

Finding a True Rabbi

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Finding a True Rabbi

by Rabbi Simon Jacobson

It happened a few years ago. I was invited to sit on a panel discussion at Touro Law School in Huntington, New York. It was a panel discussion on some of the principles of Jewish faith including a discussion on Moshiach and redemption (geulah). My co-panelists were two other Rabbis, one Orthodox and another Conservative. From the story you will see why I don't call myself an 'orthodox' Rabbi. Our mediator presented ten questions on the given topics to all three of us and we all responded to them in a cordial way.

Then at the end of the evening, after we finished answering the mediator's questions, the audience was invited to ask their questions. We were in an auditorium filled with maybe three, four hundred people. A woman got up in the back of the room and asked the following question. She said, "I speak on behalf, I believe of 90% of the Jewish people who are assimilated and unaffiliated to any type of denomination. Some of us question the existence of G-d, many of us don't go to any synagogue. I want to know this: you all talk so eloquently about a final redemption and a world that will be driven by G-d and spirituality in the quest for divine knowledge rather than material pursuits. I want to know what will happen to myself and 90% of Jews today who are totally non-observant and not committed to any mitzvahs or any of the Torah laws, what will happen to us if Moshiach were to come tonight?"

“Pretty good question,” I say to myself.

The order of response was first the orthodox Rabbi. He said four words: “G-d will have mercy.” Subsequently, a resounding boo arose from the entire crowd. Clearly they were not satisfied with his answer and found it condescending. This was not exactly a reverent audience, you can imagine, so they didn’t mind booing a Rabbi. That’s what he said and that’s how they responded to his answer.

Then came the Conservative Rabbi’s turn. He actually turned to me and said, “yes, I have the same question Rabbi Jacobson. What will happen to the unaffiliated?” The crowd laughed. That would have been bad enough, but then he added the following. His voice dripping with cynicism, he said he once heard in the name of one of the Torah leaders and scholars of the last generation, I won’t go in to graphic detail, that the Holocaust was G-d’s punishment of the Jews, particularly those in central Europe, Germany and France (the birth of the reform movement there etc.), for breaking Jewish law. And the Rabbi went on to list how every atrocity perpetrated by the Nazis was a result of another broken commandment broken. The reason their hair was shorn was because they didn’t cover their hair, the reason their arms were hurt was because they didn’t put on Tefillin. Children were killed because they weren’t born in purity, etc. etc. And so if the Messiah were to come tonight, the conservative Rabbi turned to me and asked, “Is that what you believe will happen to 90% of the Jewish people, the people that don’t keep the Mitzvot, will they experience another holocaust?”

His words were chilling – he had succeeded in getting the entire crowd roiled up. Turbulence and tension filled the air.

There are questions and there are questions. This woman’s question was one of those moments of truth. Because ultimately her simple question touches the heart of all of Judaism; it exposes what we really believe, it touches us all. I must tell

you that this was one of the most powerful experiences in my life. Imagine the scene of 400 stunned people sitting there waiting for my response. I sat there on the podium under those glaring lights, getting hotter under the collar. A thundering silence filled the room. Clearly, this question went straight to people's hearts. The question was provocative but to the point. And how? As it came my turn to speak, every second turned into an hour. Frankly, I had no idea what I was going to say. One thing was for sure. I was not going to get away with some evasive cliché or humorous answer. This was a real moment of truth. Sometimes your entire life training is to prepare you to answer this type of question. I knew that my response – especially in context of the other Rabbis – what shall we call it...could make it or break it for hundreds of people.

So, what does one do in a time like this? You pray that G-d put the right words in your mouth. I thought to myself: How would Moses, the Baal Shem Tov, the Rebbe – all the true Jew lovers – what would they say to this question? What would G-d Himself say to this woman?

I prayed to G-d to put the right words in my mouth. I took a deep breath and here is what I said:

“One of the Rebbe's once said that if you are asked a question and you don't have an answer you should tell a story and if that doesn't work you should sing a song. I will try to tell a story and I hope this story answers your question and I won't need to sing.

“In the 19th century there was a Rebbe that lived in a town in Russia, a great Rebbe, mystic and scholar, and very well respected. One Simchat Torah in 1887 the Rebbe spoke about the great virtues of simple folk. He spoke very highly about their special stature, and how they are in some ways even greater than the scholar and pious person. These were not just words. Among the Rebbe's close acquaintances was a secular, non-

observant Jew. He was neither a scholar nor very pious, but the Rebbe spent serious time with him.

