

CHAYE SARAH
“Live with a Sophisticated faith”
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So, its Friday morning, I pour myself a cup of coffee, sit at my table and open the front page of the New York Times to see what is going on in this ever changing world of ours. Supposedly it was Chief Justice Earl Warren who said – “I always turn to the sports Section first to read of man’s accomplishments; the front page has nothing but man’s defeats” but alas – I do not follow his advice – and always start with the front page. And what was on the New York Times front page yesterday? An article on the jitteriness of Wall Street – ok, another about the President defending his choice for Attorney General, the latest developments in Afghanistan, news on the American presidential race – and then – right there on the bottom left of the front page an article on how the Israeli marketplace has adjusted to the market power of the ultra-Orthodox in Israel. Excuse me? The market power of the Ultra-Orthodox in Israel on the front page of the New York Times! Clearly, there was nothing newsworthy going on in China yesterday, or India, or even the whole continent of Africa. The Former Soviet Union did nothing to merit the front page of the world’s most influential newspaper yesterday – but our Ultra-Orthodox brothers in Israel – they made it. The world’s fascination with we Jews is a never-ending source of amazement to me.

Even though the article admits that the ultra-Orthodox represent a community of 800,000 people in a country of 7.1 million – or as the article admits – they represent 8-10% of the Israeli market – and Israel represents 1/10th of 1% of the World’s population – yet there it is on the front page of the New York Times.

So, what did the world learn about the Jews yesterday? Well, they learned that when Larry Pinczower switches on his cell phone, the seal of the rabbinic council appears. He has purchased an officially sanctioned kosher cell phone that does not permit him to send text messages, take photographs, or connect to the Internet. More than 10,000 numbers for phone sex, dating services and the like are blocked. A phone call to another kosher phone is less than 2 cents per minute, to a non-kosher phone it is 9.5 cents per minute and if he tries to call on Shabbat it will cost him \$2.44 per minute. (To be honest I am surprised it works at all on Shabbat.) The article goes on to explore other areas where strict religious policy dictates Hareidi consumerism – private bus companies where men and women either sit separately or on entirely different buses; super markets that only sell the strictest of kosher products, toys for children that are modified for ultra-orthodox sensibilities, video stores that only rent approved movies and the list goes on and on. Now I have no gripe with the businesses that have adapted to meet the needs of the Hareidi marketplace. The fact that one Israeli toy maker took a doll called “chico” and the same doll is repackaged with side curls (payes) and recites *tehilim* instead of the recording it normally has – my response is *kol hakavod* – to the business man who was astute enough to see the potential in that market.

No my issue is with the demand side of the equation. Why do you need a phone that punishes you if you call on Shabbat? Isn’t it enough that the law prohibits that behavior – shouldn’t a religious Jew abstain from using the phone on Shabbat because it is *asur* – prohibited – not because it will cost too much? Which is a higher level of righteousness – to have internet access and not use it to download porn – or to not have internet access at all?

It is clear that the leaders of the Ultra-Orthodox community believe that their way of life can only survive in a closed community – openness, freedom and choice are the enemies of their way of life. And they are not wrong. The Times tells of one Ilan Shmueli, 35 who runs “American Pizza” in the less Orthodox section of Beit Shemesh. He decided to open a store in the stricter, Ultra-Orthodox part of

town. After six months, the problems started – they began to throw things at him – tomatoes, hot oil, and gasoline. What was his sin? He allowed men and women to sit in the same restaurant. Mr. Shmueli went right to their rabbi and he said, “Look, it’s like war – someone is going to get hurt.” The rabbi replied, “Yeah, you could end up dead!” Mr. Shmueli decided to cut his losses and he closed the restaurant. He still has the shop in the Orthodox but not Ultra-Orthodox part of town and his sign shows the twin towers of the World Trade Center. When asked why he chose that as the symbol of his American Pizza business he replied: “I wanted the Statue of Liberty – but the rabbi told me that Liberty is a problem, spiritually speaking. “Liberty is ‘chofesh’ which implies pure freedom. “Haredis,” said the rabbi, “don’t have chofesh, we are servants of God.”

