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The Academic Study of Judaism: A Challenge to the Reform Rabbi

Abstract

Any discussion of the Reform rabbinate and the academic study of Judaism presupposes some distinct notion of the primary function of a rabbi, as well as a clear definition of what Torah means in the context of our contemporary community and the new settings in which Jewish learning are presently located. Admittedly, both definitions that I offer are subjective and incomplete and arise from my own unique situation of being both an academic scholar and a Reform rabbi, as well as the son of a Reform rabbi.

Disciplines

History | History of Religion | Intellectual History | Jewish Studies | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments

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MAINTAINING OUR ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF JUDAISM: A CHALLENGE TO THE REFORM RABBI

DAVID B. RUDERMAN

Any discussion of the Reform rabbinate and the academic study of Judaism presupposes some distinct notion of the primary function of a rabbi, as well as a clear definition of what Torah means in the context of our contemporary community and the new settings in which Jewish learning are presently located. Admittedly, both definitions that I offer are subjective and incomplete and arise from my own unique situation of being both an academic scholar and a Reform rabbi, as well as the son of a Reform rabbi.

To my mind, the most authentic function of rabbis, both historically and in our own time, is to be students and teachers of Torah. Despite their other manifold functions, they perform no more critical role. To neglect or relinquish that role to others is to renounce their primary responsibility, and even to delegitimize their sacred calling. Although academic scholars may acquire greater learning in specific disciplines of Judaic studies, the rabbi cannot abdicate this responsibility to the professor. I once wrote the following:

The contemporary rabbi might see his or her exclusive claim to expertise in Jewish matters somewhat eclipsed by a new breed of Judaic scholars in universities and seminaries. But this situation is not as novel as it may seem. Not all rabbis in the past were great scholars; like contemporary rabbis, many had little opportunity of uninterrupted study. Nevertheless, they were aware and appreciative of scholarly distinction, and they were able to utilize and disseminate the erudition of great rabbinic teachers to educate their own congregations. They performed the critical function of mediating between esoteric scholarship and the needs of the lay community. Little has changed in this respect. The modern rabbi need not be a great scholar in Jewish or in secular matters, though some are. Yet the rabbi has the capacity of being conversant and stimulated by academic issues and provides the unique bridge between pure book learning and pragmatic human concerns. In short, he or she performs a function the academic scholar can never perform: to learn in order to teach and in order to do. By studying, and applying, and living the Torah, the rabbi remains, in the language of Salo W. Baron, "the chief protagonist in the drama of Jewish communal survival" ("Rabbi and Teacher," in A.A. Cohen and P. Mendes-Flohr, *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, New York, 1987, pp. 746-747).

And how do I define Torah? It is not identical with the academic study of Judaism as practiced in the universities, but it is also not unrelated to the latter. Torah for me is the ongoing quest to discover the inherent spirituality and the ultimate values of Jewish living in the documents of Jewish civilization in all ages and in their social and cultural settings. Armed with Torah study, the Jew faces patiently and courageously the uncertainty of a Jewish and a global future. Torah learning is never passive; it is charged with energy and with the excitement of discovery. Torah study is never parochial or close minded. Since it is constantly fed by contemporary concerns and dilemmas, it is continually bursting forth with new questions and startling insights. As a

dynamic and exhilarating dialogue between ancient and contemporary voices and between the Divine, it is never stale nor petrified, never detached nor remote. Students who are stimulated and enlivened by Torah are never satiated but constantly thirst for more. Their very being aches when they remain unreplenished with more Torah. And such students, excited and exciting in their Torah study, are the best teachers of Torah, for their passion for learning is contagious even among the uninitiated.

