

Radical Judaism: “When Heresy Began”

*Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha'Olam, Asher Kideshanu BeMitzvotav
VeTzivanu, La'asok BeDivrei Torah. Hafoch Bah!*

Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 47a-b

Our Rabbis taught: If at the present time a person comes to convert to Judaism, he is to be addressed as follows: “What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte; do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions?” If he replies, 'I know and yet am unworthy', he is accepted forthwith, and is given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments. He is informed of the sin [of the neglect of the commandments of] Gleanings, the Forgotten Sheaf, the Corner and the Poor Person's Tithe. He is also told of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments. Furthermore, he is addressed thus: 'Be it known to you that before you came to this condition, if you had eaten the forbidden fats you would not have been punishable with *karet*, if you had profaned the Sabbath you would not have been punishable with stoning; but now were you to eat the forbidden fats you would be punished with *karet*; were you to profane the Sabbath you would be punished with stoning.' And as he is informed of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments, so is he informed of the reward granted for their fulfillment. He is told, 'Be it known to you that the world to come was made only for the righteous, and that Israel at the present time are unable to bear either too much prosperity or too much suffering'. He is not, however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much. If he accepted, he is circumcised forthwith. ... As soon as he is healed arrangements are made for his immediate immersion [in a mikvah], when two teachers must stand by his side and acquaint him with some of the minor commandments and with some of the major ones. When he comes up after his immersion he is deemed to be an Israelite in all respects.

Maimonides (1135-1204), Mishnah Torah, The Book of Holiness, Laws of Forbidden Relations, Chapter 14

- 1) How do we accept proselytes? When a person comes to convert to Judaism, after he proves his worthiness, we say to him, “What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte; do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions?” If he replies, 'I know and yet am unworthy,' he is accepted forthwith.
- 2) He is informed the essential Jewish faith, which is the Unity of God and the prohibition of idol worship. This topic should be discussed at length. He is also given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments. This topic is not to be discussed at length. He is informed of the sin [of the neglect of the commandments of] Gleanings, the Forgotten Sheaf, the Corner and the Poor Person's Tithe. He is also told of the punishment for the transgressions.

Maimonides, Book of Mitzvot, Positive Mitzvah 1

The first command is the commandment which we were commanded to believe (Ieha'amin) in God (ha'Elohut), which means to believe that there is a Prime Cause behind all of existence, that which is meant by “I am Adonai your God (Ex. 20:2).”

Shemot / Exodus 19:21-24

ויאמר ה' אלמשה רד העד בעם פְּיִהְרֶסוּ אֲלֵיהוּה לראות ונפל ממנו רב : וגם הכהנים הנגשים אליהוה יתקדשו פְּיִפְרֹץ בהם ה' : ויאמר משה אל ה' לאִיוֹכֵל העם לעלת אלהר סיני כִּיאַתָּה העדתה בנו לאמר הגבל אֲתָהְהר וקדשתו : ויאמר אליו ה' לְךָרֵד ועלית אתה ואהרן עמך והכהנים והעם אֲלֵיהְרֶסוּ לעלת אל ה' פְּיִפְרֹצָבם :

And the LORD said unto Moses: 'Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish. And let the priests also, that come near to the LORD, sanctify themselves, lest the LORD break forth upon them'. And Moses said unto the LORD: 'The people cannot come up to mount Sinai; for thou didst charge us, saying: Set bounds about the mount, and sanctify it.' And the LORD said unto him: 'Go, get thee down, and thou shalt come up, thou, and Aaron with thee; but let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto the LORD, lest God break forth upon them.'

Bemidbar / Numbers 16:1-3

ויקח קרח בְּיִצְהָר בְּקֶהֶת בְּלֹוי ודתן ואבירם בני אליאב ואון בְּפֶלֶת בני ראובן : ויקמו לפני משה ואנשים מבנֵיִשְׂרָאֵל חמשים ומאתים נשיאי עדה קראי מועד אנשים : ויקהלו עלמשה ועלאהרן ויאמרו אלהם רְבִלְכֶם כי כלהעדה כלם קדשים ובתוכם ה' ומדוע תתנשאו עלקהל ה' :

Now Korah, the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On, the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men; and they rose up in face of Moses, with certain of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty men; they were princes of the congregation, the elect men of the assembly, men of renown; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them: 'Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them; wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?'

Mishnah Sanhedrin, 10:1

1) All Israel have a portion in the world to come, for it says, "Your people, all of them righteous, shall possess the land for ever; They are the shoot that I planted, my handiwork in which I glory" (Isaiah 60:21).

2) And these are the ones who have no portion in the world to come: One) He who maintains that resurrection is not a biblical doctrine, that the Torah was not divinely revealed, and an epikoros.

Rabbi Akiva says: "Even one who reads non-canonical books and one who whispers [a charm] over a wound and says, "I will not bring upon you any of the diseases which I brought upon the Egyptians: for I the lord am you healer" (Exodus 15:26).

