

ROSH HASHANAH 5778

THE BABY AND THE BATHWATER – JEWISH HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY AND CHANGE

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Last week we went along to see a play staged by an amateur company in Essendon. The play was called *Baby and the Bathwater*.

Now don't rush out to go and book, because we only lasted to the interval – what we saw was unimpressive! It was billed as a black comedy about raising children, and in particular a child of uncertain gender, and from the description it sounded very relevant to the current important debates about gender identity, and things like the safe schools program. In fact, it was about a collection of abusive, dysfunctional people who had never grown up, and a baby – or rather a rag doll - that was continuously pulled and thrown around – I think the author was saying that where people have no values and moral framework, and act like spoilt children, then this behaviour is bound to be repeated in their own children, who know no better. The point, presumably, was that not only the bathwater, but the baby too, had been thrown out – or literally that these people had no framework left by which to guide their lives. I think we are probably all aware of this worrying state of affairs developing to a certain extent in pockets in many places in Australia and elsewhere, but I couldn't see the need for the play – the first half, at least, of which didn't seem to add anything at all to the debate. I am glad though that we are today aware of the danger of forcing a child into our particular expectations, and that we have expert programs to help students to be sensitive.

Of course throwing out the baby with the bathwater is the same argument as the thin edge of the wedge – both are used to resist any change, and are often the criticism levelled at Progressive Judaism by others. Actually, they are regularly used by any religious orthodoxies against the more progressive parts of their traditions, whether Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs etc. Both are based on the fallacious argument: 'Once you make any change, where will it end?' It is self-evidently true that if you throw out your entire tradition, you'll have none left – if you throw out the bathwater with the baby as well, you'll end up with an empty bath. But of course, reformers are not trying to do that. On the contrary, reformers are trying to avoid their co-religionists from taking that option – to simply walk away from the faith that they see as too overburdened with irrelevancies or prejudices, or worse, justifying irresponsible and inhumane behaviour, with unjust and unacceptable rules and demands.

This morning, on this first day of the New Year, I'd like to explore some periods of Jewish history – in particular, times when Jews have vehemently and violently disagreed.

In the past it was not so easy to walk away from your tradition. It meant cutting yourself off from your family and friends, probably having great difficulty in getting married, or earning a living. In seventeenth century Amsterdam, Baruch Spinoza was not trying to walk away from Judaism – to throw out the baby with the bathwater. But he was trying to throw out some of the bathwater, which he realised had become cold and stinking and stagnant, to keep the baby healthy and responsive. At the age of 23, having called into question whether the Torah was indeed given directly by God as it claimed, and as was consistently taught, Spinoza was ousted from his family and from the Jewish community, which was prohibited from even owning, let alone reading, his books. For good measure he was also banned by the Catholics who felt equally threatened by his seemingly radical ideas.

Let us remind ourselves of some of his reasons for questioning the divine authorship of Torah. As a science and philosophy student, he was confident that the world had not been created in 6 days, nor only 5400 years before. He knew about fossils, and that the moon was a reflector of the sun's light, not a light in itself, as it is described in the Creation story. He saw the inherent contradiction that God was the creator of all humanity, described as patient and loving, forgiving, kind, (Adonai, El Rachum...) yet was also said to be demanding the death of disobedient children, or all Canaanites, or killing Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu without warning, or getting angry and destroying thousands of Israelites at a time.

Things change, and we develop deeper understanding – and hopefully humanity becomes more sophisticated over time. As a ninety-one year old congregant told me this week, there has always been change, and he has seen huge changes even over his own lifetime, that few would have anticipated, such as the rise and fall of the third reich, or communism, or climate change or the establishment and technological achievements of the State of Israel.

Spinoza was by no means the first to deny the straightforward meaning of the Torah. If there was no disagreement over meanings, there would never be two Jewish opinions – whereas there is probably not even one thing about which all Jews agree. We wouldn't have needed the prophets to warn and chastise the people – and the kings, if they had been doing what they were instructed to do. Indeed the first King, Saul, was replaced because he had simply shown mercy to the king of the Amalekites, and to the animals, when told not to.

From the beginning of the Rabbinic period, over 2000 years ago, multiple opinions and arguments are recorded – and of course, there were two separate schools of Hillel and Shammai, which disagreed on hundreds of interpretations. And the Talmud is full of stories of debates and arguments, and minority and majority opinions. And these are often major disagreements, and they certainly didn't stop with the completion of the Talmud either!

