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JEWISH THOUGHT AS A SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITY

For the past twenty-five years, I have taught an Introduction to Jewish Thought curriculum to young women studying in Israeli seminaries following high school. The course has changed slightly over time, and I have modified it at need for the student bodies at different schools, but the curriculum is organized roughly chronologically, with a focus on medieval rationalism and non-rationalism, a (very brief) introduction to Kabbala, some discussion of *hasidut*, and a transition to modern Jewish philosophy. I teach material designed to challenge the students' assumptions, and I emphasize that there is no consensus about the key questions of Jewish thought and religious truth. Everything that matters is subject to deep dispute, and dispute cannot be "paskened" in the manner we determine the proper *berakha* on licorice. The range of theological possibilities within Judaism is vast, with numerous schools and *sefarim* opting for mutually exclusive positions at opposite ends of the theological spectrum.

The primary assumption of my pedagogy is trust in the students' seriousness and maturity. Students can handle difficult texts, can absorb vocabulary they are not familiar with, can ask good questions, and can think through the implications of answers to those questions. They can trace the religious and philosophical visions that vie for pride of place within the canon, and they can weigh the advantages and disadvantages of these options.

This translates into a kind of surface indifference, on my part, to how this knowledge and often new ways of thinking influence them religiously and spiritually. I am not actually indifferent to these issues, but to me they are second-order questions, with matters of the first order being how to understand the texts and their implications. Ultimately, this exposure is religiously valuable, but not because I have any direct desire to get them to believe any particular opinion nor because I know what the "Torah position" is on any given question.

I want my students to understand that Rambam, following the medieval rationalist mode, conceived of God as static, which is very, very different from what they were usually taught in their earlier education. Yet, in contrast, the dynamic Godhead of theurgic kabbala is equally foreign to the religious vision most of them absorbed in high school. I want them to understand that there is a price to pay for religious fideism and non-rationalism, as well as for not trying to bridge the gap between what Torah seems to teach and what reason and science describe. I want them to grapple with Mendelssohn's attempt to make sense of religious commitment in a free and liberal society, and I certainly want them to unlearn the nonsense that many were taught, such as the assertion that Mendelssohn was the father of the Reform movement. Rabbi Hirsch's almost pro-*galut* attitude—his conviction that political power is religiously and morally corrupting, and therefore political weakness has advantages—can help them question the jingoistic Zionism that they have sometimes heard. Yeshayahu Leibowitz's notion that we must perform *mitzvot* for the sole reason that they are commandments, with no expectation that they might be good for us or that we might benefit from them, should and often does anger them. When we deal with modern Jewish thought, the curriculum includes works by non-Orthodox writers, like Buber and Rosenzweig, because committed, observant Jews have significant things to learn from them, and in any case should have some familiarity with those outside the canon. I consider it a success when the students are upset or irritated by the texts we learn.

In all these cases, I challenge them to ask what they find convincing and non-convincing about each thinker or school. It is not enough to dismiss or reject new ideas that seem non-traditional to them, certainly not simply because those ideas are unfamiliar. None of the sources we study are stupid or silly, and it helps to understand why smart people would say unexpected and even shocking things.

Despite the value I place in a pedagogy of theological diversity, I do not want to exaggerate either the potential or the impact of this teaching. I teach Jewish thought because I enjoy it, no more but also no less. It is not the most important area of study, nor even necessarily a significant lynchpin in the development of religious commitment and identity. I regularly tell students that "Jewish philosophy is a lot of fun, as long as you don't take it too seriously." At the end of the day, people's religious commitments are largely dependent on narrative, relationships, experiences, and intuition. Intellectual coherence and philosophical precision, for the most part, play a small role, or at the very least are things that develop in light of already existent religious and moral intuitions about what a life well-lived ought to look like.

TRADITION

With that, it is helpful, up to a point, to take our religious commitments out, hold them up to the light, knock on them, and see how well they hold up. Philosophical tools are one method of doing so. Complacency is one of the great dangers of the demographic successes of the Orthodox community, and philosophical rigor that identifies the vast diversity of Jewish truth, along with weaknesses and flaws in any religious position, can help counter that complacency.

The luxury to teach in this way stems in part from teaching post-high school students who already have strong religious commitments and who self-select to choose my particular class. I have no illusions that this could or should work for all students at every grade level. I am blessed to have been able to teach this material to such bright, talented, dedicated, and *frum* young women.