

Will the Real Judaism Please Stand Up

by Ariel Bar Tzadok

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There is so much confusion today as to what is and what is not a legitimate expression of the Torah faith. All too often I can hear the metaphorical voice cry out, “will the real Judaism please stand up!”

When the cry goes out, there is no shortage of those who respond, each with a divergent and divisive position. So, **how can one decide?** What does one accept as **a source of authority?** Is public or **popular opinion** how we decide what to believe and accept, or must there be more than just popular claims and the peer pressure to accept them? This become ever so vital with regards to the claims made about religious beliefs!

Religious beliefs define for its believers an entire mental construct about how all existence operates. Religious beliefs, however primitive or advanced, share this one element. Therefore, what one accepts to be true, and what one considers to be the source of truth defines for one everything, what they think, how they feel, and what they do.

Throughout history, and until recent times, **Judaism has been a religion that is very pluralistic in nature.** Unlike many other faiths defined solely by doctrine, throughout the many centuries, **Judaism has embraced many different forms of both faith and practice,** and considered this divergence to still be within the framework of the acceptable expressions of the religion.

Today's Judaism is certainly not yesterdays. Here are some examples. While today reincarnation is a commonly accepted belief in Orthodox circles, the belief was unrecorded in Torah literature until maybe the 12th century, at the earliest. Today, the principle expressed by Maimonides that God has no form or semblance of form is considered the accepted norm. Yet one can, too this day, read the commentaries on Maimonides, and clearly see that earlier generations of Sages certainly did not agree with Maimonides about what has today become an absolute foundation of the religion.

So much has changed over so many centuries. Whether it be in the realms of Law, legends, or mysticism, **Judaism is, and has always been an evolving faith.** Like wise King Solomon said, there is nothing new under the sun. **Judaism is changing even today,** right under our very noses. Some change may be for the

good, some change may not be. Only time will tell what tomorrow's Torah Judaism will look like.

Changes in religion can come rather abruptly. For example, until the revelation of the Zohar, its teachings and ideas were for the most part unknown in Judaism. And yet, for some unexplained historical reason, once revealed, the Zohar was widely accepted and embraced by almost the entire Torah world. The faithful will point to this phenomena to validate the authenticity of the Zohar as being an ancient compilation of teachings from the 2nd century Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai. Yet, throughout the centuries numerous Sages have challenged this antiquity, all the while not challenging the value, or otherwise validity of the texts.

Beliefs, books, and practices embraced by some as fundamental to the faith, are rejected by others as not being legitimate expressions of the faith. Judaism covers them all, and for the most part, accepts and embraces them, as long as the basic fundamentals of the faith, and the practice, are observed. This is very important for any observer or practitioner of Judaism to understand.

There are many forms of Judaism today that are not faithful to the Torah. One can simply read the Bible, see what the Divine Law demands, and see who embraces and observes this, or who rejects it. This, and this alone, defines the criteria as to who is truly faithful to Torah, and who is not. Torah observance is called Halakha, it means “the way to go.” As long as one is faithful to, and observant of Halakha, then one is considered faithful to the religion.

Then again, those who innovate or reform, to introduce other practices, or beliefs, not founded upon Halakha are those who are considered practicing a faith that is Judaism in name only. One can look to the modern movements of ***Reform Judaism*** or ***Messianic Judaism*** to see two forms that embrace ideas and practices so foreign to the accepted norms that they are ***not considered authentic forms of Torah observance.*** Of course the practitioners of these faiths will strongly proclaim that they are true to Torah, according to their own points of view. Nevertheless, if they are honest, the members of these groups will admit that they are not accepted within the greater Torah community.

In our modern internet era, with everyone having access to an audience, anyone who wishes to present their version of religion, be it Judaism or otherwise is free to do so. ***Today, every kind of belief, from the most authentic, to the most cultic are all found online, each one proclaiming itself “the truth,” and, needless to say, insulting, mocking, and attacking any belief or believers that challenge or contradict it.*** Sincere internet seekers are left in a quagmire of religious wars and attacks, not knowing which, if any, is right, and who to believe, or not believe.

Now, of course, I could enter the fray, and begin making my own proclamations about who is, and who is not, kosher. But, after being in the Torah teaching business for 30+ years, I recognize that proclamations of this type are nothing more than words of propaganda.

Some words are entertaining, and they attract the entertained. Others words have emotional conviction, and they will draw the emotionally sympathetic. But, where, in all of this talk, lies the true teachings of religion, be it in Judaism or otherwise? Here is where the problem is.

Since the days of the Second Temple, some 1900+ years ago, Judaism has be built by, and defined by, its line of tradition (mesorah). This line of tradition are the Sages, the Rabbis. We have centuries of their beliefs and practices recorded in thousands of different texts spread out over the entire diaspora. And, in spite of whatever one wants to believe, Rabbinic beliefs are very divergent and include many things that today most are very unaware.

Yes, the Talmudic Sages (and many after them, too this day) believe in astrology, in demons and in other strange and bizarre things. Many Rabbis today desperately wish to dismiss and hide these ancient (and modern) Rabbinic beliefs, because they ascribe to the rationalist school, and find these beliefs shameful and embarrassing.

Nevertheless, the record and the facts speak for themselves. The later day rationalists, beginning with Maimonides, are the ones who departed from the norm. One only need read the original commentaries and comments on Maimonides to see just how objectionable his works were in his day.

Today, Maimonides is a central pillar of Torah Judaism. At the same time, those who represent teachings that Maimonides rejected are also an equal pillar. There are many such pillars, some which can be mutually exclusive of another, and nevertheless, still, essential to the foundations of today's Judaism.

So, will the real Judaism please stand up! And, what do we do now, when not one, but many stand up, each one yelling for the others to sit down! Where can one find a resolution in all the confusion?

This then is the big question. How does one find that which is right, and recognize and reject that which is wrong? It will tell you that the criteria of judgment are not necessarily based on beliefs, rather the criteria of judgment must be based on behavior.

Throughout the prophetic writings in the Bible, one message came forth loud and clear. God has commanded us all, men and women, Jew and Gentile, to behave towards one another with a code of morals, dignity, honor and righteousness. Theology, doctrine and beliefs were hardly part of the prophetic message. ***How we***

behave and treat others seems to express the major Divine concern. If how we behave towards one another is what is most important in God's eyes, then I think that it should be equally of paramount importance in our human eyes.

So then, which is the right form of religion to believe in? Which is the real Judaism to stand up for? I will not answer this with any statement of beliefs in this or that. I see that individuals are inclined and drawn towards those beliefs which are comfortable fits for the individual personality. ***I have no interest or concern to debate beliefs. Why bother? Beliefs can only be argued, they can never be proven!***

What unites us, and what defines real Judaism, is the call of the prophets that we live righteously and properly, extending respect towards one another, and putting love into practice, by being there, to help one another.

Regardless of what one wants to believe, this practice will benefit all, and will surely solicit nothing other than Divine blessings, and this is, after all, what religion is supposed to be about, isn't it?