For example, the renowned philosopher and rabbi Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) teaches in his Guide for the Perplexed (1:65) that when Torah says 'God said', it should not be understood literally, as such anthropomorphic terms for God are never to be taken literally. Now Maimonides is considered the most widely influential of all Jewish philosophers, even among Christians and Muslims – but it wasn't always so. Once established in Cairo, having been forced to flee Cordoba, he attacked the head of the famous Babylonian rabbinic academy and his son, calling him 'a very foolish man, miserable and an ignoramus in every way'. Maimonides sought to replace study of the Talmud, which required years of intense work and tortuous argument, with his own, concise, systematic and above all, accessible law code, the Mishneh Torah. Maimonides favoured Greek logic and analysis over rabbinical casuistry, which he felt had become like hocus pocus. Where Torah passages would not stand up to rational scrutiny, he explained them as allegory. He opposed astrology, star magic, for the science of astronomy. We could certainly call him a modern of his time.

The Jewish community was split into warring factions, flinging cruel insults and vicious accusations at each other. This was not only a split between blind faith and rational thought, but also between separation and integration, and between the obedient Jew and the intellectual upper stratum of Judeo-Arabic society. The so-called Maimonidean controversy lasted over a century after he died, and in 1233 the Dominicans burned his books at Montpellier – and nine years later, having got the appetite, they tipped twenty four wagon-loads with 12,000 copies of the Talmud – all written meticulously by hand as printing had

not yet been invented - into a great fire near Notre Dame on the Ile de la cite in Paris. This disaster abated the controversy for several generations, but in 1305 a synod of rabbis met in Barcelona and excommunicated anyone under 25 who studied the work of the Greeks, saying 'how can any man dare to judge between human analogy, proof and thought on the one hand, and the pure wisdom of God on the other?'

For more than two centuries after that, most Jewish scholars put away philosophical investigation, and clung to their ancient certainties instead. Given this history, is it not amazing that today Maimonides is universally recognised as our greatest philosopher and scholar?

Coming nearer to our own time, in the 17C, resistance to the self-perpetuating oligarchy of Talmudists was growing again – and the common people looked elsewhere for guidance. They appointed a leader of the Lithuanian community who claimed the Jewish citizens felt they needed neither a rabbi nor elders. 'They plot evil amongst themselves to bring us low', he said. 'They are all related to each other, and they rob us of our last coins, merely to enrich themselves'. Groups of Jewish artisans and craftspeople began to withdraw from the rabbi-dominated congregations and set up their own prayer circles and synagogues. Mystically-inclined groups, *chavures*, appeared, paralleling the Muslim Sufi brotherhoods across the border in Turkey, engaging, like they did, in meditation, prayer and physical acts of worship like dancing, that let the common, less educated Jews participate. Popular preachers, wandering holy men, living saints sprang up. They did not teach Torah or Talmud or complicated mysticism, but developed a practical kabbalah, emphasising magic and occult – what historian Gershom Sholem described as 'an agglomeration of all the magical practices from the Talmud through the Middle Ages, writing amulets, exorcising ghosts', healing and telling stories, encouraging the liberation of the holy sparks by devotion to God. These practitioners become known as masters of the name, *Ba'al Shem* – the best known being Israel ben Eliezer, the *Ba'al Shem Tov*. Over only three generations, this new Chassidic movement became the way of life of the majority of Eastern European Jewry.

But when, toward the end of the eighteenth century, the Chassidic movement started making inroads into Vilna, which was known as the Jerusalem of Lithuania, a city where the Jews prided themselves on resisting all religious innovation, the modest and retiring Talmudist Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, better known as the Vilna Gaon, instructed his followers to 'resist them strongly'. From this instruction, the anti-chassidic group became known as Mitnagdim – Opposers. In 1772 the mitnagdim closed the Chassidic prayer rooms, arrested their leaders, publicly burned their books and excommunicated their followers. A letter was sent out to other communities, exhorting them to campaign against the Chasidim, 'this godless sect'! They were to be regarded as another faith and there should be no intermarriage, their kashrut was not to be trusted; you couldn't even bury their dead.

But they and their energy and independent ideas continued. The Yiddish writer I L Peretz summarised in a speech in 1908: The poor Jewish masses long, feel, and want to live their own poor lives in their own way. And chasidism emerges – Toyre for everybody'. The historian Simon Dubnow summed it up: 'Under the influence of the Chasidim, the Russo-Polish Jew became brighter at heart but darker in intellect'. It is easy to say that Maimonides represents the progressive, modernising tendency, or in the century before him, Moses Ibn Ezra, who used the phrase 'hamevin yavin', the intelligent will understand. But I don't think we'd choose either the side of the Vilna Gaon or the chasidim!