Abba Shaul says: "Also one who pronounces the divine name as it is spelled."

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Text 1: “Martin Cury” Feb. 24th, 2011 comment on *The USCJ Strategic Plan Part 1: USCJ as it is* available at jewschool.com/2011/02/23/25510/the-uscj-strategic-plan/

USCJ is a victim of its own doing. It started the slip of the slippery slope when it said it was OK to drive on Shabbat to the synagogue. The slip continued with the allowance of Gay rabbis. Allowing its affiliated synagogues such a wide discretionary choice on belief and practice led to amorphous and sometimes heretical practice. ...My opinions may be hard for a lot of people to swallow and may be categorized as hateful by the more liberal, but to me, *Emet is Emet*.

Text 2: Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (Chicago, 1993), p. 27-28

At the same time, these new ideas were deeply immersed in the reservoir of classical Jewish concepts and sources, stirring up long dormant messianic elements, and causing the ancient seeds of activism to germinate and grow. These thinkers thus challenged the prevailing passive concepts of messianism with confidence in their grounding in tradition. They went so far as to castigate the popular view of the Messiah as heretical, an obstacle in the nation’s path. [Rabbi Zevi Hirsch] Kalischer warned, “If a man should come before you and sanctimoniously declare, orally or in writing, that the Messiah will be sent from heaven in one stroke, you should pour coals upon his head, saying, ‘You are a denier of prophecy! (*haKetavim haTzioni'im*, 1947)” In the same spirit, his ally [Rabbi Yehuda] Alkalai writes: “Our holy rabbis are delaying the consolation of our land ... The people expect a man to come from heaven in a fiery horse-drawn chariot and gather up the scattered remnant of Israel ... [But] this outworn idea has become a stumbling block to the people of Israel. (*Kitvei haRav Yehuda Alkalai*, 1944)”

Text 3: Mordecai Kaplan, *A Founding Father Recounts*, (JTS, 1959 Alumni Association Bulletin) as quoted in *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai M. Kaplan, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism*, p. 33

[I] had become disqualified, in my own mind and conscience, to function as an orthodox rabbi. The informal instruction which I had been receiving from the late Arnold B. Erlich ever since I was fifteen years old, finally shattered my belief in *Torah min Ha-Shamayim*. The traditional outlook which I had acquired from my Jewish Seminary, was entirely dispelled. Simultaneously, however, with the loss of my Orthodox perspective on Judaism, there was forming in my mind, with the aid of what I had learned from Ahad ha-Am, on the one hand, and from Matthew Arnold on the other, together with the aid of my post-graduate studies in philosophy, sociology, and education, a new perspective on Judaism.

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Text 4: Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (1979)

In premodern situations, there is a world of religious certainty, occasionally ruptured by heretical deviations. By contrast, the modern situation is a world of religious uncertainty, occasionally staved off by more or less precarious constructions of religious affirmation. For premodern man, heresy is a possibility -- usually a rather remote one; for modern man, heresy typically becomes a necessity. Or again, modernity creates a new situation in which picking and choosing becomes an imperative. (28)

Modernity multiplies choices and concomitantly reduces the scope of what is experienced as destiny. In the matter of religion, as indeed in other areas of human life and thought, this means that the modern individual is faced not just with the opportunity but with the necessity to make choices as to his beliefs. This fact constitutes the heretical imperative in the contemporary situation. Thus, heresy, once the occupation of the marginal and eccentric types, has become a much more general condition; indeed, heresy has become universalized. (30f)

...[T]here is no comparable case in the history of religion before the Protestant in which people from with a tradition to which they were personally committed turned upon it with the full arsenal of critical scholarship and let the theological chips fly where they might. (70)

Text 5: Arnold Eisen, *Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community* (Chicago, 1998), p. 66

... [in Peter Berger’s] *The Heretical Imperative*, the world “heresy” loses all normative character and comes to mean simply “choice” as opposed to “fate” in accordance with the etymology from the Greek. Modernity is termed “the universalization of heresy.” Nothing is heresy if everything is heresy, of course. And if everything really *is* heresy in its usual, substantive sense – a wrong choice, a normative mistake – then Berger has given us a theory of modernity and of culture utterly at variance with the general tendency in contemporary sociology and far closer, in its willingness to judge, to every Jewish notion of culture, modern or premodern, that has ever been created.

Text 6: Solomon Schechter, *Studies in Judaism*, pp.213-214, in Herbert Parzen, *Architects of Conservative Judaism*, pp.41

[There is] only One who knows the exact truth about the great mystery. But we may indicate our doubt about one doctrine by putting by its side another, which we may affirm to be not more absolutely true, but more probable. This seems to have been the attitude, too, of the compilers of the ancient Rabbinic literature, the most conflicting views about this grave subject [Divine Retribution] were embodied. Nor did the Synagogue, in general feel called upon to decide between these views... Thus Judaism has no fixed doctrines on the subject. It refused a hearing to no theory for fear that it should contain some germ of truth, but on the same ground, it accepted none to the exclusion of the others.”