What does Judaic studies emerging within the setting of the university have to do with the rabbi and with the mandate to study Torah? The academic study of Judaism, as it is presently practiced at numerous campuses around the country, constitutes no less than an extraordinary revolution in the scope and in the methodology of Jewish learning, a dramatic change fully emerging only during the last quarter of a century. The pioneers of modern Jewish learning in Europe — Leopold Zunz, Moritz Steinschneider, Heinrich Graetz, Abraham Geiger, Zechariah Frankel, or David Kaufmann, including a large number of rabbis in their ranks — could never have imagined in their wildest dreams the present situation. Until our own time, Jewish learning was excluded from almost all universities. Scholars of Judaic studies pursued their work in isolation; their writing was generally ignored by scholars in other fields. Only in Jewish seminaries or teachers' colleges were academic positions available. And most importantly, most Jewish students could not undertake any aspect of Judaic studies as part of their regular program of university education. Since the mid-1960s this has all changed. In hundreds of colleges and universities throughout this country, in Israel, and now even in Europe, professors of Judaic studies, both Jews and non-Jews, pursue full-time careers in teaching and scholarship. The Association for Jewish Studies, the major professional association of Jewish academics, boasts a membership of nearly 1000 members. Tens of thousands of young people are presently enrolled in Judaic studies courses as part of their regular program of liberal arts. Hundreds even major in Judaic studies, and smaller but sizable numbers pursue graduate degrees in a variety of sub-fields of Judaic learning.

The impact of such programs is difficult to gauge, but there is no doubt that they significantly affect the quality of university and Jewish life. Students enrolled in a basic survey course in Jewish history are probably reading more and thinking more deeply about the Judaic heritage than in all the years they studied in afternoon or Sunday schools. Furthermore, it is not only the amount of material covered in such a course that is noteworthy; it is the approach and the context of this learning that is significant. Students study Jewish history or literature in the framework of world history and literature and with the primary methodologies employed in these disciplines. Students are also expected to learn together with Jews and non-Jews of all persuasions and backgrounds. Learning is more than mastery of material and accumulation of information; it is active engagement with and the challenge of a variety of opinions, beliefs, and backgrounds.

There is also the influence such courses and professors have on the university curriculum and on our thinking about the place of Judaism within Western Civilization. A new dialogue has emerged within university settings, and along with it a new awareness of the importance of the Judaic strand of

human experience. Judaism is no longer taken for granted in general literature, history, or religious studies courses. And regularized offerings in the Bible, in Hebrew and Yiddish literature, in rabbinics, and in Jewish history are forcing a new generation of scholars and teachers and students to rethink the past and what constitutes the nature of our shared civilization and values. Most impressive is the new interest in publishing Judaica by university and trade presses in this country. The number and variety of books in Judaic studies is dazzling.

Do pulpit rabbis pay any attention to these advances in Judaic learning? Do they regularly read the new books that come out; do they avail themselves of the opportunities of further study through graduate courses in Judaica; and are they stimulated by the new ideas which emerge from the literary, theological, and historical studies of Judaism presently appearing? Judging from the typical sermons rabbis deliver, the essays in synagogue bulletins they write, and more importantly, those published in the *Journal of Reform Judaism*, the answer appears to be generally negative. Most rabbis seem to ignore much of the learning of contemporary scholarship; their ideas acquired during rabbinical school about the biblical text, the rabbinic canon, the historical and philosophical legacy of Jews were shaped in another age and often seem outmoded as judged by the standards of contemporary scholarship; their encounter with new sources and resources of the Jewish tradition is sporadic, superficial, and usually unexciting. And as Judaic studies continue to flourish, the gap between the learning of the communal rabbi and the Judaic studies professor seems to grow wider. A dream has come true in the proliferation of Judaic studies, but from the perspective of the rabbinate, it is scarcely acknowledged and appears to be unrelated to the needs and ideals of the rabbi.

Who is to blame for this situation? Is it possible that a revolution in Judaic learning goes on and the rabbis, the primary teachers and scholars of Judaism, remain relatively uninterested and unaffected? One reason is obvious: given the pressing human responsibilities of rabbis, the scholarship of the universities often appears remote and irrelevant to them. Who cares about the relation of midrash and contemporary literary theory; about the challenge to Gershom Scholem's understanding of the kabbalah by Moshe Idel; or about the rethinking about Hasidism and 19th-century Eastern European Jewish culture in the midst of the typical crises of the life cycle and the ordinary issues of Jewish life rabbis confront on a daily basis? And how many congregants challenge rabbis to know more, to replenish themselves, and to update their knowledge on any Jewish subject? Much scholarship is inaccessible in the first place; few scholars are gifted in communicating their results so as to reach an audience outside of academia. And for the average rabbi, overworked and extended in so many directions, there is nothing as uninviting as a book written with copious footnotes and excessive scholarly jargon.

Even more critical is the charge that academic learning as practiced in secular universities and the Torah learning of the rabbi have little to do with each other, that academic learning is pure *Wissenschaft*, and that it is unrelated to the sacred task of being a holy people, that it is not *leshem shamayim*. It is clear that my own definition of Torah vigorously rejects such a charge.