“Following the talk, one of the elder Chassidim came to the Rebbe and asked with respect. “The Rebbe encourages us to ask questions, so I have a question. While I understand that a simple person has certain virtues, yet the way the Rebbe described it seems somewhat ‘stretching it.’ I respect the Rebbe’s choices but how is it that the Rebbe can justify spending so much disproportionate time with this fellow who is neither a scholar nor a pious man, when so many of his students and followers would give their lives to spend just a few minutes with the Rebbe, for wisdom, for inspiration.

“Knowing that this Chassid was a diamond merchant, the Rebbe asked him to bring several diamonds of different values so that the he (the Rebbe) could choose the most precious one of the lot. It was a strange request but the Rebbe asked so a Chassid complies although he didn’t know what the Rebbe was getting at. He brought several precious stones of different values. The Rebbe chose the largest and brightest stone and exclaimed: “this is the most precious of the lot – am I right?!” he asked the Chassid. The Chassid didn’t want to contradict the Rebbe so he remained quiet. But after the Rebbe insisted, the Chassid said, “well, that is not really the most precious one.”

“But it looks so beautiful and large” asked the Rebbe. The Chassid replied, “with all due respect Rebbe, you need to have a trained eye. The naked eye cannot tell the value of a stone, the cut, the color, the clarity.” The Rebbe smiled and said to him, “with all due respect, if that is the case with stones, how much more so with neshamot, souls. It is not what meets the eye, you need to have a trained eye, the naked eye can’t tell anything about neshamot” That was his answer to his question about the value of people.

After telling this story, I continued: “There is no human

being in the world that can measure souls because souls are not man made, they are divine. Therefore only G-d knows the true nature of our souls, we humans don't. I don't know whose neshama is greater, whether it is yours (I pointed to the woman) or it's mine or its someone else's, or this orthodox Rabbi's or this conservative Rabbi's or anyone else in this room. Not only don't I know, but it doesn't even matter. It is not our business to know, or to judge or to measure the value of souls. If we had to know the nature of the soul, we would have been told. It is not our job and function to know. The fact is that we all have neshamot and we do not know whose is greater. Sometimes the one with the greatest challenges is the one with the greatest soul.

"We know very little about a soul and its journey. Remember, none of us chose to be born into the families that we were born into. Why for instance, is one child born into a healthy, nurturing home, and another child is born into a dysfunctional, abusive home? Why is one child born into a home which provided the child with a strong spiritual education, one that offered a proud and educated Jewish influence, and another child is born into a home that provided no education, or a very negative and illiterate one? These are part of G-d's mysterious ways and only G-d knows the answer to these questions. One thing is for sure: Each soul is pure and holy, and no one has the right or the knowledge to know the level of a soul. We cannot judge anyone, because we don't know all the forces that have shaped their lives.

"None of us chose to be born into the families that we were born into. I didn't choose my parents and the education and level of observance they provided me. You didn't choose your family, and the 90% of the unaffiliated Jews that you described also didn't choose. It is all driven by Divine intervention, G-d chooses. In other words, the type of education, the kind of family and environment that we would be exposed to is totally not up to us. So therefore we cannot

judge people and measure them based on that.

“The only thing we could measure – even if we had that right – is: what did you do with the abilities and opportunities that were presented to you?”

I continued:

“One step further. It says in holy books that Moses was shown all the generations to come. Moses is the first and greatest leader of the Jewish people, their shepherd, ‘roeh Yisroel.’ Before he passed away, G-d wanted to show him the future generations so that he would have nachas (pleasure) to see how they would thrive under all circumstances. Of all the things he saw what impressed Moses most was the effort and commitment of the last generation. The Torah tells us that Moses is the humblest man that walked the face of this earth. Why was he so humble? He was humble before our generation. When he saw this generation – one so assimilated, so secular, a generation that grew out of generations who suffered so much – and yet there are Jews trying to connect to G-d, that humbled Moses. This one tries to keep a Shabbos, this one tries to light a Shabbos candle, Yizkor on Yom Kippur, whatever. That humbled him.

“You know why? Because his generation was ‘enlightened.’ They all witnessed and experienced miracles. The exodus from Egypt, the parting of the sea, revelation at Sinai, forty years of miracles in the wilderness and yet they were far from perfect. But this generation did not see miracles. It is a generation that has every reason to deny G-d. A generation that followed the holocaust and before that, the pogroms in Eastern Europe, the Cossacks, and before that the Inquisition and the Crusaders. On and On, you name it and still there are people walking the streets of New York or Bangkok, Melbourne or Stockholm, Tel Aviv or Capetown, wherever it may be, and are aspiring and trying – that humbled Moses more than anything else.”

