

Out of the Box Judaism
Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
April 2, 2011

I have a bit of a dilemma this morning. I have just returned from a very stimulating rabbinic conference where I studied some fascinating texts, had interesting discussions with other rabbis on a wide range of issues, participated in two private off the record meetings for a small group of rabbis with members of Israel's Knesset, heard some provocative lectures, moderated a fascinating panel discussion and attended some insightful study sessions about everything from laws of tzedekeh to how to increase brand awareness and use social medial platforms and marketing techniques in the non-profit world – all pretty interesting stuff with many applications and ramifications. When I come back from a rabbinic conference, it is often difficult to capture the essence of what occurred and to present what I learned and absorbed in a fashion that would be of interest in a sermon. But the challenge of sharing it with you and telling you about what happened at our annual meeting, whose theme was "Conservative Judaism: Out of the Box," is compounded and especially difficult today, because it was held in Las Vegas, Nevada. And as you all know, "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas."

How is it that we all know that, "what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas? We associate this saying with Las Vegas because of an extremely successful marketing campaign which features memorable and impressionable televisions ads. Like any successful advertising campaign, it is easy to remember, it captures an idea and concisely conveys a concept and image.

Ironically, the panel discussion I moderated with three extremely talented, bright and thoughtful rabbis who are true luminaries and shining stars of the Conservative Movement about what will happen over the next twenty years in our Movement, veered off into a discussion for a while about the concept of "bumper sticker Judaism." Rabbi David Wolpe of Los Angeles made a strong and cogent plea that one of our problems is that we cannot fit our catch phrase onto a bumper sticker. He said we need something short that is not complex or nuanced that will let people know what we are all about. Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky of New York strongly disagreed and said that it is neither possible nor desirable to distill the wisdom of Conservative Judaism in a few simple words. It is neither worth the effort to try to do so, nor does it do justice to the complexity of our tradition.

As the moderator of this fascinating discussion, which was obviously a metaphor for many other issues, it was one of those times when I felt: He's right – until I heard the other rabbi speak, and then I thought he was right. At a later point in the conversation when Rabbi Kalmanofsky mentioned that dues at his synagogue are less expensive than another prominent congregation not far away, I chimed in and said, "There's your bumper sticker: "We're cheaper'!"

Writing about the plenary session, Judy Fishkoff of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency said, "Kalmanofsky championed a Judaism of purpose and complexity, one that moves beyond the 20th century emphasis on helping Jews fit into American society and concentrates instead on helping them "find moral and spiritual purpose" – a "passionate authenticity" that will "seed, nurture and harvest opportunities for people to find depth." She continued, Wolpe argued, on the other hand, for a coherent ideology that "could be put on a bumper sticker" to let Jews know what the Movement stands for. "Intellectual complexity is not the way to bring people into your synagogue, he said. "You have to pray to something expressible. You can't beseech a nuance."

Rabbi Ed Feinstein of Los Angeles passionately called for reform of our infrastructure and made the point that our institutions have problems that call for restructuring and need to be realigned without delay, while noting that the ideology and message of Conservative Judaism has won and carried the day.

Our discussions with Israeli opposition leader Tzipi Livni and Minister of Education Gidon Saar focused on how to help to allow Conservative Judaism to grow in Israel, to be sure we are not denied a platform so that Israelis will see that there is a real and viable alternative to the fundamentalist, doctrinaire approach of the ultra-Orthodox to Judaism.

A comment from my notes, I do not even recall who said it, or in what session or context, or even if it was something someone said, or a thought that came to my mind based on someone else's comment: If God is in your heart, then what is God's role as a Sovereign in our lives?" And, "if there is no God, then is there no mandated way to live our lives?" In other words, as we grapple with faith, we must consider the implications it has for how we live our lives. For Jews, it is not enough to proclaim a belief in God, nor is it enough to try to live a good life. Faith is meaningless in a vacuum unless it leads to action, action placed in the context of the Divine and the Jewish continuum.

One of the things I think we can take away from this morning's difficult Torah portion is that when someone has a mysterious skin disease, referred to in the Torah as *tzaraat*, that individual must come before the kohen, the priest, who makes a judgment and determination about the disease and what to do about it. To do so, he must carefully inspect it, and especially the person, closely. I read into and interpret the passage as being a caution against making hasty judgments. I believe it is telling us to look beneath the surface and beyond initial appearances to uncover and discern truth.

It is important for us today in whatever we do to steer away from superficial judgments and to look into profound matters deeply.

As modern Israeli author Yochi Brandes spoke to the rabbis in Hebrew about her groundbreaking best-selling novels, she reminded us that our sages who created Judaism, basing it upon the foundation of the Bible, taught us that our tradition is one which is constantly responding to the challenges around it. They made it alive and relevant for their times, as we must do in ours.

In certain respects we do have a bumper sticker. We have many bumper stickers, such as "*Al shelsoha devairm ha olam omed*: the world rests on three things: on Torah, worship and deeds of lovingkindness." There are others, but one that comes to mind is what we recited when we take the Torah out of the ark on shabbat. We proclaim, *Kee Metzion tetzeh torah, udvar adonai meryurshalayim*: For out of Zion shall go the Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. In other words, the antithesis of what is said about Vegas. We do not, nor should we keep what happened at Mt Sinai or in Jerusalem to ourselves. We are compelled to share the message of Judaism with others, to adapt it as necessary so that it will continue to inspire, to touch and to teach Jews and the world for all time, to be sure it does not just stay in the box.

© Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Potomac, MD 20854
April 2, 2011
potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org