Well that rabbi certainly put his finger on the crux of the problem. It really is either/or. People who embrace real freedom are going to make their own choices and those choices will frequently (from a religious perspective – from a torah perspective) be the wrong ones. Welcome to my world. And if you want to make sure that people do not make the wrong choices – then don’t give them the opportunity to choose – welcome to the Haredi world – it is as simple as that.

When the rabbi informs the pizza storeowner that, “we are servants of God” – his metaphor is a telling one. The goal of a servant is to get the job done. We really don’t care if the servant understands his job, we don’t care if he likes his job, we don’t even care if he agrees with his job – to be a successful servant he just has to get it done. Choice is irrelevant for the servant, freedom is the enemy.

But some of us embrace a very different metaphor – we see ourselves more as *shutafim im hakahosh baruch hu* – we see ourselves as partners with God in the creation of the world. And anyone who has worked in a partnership understands that the rules are very different – here if you want something to get done – you must convince, persuade, cajole – because ultimately the job will only get done if the partner chooses to go along – here freedom of choice is crucial.

And this argument is as old as Judaism itself.

The classic Jewish discussion on this issue is the famous story of the non-Jew who comes to Shammai, one of the greatest rabbis of the Mishna and asks “Can you teach me all of Judaism while standing on one foot?” Shammai dismisses both the man and the question as silly; with a wave of his hand he walks on muttering, “Impossible, how could I even attempt to summarize all of Judaism and its exquisite complexity “while standing on one foot”. A variation on this story, also found in the Talmud, has the non-Jew asking Shammai: “I would like to become the High Priest, can you help me?” Here too Shammai dismisses the silliness of the man’s request, not only would one have to have been born a Jew to become the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest, but one would have to have been born into a priestly family and not only into a priestly family but into the family of the High Priest! So in response to this obviously ridiculous request, Shammai dismisses the man and his question.

But each of these stories does not end here. In each of them, the non-Jew persists in his effort and comes to yet another great and legendary rabbi of that period, to the great Hillel. And once again he puts forward his questions, but this time he is treated very differently. In response to his question: “Can you teach me all of Judaism while standing on one foot?” Hillel smiles and gently answers, “But of course, ‘that which is hateful to yourself, do not do unto your neighbor’ ...all the rest is commentary, now go and study all the rest.” To the version of the story that has the non-Jew asking for direction on how to become the High Priest again we see the very different methodology of Hillel, as he responds, “It would be my pleasure to help you in your quest.” Hillel begins to teach the eager student who in the course of his studies comes to learn that a High Priest is a member of the Priestly family, the son of the former High Priest, but by this time he is so engrossed in his studies, in his fascination with Judaism that he gives up his quest to become the High Priest but pursues his desire to become a Jew and converts under Hillel’s tutelage.

The debate between Hillel and Shammai is at its heart the same debate between that Haredi rabbi and me. To Shammai, the discussion with the non-Jew is a waste of time. Judaism is about right behavior. A non-Jew could never become a *Coheyn* let alone a *Coheyn Gadol* – don’t bother me. But Hillel understands the need to explain, the need for understanding as a critical element in the Jewish

enterprise. For Hillel – the relationship with God is a partnership and if the partnership is to succeed, if the enterprise is to flourish – then questions are the key to the solution not the source of the problem.

In the Hareidi world answers are valued over questions – in my world questions are valued over answers. In the Hareidi world the rabbi is the ultimate authority as he is the source of all answers. In my world the student is valued above all else because he/she is the source of all questions.

And I believe in a Judaism that values questions.