Certainly the university study of Judaism emerges in the context of a value-free environment where Jewish advocacy is not the norm. Nevertheless, the kind of intense scrutiny of texts and contexts, the kind of probing questions and sparkling insights the new study elicits, and the dynamism and energy it generates is in fact related to Torah and merely awaits the active engagement of the rabbi to "sanctify," so to speak, its results. Only rabbis are capable of transforming university study into Torah learning, of using this potent resource to enliven their Torah study and to direct its fecund energy toward the Jewish community and its value system. Accordingly, to dismiss the scholarship of the universities as remote and irrelevant for the rabbi is both to underestimate the potential spirituality of the new learning as a vital reservoir for Jewish life and to demean the role of the rabbi who must function as the primary mediator between scholarship and Jewish living.

The challenge then is twofold: on the one hand, how do we motivate the average rabbi to devote more attention and to find greater satisfaction in sustained and intense learning? On the other hand, how might we best stimulate rabbis to assume their critical mediating function between the community and the new academic learning? To my way of thinking, we might address these challenges by first enhancing the educational setting of our rabbinical seminary and then by offering more incentives and opportunities for continued education after ordination. Let me address each of these two issues separately.

This is not the appropriate place or time to offer a comprehensive critique of the education leading to rabbinic ordination offered by HUC-JIR. It is rather a time to celebrate the extraordinary achievements of the College for over a century, including those improvements in the quality of teaching and in the curriculum of rabbinic education. It is also not the proper occasion to discuss fully the function of a seminary education (a *Beit Midrash*) as distinct from one in a university Judaic studies program. It is sufficient to state what I have already implied in my remarks on Torah that the two are not identical but are, nevertheless, intimately related. To the extent that HUC-JIR aspires to be an institution of academic excellence and continues to view academic learning as being indispensable for studying Judaism, the issues I raise here are relevant. But I would be the first to admit that there are other critical issues not addressed by these remarks.

Seminary education in Reform Judaism (and in the other denominations as well) faces at least three major challenges emerging from the setting of the new Judaic learning on campuses. Each of these challenges needs to be addressed seriously if the quality of seminary learning is to remain high and the products of that learning will be able to pursue successfully and enthusiastically the commitments to learning related to their rabbinic calling. In the first place, despite recent curricular changes, the regular courses of study offered at the College still generally reflect a state of learning and a selection of fields relatively unaffected and unresponsive to some of the more recent trends of Judaic scholarship both here and in Israel. To a great extent, the study program of HUC-JIR still embodies the academic preconceptions and biases of 19th- and early 20th-century Reform with its heavy emphasis on biblical studies, aggadic midrash, medieval and modern philosophy, often

taught with a heavy emphasis on philology and narrow text criticism. One would be hard pressed to discover many of the new vistas of contemporary Judaic learning in the HUC-JIR curriculum. There have been remarkable developments in such areas as the study of kabbalah and medieval pietism, medieval and modern ethical and homiletic texts, early modern and modern Jewish social and cultural history, medieval and modern Sephardic culture, *Eretz Yisrael* studies, modern and contemporary Jewish literature, Hasidism and Eastern European culture, and the sociology and anthropology of Jews, to name only several examples, but, with a few notable exceptions, most of these areas are treated superficially or negligibly in the typical curriculum offered rabbinic students, despite their intrinsic value as sources for contemporary Jewish values. Talmud and codes have always been de-emphasized, at least in comparison with other seminaries, but what of the study of Halacha as sources of history for reconstructing the social, political, and spiritual underpinnings of past Jewish cultures? How much time is also being spent in the enriching study of *she'elot* and *teshuvot* from the early Middle Ages to the present as resources for contemporary Jewish experience?

