

## **Wrestling With God And Man: Deeply Personal Reflections About Being An Orthodox Feminist**

### **1. F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Crack-Up", *Esquire* 1936**

"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

### **2. Max Delbrück**

*Mind from Matter: An Essay on Evolutionary Epistemology*, (1986) p. 167, quoting Niels Bohr

"It is the hallmark of any deep truth that its negation is also a deep truth."

### **3. Midrash Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim (Psalms), Chapter 36**

רבי יוסי ב"ח אמר נושא. רבא כרבי אלעזר, ורב יהודה כר"י: אדם ובהמה תושיע ה' א"ר יהודה  
א"ר אלו בני אדם שהם ערומים בדעת ומשימים עצמם כבהמה.

"Human and beast, save, O Lord" (Psalms 36): Rabbi Yehuda said...these are humans who are clever in their understanding but set themselves as beasts."

### **4. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Chapter 3 (1843)**

The difference between the tragic hero and Abraham is clearly evident. The tragic hero still remains within the ethical. He lets one expression of the ethical find its *telos* in a higher expression of the ethical; the ethical relation between father and son, or daughter and father, he reduces to a sentiment which has its dialectic in the idea of morality. Here there can be no question of a teleological suspension of the ethical.

With Abraham the situation was different. By his act he overstepped the ethical entirely and possessed a higher *telos* outside of it, in relation to which he suspended the former. For I should very much like to know how one would bring Abraham's act into relation with the universal, and whether it is possible to discover any connection whatever between what Abraham did and the universal . . . except the fact that he transgressed it. ....

Why then did Abraham do it? For God's sake, and (in complete identity with this) for his own sake. He did it for God's sake because God required this proof of his faith; for his own sake he did it in order that he might furnish the proof. The unity of these two points of view is perfectly expressed by the word which has always been used to characterize this situation: it is a trial, a temptation (*Fristelse*). A temptation -- but what does that mean? What ordinarily tempts a man is that which would keep him from doing his duty, but in this case the temptation is itself the ethical.. which would keep him from doing God's will....

Therefore, though Abraham arouses my admiration, he at the same time appalls me....

But now when the ethical is thus teleologically suspended, how does the individual exist in whom it is suspended? He exists as the particular in opposition to the universal. Does he then sin? For this is the form of sin, as seen in the idea. Just as the infant, though it does not sin, because it is not as such yet conscious of its existence, yet its existence is sin, as seen in the idea, and the ethical makes its demands upon it every instant. If one denies that this form can be repeated [in the adult] in such a way that it is not sin, then the sentence of condemnation is pronounced upon Abraham. How then did Abraham exist? He believed. This is the paradox which keeps him upon the sheer edge and which he cannot make clear to any other man, for the paradox is that he as the individual puts himself in an absolute relation to the absolute. Is he justified in doing this? His justification is once more the paradox; for if he is justified, it is not by virtue of anything universal, but by virtue of being the particular individual.

## 5. Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again At Sinai*, 1991

In the main, however, the process of coming to write this book has been for me a gradual process of refusing the split between a Jewish and a feminist self. I am not a Jew in the synagogue and a feminist in the world. I am a Jewish feminist and a feminist Jew in every moment of my life. I have increasingly come to realize that in setting up Judaism and feminism as conflicting ideologies and communities, I was handing over to a supposedly monolithic Jewish tradition the power and the right to define Judaism for the past and for the future. "Judaism" was a given that I could fit myself into or decide to reject. It was not a complex and pluralistic tradition involved in a continual process of adaptation and change--a process to which I and other feminist Jews could contribute. Like the wicked child of the Passover Seder, I was handing over Judaism to *them*, denying my own power as a Jew to help shape what Judaism will become.

I am no longer willing to relinquish that power....When Jewish feminists allow Judaism and feminism to be defined by others in oppositional ways, then we are stuck with two "givens" confronting each other, and we are fundamentally divided. When, however, we refuse to sever or choose between different aspects of our identity, we create a new situation. If we are Jews not despite being feminists but *as feminists*, then Judaism will have to change--we will have to work to change it--to make a whole identity possible. This change, moreover, may lead to new life for us and for the tradition.

