

## An Argument for the Sake of Heaven

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5780

Rabbi Nicole Roberts

We're all familiar with the saying, "Two Jews, three opinions." The rabbi delivers a Rosh Hashanah sermon, someone at lunch sees the subject differently, and suddenly a conversation erupts and the number of opinions around the table grows *exponentially* greater than the number of people actually debating the issue at hand. Divergence of interpretation is in our DNA. (You're welcome to disagree 😊)

We've inherited this tendency to disagree and offer our *commentary* from generations of Jewish sages before us, whose disputes fill the pages of our sacred texts. Whether discussing what happened on Mount Moriah between Abraham and his son Isaac, or if one is permitted to carry a shofar on Shabbat, our sages loved to engage in a good debate, especially if it involved matters of religious practice. They considered these arguments *l'shem shamayim*—for the sake of heaven, of concern to God—and perhaps because they believed that God was listening intently, they took great care to uphold the dignity of their conversation partners. They perfected the art of arguing-without-denigrating. If they couldn't agree with each other, they'd say, *Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim Chayim hen*—"These and those are words of the living God"<sup>i</sup>—our differing opinions *both* come from heaven. Debating matters of religion with respect for one another brings God into our lives, they thought, and makes our conversations worthy of Divine attention.

While we have inherited our sages' love for dispute, I sometimes feel we've lost their sense of God's presence in our religious arguments. This is readily apparent in the "comments" section on the internet, a prime example being the debate this past summer regarding Moriah—not Moriah-the-mountain where Abraham brought his son Isaac, but Moriah the Orthodox Jewish day school in Sydney's eastern suburbs. The school had denied admission to a boy because they didn't consider him halakhically Jewish, as his grandmother had converted to Judaism through the Progressive movement. Someone posted the news on social media,<sup>ii</sup> and soon the Jewish commentaries were flying, opinions rapidly proliferating. Progressive Jews were angry, Orthodox Jews defensive, and the comments quickly grew ugly. Insults were hurled, and the mud-slinging got everyone dirty, such that I soon found these interchanges more troubling than the original issue itself.

Because so long as there are Jewish schools with *open* enrolment policies like Masada on the North Shore and Emanuel in the East, then it's not our role, as Progressive Jews, to shape an Orthodox school's policies. What troubled me more was that fuelling the vehemence in the commentary were some fundamental misconceptions about Progressive Judaism, and it *is* our role to help the wider community better understand who we are and why.

The misconceptions are perhaps surprising given how long our movement has been in existence. The new year will mark the 210<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Reform Temple in Germany, and the 60<sup>th</sup> of ours here in Chatswood; the 145<sup>th</sup> anniversary of

the first Reform seminary, and the 135<sup>th</sup> of our movement's initial Platform of principles. But seeing as this is the 5,780<sup>th</sup> anniversary of creation, I guess we are still a bit of a novelty in the Jewish world. In the new year, we must continue to correct the myths about our movement, so that when debate turns to insult, we can inform that debate and elevate it *l'shem shamayim*—for the sake of heaven. To engender a more respectful religious discourse, I want to clear up these myths, so that we're all prepared to refute them with calm, clarity, and confidence, ensuring that in the future our Jewish debates merit Divine attention and remind us of God's presence. Which brings me to:

**Myth #1: Progressive Jews are “secular” Jews.** Orthodox people often use the term “secular” to refer to Jews who do not follow Orthodox prayer practices or belong to Orthodox synagogues. The term “secular Jews” is more respectful than not calling us Jews at all, but it's nevertheless inaccurate. Secularism has never been our movement's stance. Though born in an era when rationalism reigned supreme, our first platform still affirmed “the one God,” a “monotheistic...truth,” and the immortality of the soul.<sup>iii</sup> Even after the Holocaust, while conceding that belief had become difficult for some, our 1976 platform asserted: “Nevertheless, we ground our lives, personally and communally, on God's reality.”

Secular means “not having any connection to religion,”<sup>iv</sup> and while there are Jews in every community who *are* secular and unaffiliated, thousands of Progressive Jews in Sydney *do* belong to synagogues and pray, usher in Shabbat with blessings, circumcise their baby boys, and ensure Jewish funerals for family members—reciting kaddish and saying “amen” to the prayer that God embrace their loved one's soul. We are practicing *religion*, and the values that shape our lives are *religious* values, including the Jewish belief that everyone is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image, and deserving of dignity; the belief that we are *commanded* to look after the most vulnerable in society; and the belief expressed each year at our Pesach table that no one should be enslaved to another human being—we don't serve Pharaohs, only God.

Like congregations in every stream of Judaism, Progressive communities welcome those Jews who don't have faith. But, as a group, it's a misnomer to label us all “secular” simply because we pray and respond to God differently than Jews in other shuls.