A second challenge offered by the new Judaic studies is related to the centrality of Israel in contemporary scholarship. In many fields, the major scholars, the most creative minds, and the most exciting writing emerge from Israeli universities. Israel radiates its learning in so many disciplines of Jewish scholarship: in Bible and *parshanut*, in medieval history, in Jewish thought, in modern history, in Zionism and Eastern European history, in contemporary Jewish studies, to name only a few fields. Some of the larger American university programs offer regular visiting programs for Israeli scholars. Israelis teach courses, offer faculty seminars, and engage their American counterparts in rigorous academic discourse. HUC-JIR, one might argue, has its beautiful Jerusalem campus, and the kind of interchange I am describing naturally goes on for some of its faculty and students. But what of the other campuses? Why are there so few opportunities, outside of Jerusalem, for Israeli scholars to visit and to teach regularly at HUC-JIR? Compare the extraordinary arrangements of the Jewish Theological Seminary which invites large numbers of the finest Israeli scholars to teach and interact with students and teachers on a regular and intense basis. Why has this never been a high priority for HUC-JIR? To what extent are the typical HUC-JIR graduates exposed in their most mature years of learning to the best of Israeli learning and teaching? Out of Zion goes forth a Torah, but most Reform rabbinical students know only about the learning emanating from their Hebrew ulpan experience.

The last challenge facing HUC-JIR is more subtle to describe but perhaps the most profound of all. It is that seminary learning potentially may become more parochial, more isolated, and less dynamic than the best of the new learning of the university communities. This need not always be the case. Seminary students and faculty generally pursue reading outside the narrow confines of traditional Jewish texts; faculty often attend academic conferences away from their campuses; and individuals who make the effort are often stimulated by currents and methodologies employed in the academic study of literature, history, philosophy, and the social sciences. Nevertheless,

the fact remains that students of Judaic subjects in the setting of the university more regularly engage in dialogue with the rest of the humanities and the social sciences. They are constantly challenged to define themselves, to ask of themselves the most provocative questions, and to stretch their imagination to the widest reaches possible. It is potentially the most invigorating and stimulating environment in which Judaic study can emerge. Can learning in a seminary setting be as exciting, as fresh, and as stimulating? Potentially it can, but this requires a constant infusion of academic visitors, of scholarly exchanges, of intense encounters of faculty and students with the larger academic world. HUC-JIR professors cannot afford to be challenged only by their students and by the congregations to which they lecture; their scholarship requires more invigoration from outside to be important and exciting. How well they succeed in this task determines the quality of their teaching as well as their ability to instill in their students both an insatiable appetite for further study and a profound desire to enrich their learning by merging their particular Jewish knowledge with larger structures of knowledge.

Of course, even if the College could fully face up to these challenges and others, the more formidable problem of sustained and meaningful learning after ordination would still remain. The love of learning is not difficult to foster when one is surrounded by fellow students, books, and classrooms. It too easily evaporates in the more lonely and more cluttered environment of the typical congregation. Do most congregants appreciate the rabbi's faint plea for time to study; do they view their scholarship as a priority on their time and energy; do they challenge their rabbis to know more than they know now? More often than not, they will not challenge them to greater heights of knowledge; they are paying them to lead prayer, to organize, to counsel, to teach basic Hebrew and Judaism courses, but not to learn more. So with the best of intentions, and without the prodding of former teachers, students and colleagues, rabbis learn quickly that success in the rabbinate has little to do with the systematic and sustained study of Torah.

Yet how can we feel good about ourselves as rabbis without regular study, and how do we motivate ourselves to fill our hearts and minds with Torah when such pursuits often seem so unrelated to the real and pressured world we live in? There is only one answer. We need to be reminded by our professional association that Torah is not only critical for our spiritual sustenance; we cannot function authentically and effectively without it. What I am suggesting is a well-constructed and well-conceived system of incentives and opportunities offered by the CCAR to its members in order to excite and encourage them to study Torah. The analogy of doctors or lawyers might be useful in this regard. Physicians or lawyers cannot be effective in practice unless they constantly read and update themselves in the latest developments in their field. A doctor cannot afford to fall behind, to ignore the most recent technologies and the most important treatments in curing patients. And in a most substantial way rabbis, "the physicians of the soul," find themselves in a similar situation. They cannot afford to teach a stale and outmoded Torah, a fixed revelation lacking human interpretation, creativity, and ingenuity. For in so doing, they become stale and petrified like the overused and outmoded

clichés they are prone to employ. More importantly, when they become stale and uninspired, so does their community.

What can the CCAR do? It can institute a set of minimal guidelines to which every rabbinical graduate might aspire after three years, five years, 10 years, 15 years, and so on following graduation. What is needed is a task force made up of some of the most learned and exemplary rabbis in the Conference, together with HUC-JIR professors plus several other learned but accessible university scholars, especially those who are also Reform rabbis, in each of the major fields of Jewish studies. I include this third group because I believe they are an important resource for rabbis and a crucial link to university learning that has been generally ignored until now. This entire task force should meet regularly to discuss ways in which rabbis might be stimulated to study more as they mature in the rabbinate.