The commitment that underlies this book is precisely a commitment to creating a new Jewish situation, to making a feminist Judaism a reality. Since I assume this commitment but do not defend it elsewhere in the text, my decision to remain within a patriarchal tradition requires some explanation. The important decisions we make in our lives are seldom rooted in rational calculation or easily analyzable, so the sources of this commitment are difficult for me to articulate. Especially in the American context where religious traditions are often viewed as selections in a great smorgasbord form which we pick and choose, the place of upbringing, community, and identity in adult religious decisions is often neglected or devalued. For me, the move toward embracing a whole Jewish/feminist identity did not grow out of my conviction that Judaism is "redeemable," but out of my sense that sundering Judaism and feminism would mean sundering my being.

## **6. Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, 1997**

I deeply love and feel connected to rabbinic texts and culture, and even more to the Rabbis themselves, but there is much within them that I find deeply disturbing as well, and much of that has to do with the oppression of women....

My endeavor is to justify my love, that is, both to explain it and to make it just....I cannot, however, paper over, ignore, explain away, or apologize for the oppressions of women and lesbian and gay people that this culture has practiced, and therefore I endeavor as well to render it just by presenting a way of reading the tradition that may help it surmount or expunge--in time--that which I and many others can no longer live with.

I repeat that I deeply love and feel connected to rabbinic texts and culture, but there is much within them that I find deeply disturbing as well....

What I want is to produce a discursive catachresis, not a quick fix by a halakhic committee but a new thing in the world, the horizon of possibility of a militant, feminist, nonhomophobic, traditionalist--Orthodox--Judaism. The reasons for Jewish conservatism are not essential but accidental. The force of my writing is to avow not that traditional Judaism does not need radical change but rather that it can accommodate radical change and still remain viable if the terms of the change themselves can be seen as rooted in the documents, traditions, texts of the Rabbis. The only reason--other than divine mandate--for seeking this accommodation is that such practice brings to many men and women an extraordinary richness of experience and a powerful sense of being rooted somewhere in the world, in a world of memory, intimacy, and connectedness, a pleasure that I call *Jewissance*. Note that I am *not* arguing for a continuation of Judaism on the grounds that it makes people better, although in some sense my justification for indulging in the extreme pleasures of Jewishness is the assumption that it does have something to contribute to the world as well. I treasure in principle with deep emotion cultural difference per se--not only my own--and for me the disappearance of a cultural form is attended with a pathos and pain not unlike that experienced by many people when a species of bird goes out of the world. The demand for cultural sameness, universalism, has done much harm and violence in the world, but cultural difference as well has to work hard to do no harm; to participate in this work is the calling of the scholar.

## **7. Steven Shapin, *Never Pure: Historical Studies of Science as if It Was Produced by People with Bodies, Situated in Time, Space, Culture, and Society, and Struggling for Credibility and Authority*, 2010.**

- You could say that science happens within, not outside of, historical time, that it has a deep historicity, and that whatever transcendence it possesses it itself a historical accomplishment
- You could say that science similarly belongs to place, that it bears the marks of the places where it is produced and through which it is transmitted....

- You could go further and say that there is *no* single, coherent, and effective Scientific Method that does the work that genius was once supposed to do, even that there are no supposedly special cognitive capacities found in science that are not found in other technical practices or in the routines of everyday life.
- You could say that Truth (in any precise philosophical sense) is not a product of science, or that it is not a unique product. Or you could say that the historian is not properly concerned with Truth but with credibility, with whatever it is that *counts as Truth* in a range of historical settings
- You could say that science is not pure thought but that it is *practice*, that the hand is as important as the head, or even that the head follows the hand.
- You could say that making and warranting of scientific knowledge are *performances*, that those producing scientific knowledge can and do use a full range of cultural resources to produce these performances, and that these include displaying the marks of integrity and entitlement: expertise to be sure, but also signs of dedication and selflessness. The very idea of disembodied knowledge thus becomes a bodily performance.

## 8. "Telling Lies To The Young Is Wrong," Yevgeny Yevtushenko

Telling lies to the young is wrong.  
 Proving to them that lies are true is wrong.  
 Telling them that God's in his heaven  
 and all's well with the world is wrong.  
 The young know what you mean. The young are people.  
 Tell them the difficulties can't be counted  
 and let them see not only what will be  
 but see with clarity these present times  
 Say obstacles exist they must encounter,  
 sorrow happens, hardship happens.  
 The hell with it. Who never knew  
 the price of happiness will not be happy.  
 Forgive no error you recognize,  
 it will repeat itself, increase,  
 and afterwards our pupils  
 will not forgive in us what we forgave.