**Myth #2: Progressive Judaism is not Halakhic Judaism.** Much as it's a misnomer to call our entire movement secular, it's a misstatement to equate halakhic Judaism with *only* an Orthodox way of life and refer to all liberal expressions of Judaism as *non-halakhic*. *Halakhah* was originally a legal *discourse*, never intended to be a *code* frozen in time and place, as it has become in traditional communities. The law's very pliability enabled it to respond to the needs of every generation, and endure. Even in the earliest days, differences in interpretation of Torah led to differences in practice; what was right for one community might differ in another. We find diversity in the observances described in the Jerusalem Talmud versus the Babylonian, and later, rulings of Maimonides that contradict *each other*, depending on the unique circumstances of each community seeking his “halakhic” opinion.<sup>v</sup>

Progressive rabbis and scholars have long engaged in halakhic discourse, producing a vast array of *responsa* literature for modern times. These opinions about religious practice take into account the Jewish legal tradition, our most current knowledge of how the world works, and our highest contemporary moral values—just as *halakhah* at its best has *always* done. In the eyes of the Institute for Progressive Halakhah, the word *halakhic* mustn't become a synonym for Orthodoxy. It is “too broad, and—well, too *Jewish*—for that.”<sup>vi</sup>

**Myth #3. Progressive Jews “deny part of the Torah.”** I spotted this accusation in the comments section of a Facebook debate about Moriah. The commentator did not get this right. Born in the age of rationalism, the “early” or “Classical” Reformers believed that the Torah was written by humans, and that what Moses felt commanded to do was not the same for every Jew in every age thereafter. So the early Reformers accepted as binding on *their* lives only the Torah’s “moral laws” and only Jewish rituals that they felt elevated their lives.<sup>vii</sup> That said, because of this belief in “ongoing revelation”—that what was revealed at Sinai would speak to every generation in new and different ways—our forebears left the door open for later reforms and *returns* to tradition. Our later platforms *reclaim* many practices previously rejected by the early Reformers.<sup>viii</sup>

Yes, we still reject as binding those commandments that offend our modern religious sensibilities—like stoning to death a rebellious son. But our most recent Statement of Principles urges us to at least study the “whole array of mitzvot,” and fulfil those that do “address us as individuals and as a community.”<sup>ix</sup> History has taught us that what doesn't speak to us in one era may very well move us in the next, so Progressive Jews would never “deny” that any part of Torah is actually *in* the Torah. Our movement encourages us to express, not repress, our Jewishness. Which brings me to:

**Myth #4: Progressive Judaism promotes assimilation.** When people say this about our movement, they get us wrong, and they get history wrong. The original intent behind reforming Jewish worship, practice, and ideology was to *keep* Jews who were already assimilating from abandoning Judaism altogether. In the face of modernity, Jews were turning away from traditional Judaism and its strictures, and the purpose of Reform, as today, was to keep them in the fold. The early Reformers feared that there would be no Jewish community at all, if Judaism didn't respond to how torn people felt trying to straddle both the Jewish and the post-Enlightenment worlds. The Reformers forged a path that didn't require us to abandon either world for the sake of the other. The very goal of their changes was Jewish continuity, and it is thanks to their vision and *chutzpah* that today our movement worldwide is 1.8 million individuals and 1,200 congregations strong,<sup>x</sup> with a proud history of making a place in Judaism for those who find neither Orthodoxy nor secularism a spiritual fit.

The Classical Reformers were no more radical than the Talmudic sages, who created a *vastly* different system of Jewish life after the destruction of the Temple. Or than Maimonides, whose *Guide for the Perplexed* helped Jews reconcile their scientific learning with their faith. Far from promoting the disappearance of Jews into the larger

culture, “Progressive” is what Judaism has always been at its most dynamic and responsive.

In response to modernity, our movement *has* secured a place in Judaism for Jews who fall in love with people of other faiths and their descendants. In our egalitarian view, the child of a Jewish father is no less Jewish than one of a Jewish mother, so long as *all* undergo formal Jewish education and timely rites of passage. Rather than rejecting Jews in interfaith families, we support their Jewish decisions, in keeping with our founders’ mission to keep Jews in the fold.

Conversion *is* still necessary to be married by a Progressive rabbi, so **Myth #5 concerns Progressive conversion**, which one misguided commentator on Facebook referred to as “a cheap 5 minute... process.” This represents a profound insult to our Jews by choice, considering how much time and commitment their conversion process actually does entail.

