish tradition, being a Rabbi means being a teacher. That is what we say, but it is not completely true. In fact, certainly in the American experience, Rabbis teach, learn, counsel, advise, and do a host of other activities that are almost impossible to expect of any one person.

This past weekend, I spent time with two Rabbis, who on the surface are very different but have many of the same struggles in modern day America. The first Rabbi has become a friend only in the last several years. He is a Lubavitch trained Chabad Rabbi on a liberal, very high level college campus. Oy, do I feel sorry for him! Every day he has to deal with people who think they know everything about education, learning, politics, physics and chemistry.

The second Rabbi is a fellow about my age. He is a member of the Reform denomination, having attended Hebrew Union College in New York. His denomination is the very vanguard of liberal American secularist Judaism.

What would these two Rabbis, at the seeming extremes of religious discourse, have in common? The answer of course is that they have everything in common. They have tried to reach out to people in order to teach them and encourage the beautiful 3,500 year tradition of Judaism. Beyond that, they are attempting to give comfort to the lonely, company to the friendless, meals to the hungry, and sustenance to the spiritually lacking. It may sound flowery and full of glory, but they work every day, for little or nothing, simply to be there for other people. The campus Chabad is one of the glories of modern Judaism. Rabbis willingly accept students who care nothing for Judaism, or sometimes are even hostile to it, as guests for dinner, Shabbat, and other occasions. Why these students come at all, given some of their viewpoints, is something of a mystery to me. Yet, there is a yearning for connectivity with our Jewish experience in the past which Chabad Rabbis unselfishly provide. A Chabad Rabbi, somebody once said to me, is a model of true capitalism. They must raise money for their "house" or their building. They must raise all the money, they run the show totally themselves, and they reach out to those who have an interest in participating. They are sole small companies who are responsible only for themselves to exist on a day-to-day basis. Certainly, they receive gifts from generous people, but they neither ask nor can they do anything to force or twist arms.

The Reform Rabbi runs a small Synagogue, which some people would call a Kolel, on the first floor of his condominium. He is also reaching out, but his congregants

are young, middle age and older people who simply want to have a relationship with a Rabbi, learn something about Judaism, and feel the impulse of Kavanah that is part and parcel of the Jewish experience. They want to be Jews, they want to live as Jews, and they want to be able to enjoy an egalitarian spirit.

I often think of the role of Bible movies. There is plenty of hype now about the movie concerning Moses called Exodus: Gods and Kings.” But there have been many moves. There have been movies about Jesus, and recently on television there was The Red Tent. All of these movies display not the slightest understanding for the Jewish religious tradition upon which they are based. I once spent an hour and 45 minutes with a terrific Evangelical Baptist minister in my office. He did not understand that the Bible is only half of what both Christianity and Judaism are about. Without the oral tradition, that is, the interpretations of the Bible, there would be no religion. Protestantism itself is nothing more than an interpretation of Christianity. The Jews have the Talmud, which includes stories, law, lessons, learning, education and a complete interpretive tradition on the Bible. The proof set for all of this is the New Testament itself. The New Testament provides insight in ways that Jesus lived. All of those stories point out that Jesus was an apocalyptic Pharisee, living the Talmudic tradition that was common for Jews at his time. That tradition continued to evolve for several hundred years after his passing, but was well in progress at the time of Jesus’ own life. Jesus was a good, Talmud observing Jew.

Rabbis are taking a religious tradition that is thousands of years old and they are interpreting it, and they are utilizing it to reach out to people to make their lives, the lives of their congregants, the people they touch, more meaningful. The Rabbi at the Chabad campus, after lunch, said, “Now let us learn some Torah.” Every meal is a sacred act and there is no lunch or dinner without some Torah. He pointed out that in the upcoming Parsha Joseph has several dreams. One set of dreams deals with material possessions such as cows and corn that come out of the Nile and predict the future for the Egyptian empire. Another set of dreams that Joseph has deals with the stars and the moon. The Rabbi pointed out that materialism is not what we are all about, but rather we always have to be connected with something spiritual. Just as Joseph dreamed of the material, he also dreamed of the connection with the divine. In everything we do, pointed out the Rabbi, we must have the spiritual orientation. That was just lunch.

The Reform Rabbi represents the qualities of one who has given to others, speaks with depth and relates to others with a genuine character of warmth that cannot be denied.

I wonder if we appreciate our clergymen. Frequently when I drive home from work I listen to preachers on the radio, many of whom sound to me like they are ranting and raving. They may be marvelous speakers, but do they really understand that the evolution of the Bible is the product of G-d himself? The world evolved over seven days. The Bible evolved over centuries, and we are continuing our search for

connection with the divine. In fact, the work of the Bible has never ended and perhaps has never truly begun. We find even in Genesis, there are two different stories of the creation of the world. There is a general story, which seems to follow almost, we might say, scientific tradition; and then there is the specific story. Even within Genesis we see an evolution from the general to the specific.

The two Rabbi friends of mine are people for whom I have great respect because, for very little money and for a great deal of personal satisfaction, they work to connect their religious tradition of the eons with current living conditions. Both of them are fine human beings for whose work I will continue to support and pray for. May both of them grow in learning, knowledge, education, and their ability to reach out and touch the souls of all of those they meet.

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