Then I concluded:

“I don’t know much more than you do, and I don’t understand it all on a cosmic level, but in reply to your question, I can say this: I was taught by my Rebbes that if Moshiach is to come tonight, people with the greatest challenges will march first – being the ones that made Moses humble. If Moshiach comes tonight, by tomorrow morning you and every person on this earth will recognize that Mitzvos and Torah is the healthiest and best way for a person and a Jew to self actualize and to live up to their divine calling and their highest potential.”

There was silent hush in the room after I finished speaking. I felt a very strong emotional reaction coming from the crowd, a powerful surge of electricity that was felt across the entire room. People were crying and the woman who asked the question came over to me in tears. It was amazing, beyond description. I was deeply moved and never forgot that evening.

I sincerely say this with all humility – because I know that my answer was not my own. I truly feel privileged to have a Rebbe who taught me how to answer to this question. Without that I honestly believe that I would have had the same blank response as the other two rabbis did.

I must admit that I felt proud at that moment, and every time I think about that evening. Not arrogant pride, but blessed pride. A pride that is mixed with deep sadness, because right here before my eyes I saw both the tragedy and blessing of our times. These two so-called Rabbis could not answer this earth shattering and life-defining question. If they cannot answer such a fundamental question, what are they doing to their constituents?! Without the basic understanding of the soul, are they truly able to foster love and respect for people that are not like themselves – people from other communities, people who may dress and behave differently, people who may go to other synagogues, unaffiliated Jews and so on?

The reason they could not answer the question is because they never learned about the neshama – the soul. They may know much about the Torah's laws and dictates, but not much about the human spirit. The reason I was able to address the issue was not because of my innovation or creative skills, but because I was taught these principles. The indispensable value and sanctity of every individual soul – despite its challenges and opportunities – is the most fundamental principle in Judaism. This is what Torah is all about; everything else is commentary.

G-d created the neshama. Each human being has a soul that is created in a divine image and all of us are trying our best through the information we have and through study and commitment to live up to it. Without knowledge or awareness of every soul's value, there is no way that we could find ways to love each other unconditionally. The mitzvah of "love thy fellow as yourself" is only possible because we have souls that unite, and we are not just bodies that divide.

And this is precisely what is lacking today in our education system, including the education of many of our Rabbis. This is one of the reasons that I struggle with the title "Rabbi" and "Orthodox." Because these names are labels that either don't mean anything, or even worse. I don't want to be stereotyped because of the behavior or ignorance of some many so-called "Rabbis."

We all are essentially souls of G-d walking around in material bodies. Titles are not that important, especially titles that become bureaucratic and tend to obscure the truth.

Those two Rabbis were very nice guys. The fact that they couldn't answer the question was not due to their own fault. They were never taught this information. Even if they were aware of the concepts, for them it was only a concept, not a viable reality. And without knowing the reality of this fundamental principle, how could they ever communicate the

message of Torah to unaffiliated 90% (or whatever number it is) of the Jewish people. The answer is they don't communicate it! They may communicate it to the other ten percent, their constituents, but this inherently creates an immediate separation between 'us and them,' so to speak, between this group and that group, because there is no spiritual common denominator communication between different types of Jews. Everyone is going their own way, completely oblivious that we are all interdependent souls, and each of us is incomplete without the other souls.

I repeat again: The only way to bridge and unite diverse people is through recognizing the sanctity and indispensability of each individual soul, regardless of background.

Last week I wrote about a foolproof method to determine the status of your Rabbi by asking him for his sources. In the same vein, if you want to have a good understanding of any Rabbi – and for that matter any scholar – ask him this woman's question: What will happen to the people who transgressed when Moshiach comes?

Let me conclude with the following words: There may be no perfect rabbis today. There may be no perfect synagogues and communities. However, G-d tells us that he does not ask us to accomplish our mission without giving us the abilities to do so. We have everything it takes to fulfill our calling. Therefore, we clearly have the power to search, discover and recognize the appropriate Torah authorities and mentors that will assist us in our life journey.

Remember, we are all in the same boat. We all face challenges of people not living up to the standards of their belief system; we all have experienced hypocrisy and the inevitable disappointments. But we also have been given strength to face these challenges, and we do not come alone. We are like 'midgets' that stand on the shoulders of 'giants' – all the

generations that come before us. With this enormous accumulative power we have within ourselves the ability to face corruption and not become victims.

What each of us has to do is find the best people around us, ask the right questions, have the courage to ask them, and always remember that each of us, even Rabbis, is an indispensable musical note in a grand cosmic composition.

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