Progressive conversion candidates spend, at minimum, a year in formal study, during which our Progressive *beit din* demands that they also immerse themselves in Jewish community—worshipping, volunteering, and celebrating festivals. They take written exams, meet regularly with a rabbi, and must learn to read Hebrew, keep kosher, and honour Shabbat. At the end of the process, they sit before a *beit din* of Progressive rabbis, immerse in the mikveh, and men undergo circumcision. Candidates must respond affirmatively when asked if they’ll raise their children as Jews, support the State of Israel, accept the God of Israel, keep mitzvot, and bind their personal destiny to the destiny of the Jewish people, come what may. We alert them that their conversion will not be accepted by most Orthodox here or in Israel, and remind them that our people have known unspeakable persecution throughout history. The steadfast resolve and commitment of those who complete our conversion process is worthy of nothing less than our great admiration. And finally:

**Myth #6: Our movement is anti-Zionist.** In the 1800s, Reform Jews in Germany and America did stop praying for a return to Zion. Their rationalist sensibilities and fondness for liturgical decorum could not embrace the prospect of a return to the sacrificial cult of the Jerusalem Temple, and their new world freedoms led them to believe they lived in a “new Zion.” But in the 1930s, their sentiments shifted, as they realised that their fellow Jews were in peril. Their new platform read, “we affirm the obligation of all Jewry to aid in [the] upbuilding [of the] Jewish homeland.”<sup>xi</sup> Later platforms pledged “continued... support and financial assistance,” affirming that we “stand firm in our love of Zion,”<sup>xii</sup> and “are committed to the State of Israel” which “gives meaning and purpose to our lives.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Beyond talking the talk, our movement walked the walk. For 50 years now, our seminary has required all its aspiring rabbis, cantors, and educators to move to Jerusalem for the first year of our training. Attachment to and love for Israel is seen by our seminary as an essential foundation for becoming leaders of Progressive communities. In our Year-in-Israel program, we encounter a whole faculty of role models—Progressive Jews who’ve made *aliyah* so they could help build the Jewish State, even though this meant joining and sending their children into the army. Our

movement formed Zionist youth organisations like Netzer, and brings *sh'lichim* from Israel to our summer camps across the diaspora. We donate generously to Israel, and have relatives who live there, just like Jews of every other movement. Our commitment to Israel should never be doubted but, rather, acknowledged for persisting *in spite of* the spiritual dissonance we experience when liberal Jews are accosted for praying at the Kotel, aspersions cast on us by the chief rabbinate,<sup>xiv</sup> and women erased from billboards and ads. These affronts sting all the more bitterly *because* of our love for Israel. Because we, too, want so much to have a portion in Zion—a share in this land we cherish.

It follows that Progressive Judaism formally opposes the “BDS” movement, which advocates boycotting, divesting from, and imposing sanctions on Israel.<sup>xv</sup> Many Progressive Jews do take issue with actions and parties that move us further from a two-state solution, since our movement supports this as the only way to maintain a State that is both Jewish and democratic. But our position comes from a place of care for Israel’s wellbeing and moral stature. If we are pained by politics, it is only because we are profoundly *invested* in the future of our ancient homeland.

Knowing the principles and history of our movement is key to ensuring a respectful religious discourse with the wider community. Understanding who we are and *why* we are; what we are and what we are not; what we used to be and what we are now—these equip us to dispel the myths that lead to disparagement and inflame our conversations. In Israel, our teachers brought us to overlook the route that Abraham and Isaac took to Mount Moriah. Atop Moriah, Abraham nearly sacrificed his own flesh and blood for the sake of heaven. But with the angel’s call to stay his hand, Judaism proclaimed that this was not the way to honour our God and show our faith; no Jew had to be cut down on account of another Jew’s piety—that isn’t how *our* religion works. We don’t slaughter one another for the sake of heaven. Rather, in the shadow of the Moriah debate of the past year, let’s equip ourselves, and commit ourselves to the age old Jewish art of debating without denigrating, so our arguments may be worthy of Divine attention. Perhaps then the wider community will follow suit, taking the high road *l’shem shamayim*—for the sake of heaven.

*Shanah tovah.*

---

<sup>i</sup> *B. Eruvin* 13b.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.jewishnews.net.au/graduates-son-not-welcome/84718>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/secular>

<sup>v</sup> See Haym Soloveitchik and David Hartman on “*Iggeret haShemad*; Law and Rhetoric” and “The Epistle on Martyrdom,” respectively.

<sup>vi</sup> [https://www.freehofinstitute.org/uploads/1/2/0/6/120631295/halakhic\\_liberal\\_and\\_secular.pdf](https://www.freehofinstitute.org/uploads/1/2/0/6/120631295/halakhic_liberal_and_secular.pdf)

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-reform-judaism-centenary-perspective/>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-statement-principles-reform-judaism/>

<sup>x</sup> World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) website: <http://wupj.org/Congregations/overview.asp>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-guiding-principles-reform-judaism/>

<sup>xii</sup> <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-reform-judaism-zionism-centenary-platform/>

<sup>xiii</sup> <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-statement-principles-reform-judaism/>

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Chief-Rabbinate-in-fierce-attack-on-Reform-Conservative-movements-446143>

<sup>xv</sup> <https://rac.org/opposing-bds-movement>