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January 24, 1992 A Commandment for Living Judaism Rabbi Aryeh Azriel

Many of us know the following fable in which Moses comes down to earth and visits the academy, the source of dissemination of rabbinic Judaism. There he hears Rabbi Akiba teaching Torah. Moses is unable to follow the legal discourse between Akiba and Akiba's students. Moses finds himself quite uneasy until one of the students challenges Akiba: "How do you know that point of law?" "It's the law given unto Moses at Sinai," Akiba responds. The story relates that Moses was then comforted.

The Halakhic perspective of this story teaches that while the entire corpus of Jewish law was given to Moses at Sinai, the ongoing interpretation of that law rests with the specific group of rabbis. I call this Halakhic Judaism – rabbinic Judaism – because certain rabbis arrogate themselves the right to interpret presumably divine and flawless texts in a manner that restricts other people's rights of interpretation. Today, rabbinic Judaism represents a small minority of fundamentalist Jews.

We non-fundamentalist Jews are the by-product of the breakdown of rabbinic Judaism which began with Spinoza over three-hundred years ago and reached a crescendo with the 19th century enlightenment. A major element of this break, textual criticism, teaches us that the story of Moses and Akiba in the academy is a myth to authenticate rabbinic Judaism, a new form of Judaism that developed to meet the challenges of Jewish dispersion, urban economics, and Roman imperialism. Because we understand the story as myth, we are able to reject the aspect of it that ascribes exclusive authenticity to rabbinic Judaism.

Moreover, we see this text as supporting our individual right to interpretation. In a sense, all Jews share one perspective related in the story of Moses and Akiba – that the process of understanding a text is one of ongoing interpretation and revelation of meaning. But we non-Halakhic Jews reject the fundamentalist assumptions of the Halakhic perspective – that our interpretation is limited by the inerrancy of the text, or the authority of a rabbinic elite privileged to interpret it. This story supports our notion of informed individual choice and our creed as stated by my teacher Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus: "All Jews must live according to the dictates of their conscience while allowing other Jews the same right." The problem non-Halakhic Jews face is how to maintain Jewish identity and continuity while stressing individual and universal values.

Generally, non-Halakhic Jews split into two camps regarding the resolution to this problem. I define these two camps as mainstream and progressive. The major difference between mainstream and progressive Jews is their attitude toward ritual and in our openness to new forms of expression and identification.

Mainstream Jews, who I believe are the majority of affiliated Jews, even including some modern Orthodox, believe that traditional ritual observance is the glue which binds Jews together and guarantees our future survival.

Progressive Jews, who I believe are the majority of Reform, the Reconstructionist and unaffiliated Jews, while recognizing the importance of ritual and ceremony in religion, believe that non-Halakhic Judaism represents a significant break with the past. Accordingly, we must create new forms of expression responsive to our needs and develop authentic Jewish responses to the social, economic, and political problems of our day. Initially, we

must fend off the challenge of rabbinic Judaism and then explain by our ability to develop authentic Jewish solutions to the conflicts of our world.

Rabbinic Judaism challenges us, asserting: Only by adherence to the authoritative laws of our people can we survive into the future.

We respond rabbinic Judaism is fundamentalism. It represents a small remnant of the Jewish past. We can support our conclusion that we must reject it, just as it has rejected us, by studying how it uses its authority when able. We use Israel as an example, for because of the bizarre political structure there, rabbinic Judaism wields coercive power in that land and beyond.

We reject rabbinic Judaism for its system in which faith dominates reason. Fundamentalist rabbis have claimed that children perish in automobile accidents because the Mezuzot on the doors of their homes are not written according to the strictest of Halakhic regulations.

We reject rabbinic Judaism because it permits rabbinic authority to coerce individual freedom. In Israel, between 7,000 and 10,000 deserted wives, agunot have been waiting for divorce for up to twenty to thirty years. Their husbands have withheld divorce papers as extortion; these women often lose the opportunity to have a family of their own.

We reject rabbinic Judaism because its legalistic posturing leads to hypocritical action. Many Yeshiva students of the institutions of rabbinic Judaism are exempt from military service as they fight in the political realm for goals which require military service for others and may lead to war – territorial expansion and sovereignty over the Palestinian people.

Do not fear. We do not have to feel as if our rejection of rabbinic Judaism is a one-sided affair. Rabbinic Judaism constantly attempts to invalidate our marriages and conversions. Halakhic rabbis believe that non-Halakhic conversion pollute the purity of the Jewish people. Soon they claim rabbinic Jews may have to keep computer records of just “who is a Jew.” This whole issue is an attempt by rabbinic Jews to banish progressive Jews, to declare progressive Judaism blasphemous.

Mainstream Jews sense the rift between rabbinic and progressive Jews. They conclude that even though they deny the assumptions of rabbinic Judaism – divinely authored texts and rabbinic authority – they must adhere to the basic rules and rituals prescribed by rabbinic Judaism as the means to preserve the Jewish community.

Mainstream Jews have three major concerns, and we must respond to each of them.

First, they say rabbinic Judaism represents nearly two millennia of our existence. It has guaranteed our survival to this point – we should maintain our alliance with the sure winner instead of taking risks in the future.