Reading lists, periodically updated, might be suggested at appropriate levels; some form of creative questions and study guides might accompany the lists and serve to conclude a particular term of study. Rabbis might then perceive their responsibility to be the attainment of progressively higher levels of knowledge in specific areas of Judaic studies as their own rabbinate develops. Of course, flexibility in setting goals and guidelines and appraising conditions of study would have to be built into such a plan. Moreover, reading lists and questions would constitute only a beginning. The actual and regularized encounter with dynamic and stimulating teachers, those who can relate their scholarship to the issues of the world the rabbi daily encounters is absolutely critical.

As a first step, directories of approved academic courses at universities throughout the country and at the various campuses of HUC-JIR might be made available to all members of the CCAR, and they might be encouraged to enroll in courses wherever possible. If necessary, scholarships for needy rabbis would have to be made available. Congregations would have to be convinced that such study is a critical dimension of their rabbis' activities and that such learning should be supported by them both morally and materially.

As a further step, a regularized, high-quality, and highly publicized program of summer *kallot* and institutes could be instituted, designed especially for rabbis in order for them to reach those higher levels of learning and understanding in primary disciplines of Judaic studies. In this regard, the present program of continuing education of HUC-JIR certainly represents an important and positive achievement already in place. But it still affects too few rabbis, and to my way of thinking, rabbis also need to be stimulated by scholars and approaches beyond those previously encountered during their seminary years.

I also have in mind something more intensive and serious than the present system of regional rabbinic *kallot*; I am speaking about sustained classroom study where students are engaged in systematic reading, writing, and thinking. The most gifted and exciting teachers among the congregational rabbis, among HUC-JIR professors and in the universities could be enlisted in the task of teaching, formulating, and improving guidelines and incentives for continuing rabbinic education. They should be pressed to make their own work as relevant and as accessible as possible to their rabbinic colleagues.

Their goal is to teach Torah — broad trends, major insights, illuminating perspectives; pedantic footnotes and obscure scholarship should not be encouraged. The program should be given considerable attention in order to underscore its importance for each individual member of the CCAR and for the movement as a whole.

What I am arguing for, and what represents for me the key to the success of such a program is the active engagement of the CCAR itself. The only way such a system of learning will work is that it be presented by the CCAR not merely as a low-priority option for a small number of interested rabbis, but as a highly visible and publicized program deemed critical for all Reform rabbis and the life of the community they lead. Mere lip service to the importance of study is not enough. If the CCAR would create such a task force, publicize its proposals, and ultimately implement a new and exciting structure for systematic and prolonged studies, most rabbis might avail themselves of the opportunity. I sincerely believe, in all my naïveté and love of the rabbinate, that most rabbis who are not learning regularly and are not excited by their learning feel a deficiency within themselves. I further maintain that Torah can never and should never become the sole possession of academic scholars, and that the quality of Jewish life, the Jewish literacy of our community, and the creative perpetuation of our spiritual legacy depend on rabbis who study Torah.

Is this the pipe-dream of an ivory-tower academic whose perspective is warped by his own book-lined surroundings? Is it an arrogant pronouncement of a university professor scornfully reminding his rabbinic colleagues of their obvious limitations and his self-proclaimed superiority? I honestly maintain it is neither. It is rather the empathetic plea of a rabbi and the son of a rabbi who sincerely believes that only rabbis remain “the chief protagonists in the drama of Jewish communal survival.” It represents only a constructive proposal for enhancing and upgrading our profession and our community of faith offered in utmost humility and profound respect for what rabbis do and what God commands them to do.

Permit me to close with a slight expansion of Yohanan ben Zakkai’s famous utterance. Perhaps if we would have written a *reisha* to go with his *seifa*, it might have sounded like this: “*Im lamadta Torah me-at, ein lecha reshut le hikareh beshem rav, ve-im lamadta Torah harbeh, al tachzik tova le-atmecha, ki lechach notsarta.*”

THE ACADEMIC INTEGRITY OF THE RABBI

HERBERT BRONSTEIN

I

Many years ago, a mainline Protestant colleague, a graduate of one of the best theological schools, told me that he admired the Jewish people’s demand