

# Authority and Autonomy in Rabbinic Education Today

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*Arthur Green*

The issue of authority and autonomy in Jewish life lies right at the heart of Judaism's problematical relationship with life in the democratic and "open" society of the contemporary West. It is also the issue that creates essential divergence between the various Jewish religious groups, a divergence that now threatens the ultimate unity of the Jewish people. For both reasons, no issue is more crucial to the Jewish future.

Classical rabbinic Judaism is a tradition of authority. The essential task of the Jew is to live in accord with the will of God, a will revealed in the Torah but made clear in all its myriad detail only by the teachings of the rabbis. The rabbis, or the rabbinic court, as interpreters of the divine law, have the right to punish anyone who violates the law, contravenes their decisions, or questions their right to legislate in God's name. This is not to forget, of course, that rabbinic jurisprudence was often guided by legislative principles (and legal scholars) marked by exceptional humanity and sensitivity, nor is it to ignore the fact that through most of Jewish history in Diaspora, rabbinic courts had but partial control over Jewish lives and were usually the much preferred alternative to the "justice" of Europe's kings and princes. But the intent of rabbinic Judaism as a legal system, with all its goodness and all its limitations, was to achieve the absolute hegemony of the law, as taught and administered by the rabbis, over the lives of all Jews.

The Reconstructionist view of authority and autonomy in Judaism today begins with the realization that we live in a *post-revolutionary* situation. The Jewish people, with the exception of its Orthodox minority, has over the past hundred years clearly and unequivocally rejected the authority of rabbinic law. This was no less the case for our largely non-ideological forebears who came to America than it was for

their cousins who settled in Eretz Israel and created that radically new version of Jewish identity known as Zionism. Whether opting for assimilation and economic success in capitalist America, socialist activism among laborers in Warsaw, or Zionist pioneering among the early Eretz Israel settlers, Jews leaving the shtetl in the early part of this century had in common a rejection of the old way of life of the Jewish people, including the authority of rabbi and law.

As Reconstructionists we believe that this was both an inevitable and essentially healthy rebellion, and we would have no desire to turn back the clock. The authoritarian/corporate structure of traditional Jewish society stood too much in contrast to the values of individual liberty, universalism, and scientific progressivism for it to withstand the pressures of life in an increasingly open society. Living where and when they did, most thinking Jews of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries necessarily saw the authority of tradition as an outmoded impediment to progress, and the rabbinate as a bastion of reaction.

Liberal Jewry today stands on the other side of that great revolutionary divide. Much has changed since the heyday of rebellion, but the essential new facts created by it have not. Most of Jewry still stands outside the law's authority and shows little desire to go back to it. This holds for the relatively "good" tradition-loving family in the Conservative synagogue as well as for the left-wing Reformer. True, we have learned to think of Jewry again in corporate terms, and many of the dreams that led Jews away from the community have been consumed in the fires of Auschwitz or Hiroshima. Assimilation to the point of disappearance has become as disreputable among Jews in the wake of the Holocaust as anti-Semitism has become among Christians (though both, of course, continue to exist!). The new faith so many Jews shared in the coming universal nationhood of all humanity to be brought about by the "liberating" truth of science is by now mostly a relic. Many have in fact returned to the Jewish community and are again willing, thanks largely to the influence of Israel, to view Jewry as a single body. But the vital core of Jewish corporate existence, as Ahad Ha-Am and Kaplan knew so well, is Jewish *peoplehood*, not Jewish law. Jews continue to live as a creative national entity with a language, culture, and land of our own. The essential character of this culture is, to be sure, religious; in this lies our national distinctiveness. The circumstances of Jewish life in America also dictate that here the religious will play a dominant role in our survival as a people,

while elsewhere this may be less the case. But the future of this religion will be determined by the Jewish people as a whole, not by rabbinic authority. It is all of us together, rabbinic and "lay" (a term terribly alien to our tradition), educated and ignorant, committed and indifferent who, consciously or not, are daily shaping the Jewish future.