Of course the Chassidic movement is still with us. It is more influential day by day, though I suspect that today, instead of considering it as lax and questionable in observance, most would think that it was the most strict and rigorous of all strands of Judaism. If it can be argued that it suffered most from the Holocaust, it could equally be claimed that it has benefitted most from the establishment of Israel, even if it does not always recognise its legitimacy! Certainly, it has enormous influence there, where it has skilfully negotiated deal after deal to support governments over the years, in return for all sorts of concessions including subsidised living and free education, not only for children but for many men in full-time yeshivot. And, though you may feel we can chose to have nothing to do with it, it has steadily infiltrated Israel's religious leadership, so that they now control Israel's conversion to such an extent that even the regular orthodox communities are concerned, and are losing their own control and authority. The reversal of the Government's decision to establish an area of the Western Wall where families could pray together, where women could wear tallitot or read Torah, is directly related to the voting power of the Chasidic groups in Israel, and I'll be discussing this in more depth on Yom Kippur.

In 1810, at the time of the French Revolution, another new phenomenon appeared – an intentionally reformed synagogue was established in Seesen, Westphalia in a school for both Jewish and Christian children, set up and funded by Israel Jacobson. This could be said to be the beginning of modern Progressive Judaism, 207 years ago, and responding, as Chasidism was, to the rigours and conservatism of Talmudic control, but also to the opening-up of the ghettos, to new opportunities for study and development and work and culture. For the first time the Jews could be citizens of the countries where they lived. New Jewish scholars and teachers, learned in academia as well as Talmud, took up the cause of Reform – like Eduard Kley, who wrote the first reform prayer book, Abraham Geiger (Weisbaden 1832), Leopold Zunz (Berlin 1830s) and Samuel Holdheim (Frankfurt 1836).

But in truth, this was not the beginning of reforms in Judaism, since, as we've seen, there have been many and substantial adjustments and arguments to respond to changing needs and situations. My message is that our tradition has always been inherently Progressive.

Even if these were not always acknowledged or recognised as reform, what else could it be called, when the First Temple was destroyed and the people exiled to Babylon, without centre, sacrifices, priests – or after the Second Temple had been destroyed, and the new group which came to call itself the Rabbis had to recreate, reform, the Israelite faiths and traditions to function in such a new and different environment, now permanently without a temple, so without roles for the priests, and without centralisation, since the nation was now widely dispersed across the Greek and Roman empire. What eventually emerged, which today we call and recognise as Rabbinic Judaism, bore only distant resemblance to the centralised, priestly sacrificial ritual, and perhaps less similarity even in the belief of the Israelite traditions than we like to think.

It might strike you that this day, this period of penitence, has a somewhat contemporary feel. We are seeking to purify ourselves, to start anew, to seek God's forgiveness but also to forgive ourselves for who we have been in the past – to commit ourselves to being a bit better in the coming year. It is self-help really – we come together as a group – knowing it is not only us who have failed to live up to last year's commitments and aspirations - we ask for God to help us – but ultimately it is down to us. It is really quite psycho-analytical, and we remember that the father of psychoanalysis, Freud, had himself had a Jewish upbringing,

his father moving away from chasidism but becoming known for his Torah scholarship. In a sense then, we could say that the intense self-examination, the actions and decisions we have made, for which we must ultimately take responsibility, rather than blame God, or fate; this annual struggle to reach into our depths and drag ourselves onto a better path, may have made its way into what has been called the Jewish science of psychotherapy.

A congregant I visited in hospital recommended a book he was reading: 'Every Time I find the meaning of life, they change it', by veteran philosophy student and author Daniel Klein. He has useful and digestible summaries of a wide range of philosophers, and his reflections on them. Bertrand Russell, he says, finds philosophical thinking particularly life-enriching, which Klein summarises as 'I think – therefore I feel good'. Russell demonstrates how confronting the big questions enlarges us: Has the universe any unity of plan or purpose, or is it just a fortuitous concourse of atoms? Is consciousness a permanent part of the universe, giving hope of infinite growth in wisdom, or is it a transitory accident on a small planet on which life must ultimately become impossible? Are good and evil of importance to the universe or only to humanity? Russell readily admits that such questions are unanswerable. He says questions which are capable of definite answers are placed in the sciences, whilst those for which, at present, no definite answer seems possible, are called philosophy – the area he finds so stimulating and inspiring. And, I would add, so Jewish! In fact Klein says that many would describe philosophy as useless trifling, hair splitting distinctions and controversies on matters concerning which knowledge is impossible.' And I would say that sounds just like the Talmudic methodology for which the Rabbis prided themselves! Sometimes such reflection can be useful—sometimes it seems simply pointless.

Such philosophical questions, and the internal changes and upheavals of which I have spoken today, are really all about the challenges of adjusting to a changing world. Where we differ as Progressive Jews, and this is what was new in Seesen in 1810, is that we know change happens, and must happen also in religious responses, and we have to use our God-given understanding to work out how best to adapt to it, whilst staying true to what we can best understand as the intention of God and our tradition, and to make sure in so doing that we don't in fact throw the baby out with the bathwater but strengthen ourselves & Judaism.