To this we respond that while rabbinic Judaism was our mode of survival for nearly 1,600 years, we must recognize that our tie to it began to fray with Spinoza, unraveled further with the enlightenment and was removed for good by our grandparents and great-grandparents. We cannot be like the children of Israel who clamored for a return to Egypt after the Exodus. Some are mawkishly nostalgic when they think of the life of ghetto isolation as the good old days of comparable Judaism. If it was so good, why did millions of

our ancestors flee given the first opportunity? And if it is still good, why do we abhor its modern manifestations?

we must realize that we can move on with our form of Judaism while keeping the best aspects of our heritage – the dialectic arguments of Talmud, the lore of Midrash, the insights of philosophy, the search for essential truth of the mystics and the individual celebration and community warmth of the chasids. this knowledge and way of life, which we think of in the broad concept of Torah, is the beginning point of all our action.

But mainstream Judaism will question us a second time. Is not the action to which we are called the maintenance of the Jewish people possible only through the observance of our customs, holidays, and rituals?

Here we progressive Jews must respond, well, yes and no. Yes, ritual observance can be an important factor in maintaining Jewish identity and continuity. But, no, ritual observance cannot be the measuring rod of the person's Jewish identity and fidelity. We must acknowledge that over our long, illustrious history we have eliminated some rituals – think of animal sacrifice and pilgrimages to Jerusalem; we have developed others – think of Yom HaShoa, and Yom Ha-Atzmaut; and we have transformed others – think of Pesach. Ritual observance can be reformed and reshaped to meet the needs of our time. Moreover, new forms of expression can be developed.

At our call for new forms of expression, mainstream Jews will question us a third time. Are you progressive Jews nothing more than anti-ritualists and assimilationists?

To this accusation we must respond that there have been errors in our ways that have led to this misperception among mainstream Jews. In its early years, progressive Judaism, manifested as classical Reform, adopted a position that negated traditional modes of ritual observance. We see remnants of that stand today in congregations that forbid the rabbi or congregants to wear a kippah or deny them the right to keep kashrut at Temple affairs. That position was and is antithetical to the principles of progressive Judaism which call for informed individual choice and free exercise of conscience, not exercise of authority. But progressive Jews we cannot confuse the form of ritual with the substance of a visionary program that is the true guardian of Jewish survival.

In developing our program of progressive Judaism, we have assumed three factors based upon our interpretation of Torah in its broadest sense. First, is that a primary function of Judaism is to bring social, economic, and political justice to the world. Accordingly, the synagogue must not restrict itself to ritual but must be the community center for the Talmud Torah, the teaching of the moral conscience that leads to the development and fulfillment of progressive programs. Second, progressive Judaism must affirm individual needs and universal goals. Third, all people must allow for tactical disagreements among those who have common strategic goals.

As committed Jews, we are concerned with the survival of the Jewish people. I believe that our move into the future is enhanced by embracing new constituencies and by responding positively to new forms of expression. I think of our inclusion of women, converts, and the inter-married into the fold of Judaism.

We have welcomed women on an egalitarian basis. We must respond to their perspectives regarding interpretation of Torah, reformation of liturgy and development of alternative forms of leadership.

Similarly, we have begun Outreach to converts and the inter-married. We have a responsibility to teach converts about the transformation of Judaism over time, through a broad and deep understanding of our heritage, so that they may choose with knowledge their path of Jewish expression. We must continue to welcome the inter-married.

Underlying these programs is my belief that by including individuals, by adopting a universal outlook, we do not "water-down" Judaism, rather we broaden and enrich it.

We must apply these egalitarian and anti-chauvinistic ideas to the economic and political problems we face. We are told by Torah to give the poor, stranger, widow and orphan sustenance and equal treatment before the law. Yet we live in an age when individual greed leads to public suffering. Within miles of opulent mansions, we find the hungry and homeless. We must realize that although we live in a land that guarantees life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, it does not grant the right to food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care. A primary purpose of Judaism is to see that God's blessing is bestowed upon all.

We cannot let artificial boundaries established between peoples and lands deter us from our goals. These require us to speak out against the amorality of states and other corporate entities. Representatives in government and other organizations cannot hide behind the corporate veil to avoid individual responsibility. Furthermore, we must see that peoples can exist with integrity beyond these artificial boundaries. The borders of European countries at war for generations are dissolving in light of new economic and political realities. Perhaps the European market can serve as a model for alternative solutions to realities we are confronting.

I'm not naïve. I do not believe that most of these goals will be achieved in our lifetime. But I believe that bringing social, economic, and political equality and democracy to others is the goal of progressive Judaism into the 21st century. While it is not upon us to finish the work, neither are we free to desist from it. To be preoccupied with appeasing rabbinic Judaism or to be isolationists and exclusivists to accommodate mainstream Judaism will deter us from our goals as progressive Jews.

The move into the future, therefore, is as filled with challenges as it is with rewards. Who knows, perhaps one day Moses will sit in on one of our sessions of Talmud Torah and hear us say, "This is the Torah given at Sinai." May we have the courage of our convictions to live our lives as progressive Jews with honesty and integrity, love and compassion, come what may.