In the Torah portion for this week we see Abraham beset by many questions, questions for which he has very few answers. The Talmud insists that Avraham was tested by God no less than ten times! And that he withstood them all. Among them:

1. God says to Abraham, *lech lecha*, “Leave your land and go to the place I will show you...” Why?
2. There is a famine in the land when he arrives and he is sorely tested to return...why?
3. God informs Abraham that He has decided to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gemorrah and Avraham wants to know why?
4. God promises that Abraham’s offspring will be as numerous as “the stars in the heaven and the sand on the shore...” Meanwhile he is 100 years old, Sarah in her 90’s and no children in sight...why?
5. At long last Abraham and Sarah are miraculously granted a child in their old age only to be confronted by the *Akedah*, God’s incredible demand to sacrifice the boy...why?
6. And in this weeks Torah reading Sarah dies and Avraham is confronted with the sad responsibility of her burial. Now picture his dilemma. Here is Abraham to whom God has promised this entire land as his possession and the eternal homeland of his descendents and here comes Abraham at the end of his life to bury his wife and he doesn’t even own “four-square”, he doesn’t even own enough land to dig a grave for his wife! He is forced to belittle himself and to request permission to purchase a small plot of land for a very high price. Incidentally, it is this plot of land that becomes *Maarat Ha Machpelah*, in Hevron - which is so hotly contested today.

Who would have blamed Avraham if he would have given up? Who would have blamed him if he would have said: “Enough is enough God! All I get from you are promises! All I have for you are questions to which there are no answers! So now God I have one more question, why should I go on? Why should I persist? Give me one good reason to continue believing in You!

Yet, for some strange, inexplicable reason, Avraham does go on, he did persist and as a result he changed the course of human history - and every Jew, every Christian, every Moslem, every human being who has benefited from the morality of Western Democracy from the days of Ancient Rome to modern America is indebted to his persistence. What enabled him to go on? How could he continue with so many questions and so few answers? I suggest to you that Avraham understood what many of us have not yet learned - that questions *are* more important than answers. That our questions spur us on, ignite our imagination, fire our indignation. When Abraham challenges God, *Hashofeyt kol Haaretz lo yaaseh mishpat* – Will the Judge of all the earth not do justly?” God does not get angry with this challenge, God embraces it, God encourages the debate and welcomes the challenge. God understands that unless Abraham understands the partnership is doomed.

We moderns have very little patience for questions that cannot be readily answered. If we were Abraham - most of us would never have continued. We would have given up long before the tenth test. For we value answers.

Look around the corporate table of any large company - and you tell me who is more likely too be successful:

1. The person who asks the difficult questions
2. Or the answer man/woman - who can solve the simple ones?

Follow your children in school. Which child will be more successful?

1. The one who poses difficult and challenging questions?
2. Or the one who “tests” well - answering questions quickly, mastering the material that is presented?

And look at the Judaism that makes the front pages of the New York Times; look at the type of religion which is flourishing in our contemporary world. It is that form of Judaism that offers simple answers to complex questions - that values the importance of the right answers, the right way over the right questions and the searching way.

Today we don't know how to live with unanswered questions:

- Why was God silent in the face of the *Shoah*, in the face of the Holocaust?
- Why do good people suffer?
- Why weren't women counted in a minyan?

And if we don't get our answers right away - we are ready to leave our faith behind to pursue other avenues that promise better and certainly quicker results. And we are all poorer for this haste, for this impatience with uncertainty, for our love of answers more than questions.

4000 years ago Avraham Avinu proclaimed a faith that valued questions over answers - that knew how to live in a world of multiple and sometimes conflicting possibilities. Avraham refused to embrace simplistic solutions or to abandon his quest - instead he persevered, embracing life and God in an oftentimes confusing world. The world is no less confusing today. We too are confronted with choices - to embrace simplistic solutions or to learn to live with a sophisticated faith that can allow for many more questions than answers.

In keeping with my subject matter, I will end with a question: What path will you choose? At this critical juncture in Jewish history, what path will the Jewish people choose?