

One People, Two Worlds: A Reform Rabbi and an Orthodox Rabbi Explore the Issues That Divide Them by Ammiel Hirsch and Yaakov Yosef Reinman Quotes

[Reform] However, if you say that you are in possession of absolute truth, I find this most troubling—and yes—it makes those who so believe dangerous. Here is where I raised the thinking of Isaiah Berlin. Berlin writes: “One belief more than any other is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals... . This is the belief that somewhere in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the single heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a FINAL SOLUTION.”¹

[Reform] It is for this reason, I believe, that some ultra-Orthodox rabbis ruled recently to forbid use of the Internet. Yes, they might have been concerned about easy access to pornography, but I think their primary fear was that the Internet is the highway to knowledge. Unfiltered knowledge is dangerous to the fundamentalist mind-set.²

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[Orthodox] One hundred years ago homosexuality was considered a sin. Now it is accepted by contemporary society. Just yesterday I heard a news report that for the first time a slight majority of Americans no longer consider homosexuality a sin. A triumph of reinterpretation. One hundred years ago a Reform rabbi would have been scandalized if a gay couple had come to him to be married. He would have pointed indignantly in the Torah to the prohibition, right next to murder, theft, and “love your neighbor.” But times have changed. The inevitable change, right? Society no longer considers homosexuality a sin. So therefore, a Reform rabbi today will officiate at the marriage of a gay couple without a second thought. (Have you ever had occasion to do this?) But wait a minute. What about the Torah? What about the prohibition? No problem. You will interpret and reinterpret the Torah until you have “obliterated the original intention.” Is the “original intention” relevant to you? In your opinion, is the Torah anything more than a “founding document” created by our ancestors to define their concept of a monotheistic deity? If this is indeed what you believe, then I understand why you do not consider the Torah binding. Why should you feel obligated to live by the values and mores of these primitive ancient people who peppered their laws with strange myths and legends about encounters with God that never took place?³

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[Orthodox] So let us compare the middle segments, the average people. Once again, there is no comparison. When they are not working, your average Orthodox people are extremely busy learning Torah, doing mitzvot, raising money for the poor, visiting the sick in hospitals, performing endless acts of kindness for their neighbors and strangers alike. (An Israeli survey found that hospital patients were four times more likely to be visited by an Orthodox stranger than by a secular stranger.) Again, there is no comparison. Which brings us to the bottom segment. All right, there are some Orthodox people in the bottom segment who are unethical in their business practices, but what do we find in the bottom segment of the secular Jews? Rampant drug use. Adultery. Violence. And unethical business practices on top of everything else. Absolutely no comparison. But you, my friend, who are so adept at distortions, have decided to compare the lowest segment of the Orthodox curve to the higher segments of the secular curve. Foul!⁴

[Reform] The Torah itself makes no claim that God wrote every single word. When the word torah is used in the Torah, it means “teaching,” not one unedited integral work. All the more reason to reject the claim of the Oral Law. There is much wisdom in the Talmud. Tremendous values and institutions were developed by

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our people through talmudic, midrashic, and other halakhic discourse. The Talmud has intrinsic worth. However, it is not reasonable to suggest that the Talmud constitutes the literal word of God as transmitted by God to Moses on Sinai. To accept such a claim is to suggest that talmudic rabbis were infallible. I believe that the Talmud, like everything else, was influenced by, and responded to, the circumstances of the day. It is the secret of its genius.⁵

[Orthodox] Women are not forbidden to study the Talmud; they are simply not encouraged to do so... So if most Jewish women cannot make a serious commitment, shouldn't they at least be encouraged to learn a little bit? The answer is no. The Talmud (Sotah 20b) explains that if a father teaches his daughter the Oral Law he is in effect teaching her to be duplicitous. As the old saying goes, "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing." Dabbling, especially in Talmud study, only leads to misconceptions and falsehood. Those who make a commitment to Talmud study know the experience. The Sages describe Talmud study as "bitter at first and sweet only afterwards." It is a real struggle. It takes a good five to ten years of hard work, usually at least seven hours a day beginning in early adolescence, until you even begin to see the bigger picture.⁶

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