PROUD TO BE A HERETIC
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
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Its been an interesting week to be a Reform or Conservative Jew.

On Sunday the Israeli Cabinet reversed decades of discrimination against the majority of Jews around the world, since the majority of Jews are Reform, Conservative or Secular and voted to create an egalitarian prayer space at The Kotel, the Western Wall, the holiest site in Judaism.

This was a long fought battle for recognition of Reform and Conservative Judaism and normative Jewish practice by the Israeli Government, who had previously sided with the Ultra Orthodox parties and prevented even the slightest acknowledgment that there is more than one way to practice Judaism in the 21st century. In so doing they also denied the historical fact that their has been far more than one way to practice Judaism in all of the centuries that have preceded this one.

This historic agreement, which is not perfect will create a publicly accessible egalitarian prayer space at the southern excavation of the Western Wall. It will be overseen by the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel and paid for with public money. This decision also made an important policy change that all national ceremonies held at the Kotel, including the lighting of the national menorah will take place in the public plaza. This will stop the Orthodox rabbinate from requiring that only men perform these rituals or barring women from singing as they have been doing for the last 20 plus years.

Lost in this compromise agreement was the fight by Orthodox Women, represented by Anat Hoffman and Women of the Wall to affirm their right to read Torah, wear tephilin and tallit in the women's section of the Kotel. That fight continues and may have been set back a few steps.

But even still it was a historic moment, a moment of triumph and long overdue recognition for Judaism as we practice it here at Temple Sholom and as reform and conservative Jews practice Judaism around the world, now we can do so at the Kotel as well.

No sooner was the ink dry on the document, indeed before it was even signed the Ultra Orthodox parties and Religious members of the Israeli Cabinet, including the Tourism Minister and the Deputy Minister of Education blasted the deal and Reform and Conservative Jews around the globe, calling us dogs, terrorists, worse than the Nazis and heretics.

- "Reform Jews are a group of clowns who stab the holy Torah. There will never, ever be recognition for this group of clowns, not at the wall and not anywhere else."
- "Women of the Wall should be thrown to the dogs."
- "The Reform and Conservative movements have disintegrated themselves, become oblivious, fallen into an abyss of intermarriage and assimilation. They have no future,

they almost have no present." They are steeped in apikorsos" – filled with apikorsim, heretics.

The old line rhyme about sticks and stones and names never hurting me comes to mind, and indeed I generally don't care what they say about me, they are irrelevant to the Judaism that the majority of Jews embrace today. But one name, apikoris, or heretic; that one is a badge of honour.

- If defending the freedoms of conscience, faith and religion, makes me an Aprikoris/Heretic then I declare that I am proud to be one.
- If believing that the Torah was written by human beings inspired by God, but is therefore fallible, particularly on moral issues such a homosexuality and women's rights makes me a heretic then order me a T-shirt that says, I'm a Heretic.
- If believing that there is more than one way to pray to God, more than one language that God understands, and that I am free as a Jew to choose what is spiritually meaningful to me in my own Jewish practice without persecution makes me a Heretic, then so is everyone in this room and 90% of every Jew in the world.

Apikoris is one of many Greek loan words that crept into rabbinic Hebrew. It probably comes from the Greek philosopher Epicurus. The apikoris was a heretic, a free thinker, someone who argued a little too much with the tradition, sometimes even a mocker and a scoffer.

According to rabbinic sources, an apikoris was one who rejected the teachings of a fellow Torah scholar or taught Torah in a way that different from the accepted tradition. An apikoris was one who said that the Torah was not of divine origin -- or perhaps it was of divine origin, except for one small detail. In the words of that old Apple Compter Ad Campaign, an apikoris would Think Differently. The ancient sages said that "normal" Jews had to know how to respond to the apikoris.

They were worried that if people questioned normative Jewish practices if they tried to change them to fit their times or modern values they would destroy Judaism.

History has proven them profoundly wrong, every great advancement in Judaism made for the purpose of preserving the tradition and the people was once labeled a heresy and is now so often counted as a blessing.

- The move from being a temple cult to a people of the book
- creating a written prayerbook,
- the development of Jewish theology by Maimonidies, Buber and Heschel
- Even the founding of the modern State of Israel

Each was for a moment labeled heresy and now it is what keeps us alive and relevant as a faith and a people. Reform and Conservative Judaism must be counted among them.

Perhaps the greatest *apikoris* or heretic of them all was Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza was a bold pioneer in the Age of Enlightenment and he suffered greatly for his intellectual authenticity.

Spinoza argued that God exists and is abstract and impersonal. His great heresy was his belief that everything that exists is God, a philosophy that came to be known as pantheism.

When our children ask us, "Where is God?" And we answer God is everywhere and in everything, that's pantheism, that's Baruch Spinoza. He taught that God had infinite qualities, of which we can perceive only two, thought and extension. Hence God must also exist in dimensions far beyond those of the visible world.

Spinoza's system also described a God that does not rule over the universe by Providence or Grace in which God can make changes, but a God which itself is part of nature. Spinoza said that God can't change the laws of nature, because nature is God.

Everything that has and will happen is a part of a long chain of cause and effect which according to Spinoza's teachings no amount of prayer or ritual will sway God or the Laws of Nature. Only knowledge of God and our Natural World allows the individual to best respond to the world around them.

It may not seem radical or blasphemous today, but for these heretical statements Spinoza was excommunicated from the Portuguese-Sephardic community at 23. Being excommunicated is irrelevant for the majority of us, but in the seventeenth century, it was traumatic and life threatening.

Some of our best Jews have been apikorsim. Apikorsim are, at the very least, interesting. They are decidedly un-boring. Who would you have rather hung out with – Spinoza or the rabbis of Amsterdam who excommunicated him or the rabbis of the Israeli Cabinet and Ultra Religious parties that think what we do here tonight is destroying Judaism?

There are worse things in the Jewish world than to be an apikoris.

There is an old story

A young man from Minsk decided that his life's goal was to be an apikoris. And so, he went to Pinsk to meet the great apikoris of Pinsk.

The apikoris of Pinsk asks him: "Young man, have you studied Torah?"

"No," admitted the young aspiring apikoris. "What about Talmud?" "Also no," the young man said. "Maimonides?" "No."

"Young man," the older man thundered, "you are not an apikoris – you're an am-ha-aretz!"

Translation: “Young man, don’t congratulate yourself on thinking that you are a heretic and a free thinker! You’re not! If you’ve never studied Judaism in any depth, you’re not an apikoris! You’re worse than that! You’re an am ha-aretz! You’re a person of the earth. You’re an ignoramus!”

I may be a heretic, and so may my Reform and Conservative Rabbinic colleagues and members of our congregations but I am not ignorant about Judaism, nor are they and nor should any of us be.

“Ignorance is far more dangerous to the Jewish community than heresy and spiritual rebellion. At the very least, the rebels like Spinoza [and Anat Hoffman] are thinking. And if they are not thinking, then what are they rebelling against?

It often occurs to me that the Judaism that many people reject is a caricature of a badly-taught, barely-remembered version of Judaism that they last encountered when they were thirteen, if that.”

Or, let me put it to you this way: You can be a free thinker. But you can’t be a non-thinker.

Heretics? Maybe.

Ignoramuses? Never.”[1]

[1] I’m Proud To Be A Heretic by Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin June 3, 2014