This does not mean, however, that anything Jews decide to do can be called Judaism. We are part of an evolutionary process, though one drastically speeded up by the fast pace and resulting impatience of contemporary living. Evolution means that the past is always present in determining the course of the future, the emergent new forms of the future embodying the past within them. As we enter a new age in Jewish history, we need to re-commit ourselves to that process. If there is to be real historic continuity with the Jewish past, which is to say that if Israelis are to be more than Hebrew-speaking goyim or American Jews are to be more than WASPs with bar mitzvahs, the Jewish people needs to engage collectively in intelligent self-examination. This involves serious study of the Jewish past, including both the tradition and the Jewish historical experience, and honest dialogue about the meaning of that legacy and its place in determining our future.

Such is the role of rabbis in our time. A rabbi is a Jew who has devoted his/her life to the study of Judaism and who serves as a cultural resource to the Jewish community, an ambassador, if you will, from the tradition to the Jewish people. The rabbi's task is to *present* the tradition in all its richness, to *interpret* it so that it is meaningful and spiritually compelling to contemporary Jews, and to work *with* a community, as its leader and most fully committed member, toward the creation of a Jewish lifestyle that calls forth the best in that community. By personal example he/she should set standards of Jewish intensity that always stand as a challenge to others; such challenges may be in the realm of piety, of learning, or of activism, depending on the particular rabbi and community. A rabbi should also work to lead a community toward *normative* behavior — toward setting standards for itself and making demands on its members. This is the most difficult task in our entirely voluntaristic Jewish community, whose leaders are often too afraid that people will be turned away if serious demands are made on them. For at least a significant minority of Jews, the opposite is true: they long for demands, for a sense that Judaism makes a real claim on their lives, for the richness that comes only of discipline.

It is when they see that we are too weak or fearful to make such demands that some of these turn to Orthodoxy, even if they continue to disbelieve in its intellectual foundations.

Yes, the rabbi must be trained to be a leader, but a leader who works from *within* the community. The real decisions will be made by *klal Yisrael*, hopefully with good rabbinic guidance, not by the rabbis themselves. Of course any rabbi worth his/her salt/pepper must have *personal* standards of behavior and lines that he/she will not cross. This is part of education by example. But we must never delude ourselves into thinking that any battles have been won or issues resolved because the community has *allowed* the rabbi to maintain a certain standard. Jews love to use vicariousness as a way out of their own commitments, and we should be wary of that unhealthy trap. The real job is that of educating, cajoling, persuading the community itself to become more deeply Jewish in whatever ways will be appropriate to it.

The generations that rebelled against the authority of halakhah rejected also the language of religious faith and the sense that Judaism had anything important to say about questions of ultimate meaning. This was especially true for East European Jews, for whom religion seemingly had to stand or fall in its entirety. The spiritual climate of more recent times is one of much greater openness to religion in its ultimately spiritual sense; there is a hunger in contemporary life, not only in America, for inwardness and for a sense of the divine. On the social plane too, such diverse experiences as those of black America, Poland, South Africa, and the current anti-nuclear movement have shown that religion can stand at the forefront of positive societal change. Both of these changes create tremendous opportunities for us as Jews, and our rabbinic leadership must become a part of them. *Only a rabbi who has a rich spiritual life of his/her own will be able to serve as a facilitator for others.* Such things are not given to mere professionalism. But the rabbi who is not attuned to the great spiritual hunger of our day will not, in this area, succeed. Similarly, only a *personal* commitment to Israel, to racial equality, to Soviet Jewry, world peace, or any other cause will work to persuade others. A rabbi who cannot exhibit such commitment will make a sorry showing.

Our authority is gone. All we have left to give is ourselves; all we have left to teach with is the example of our own lives. But — come to think of it — isn't that all we ever had?

# THE SEMINARY AT 100

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