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By Don Feder



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JUDAISM AND LIBERALISM: THEOLOGIES IN CONFLICT

by Don Feder

As the 1988 election approaches, pundits again will speculate on the perennial question: Whither the Jewish vote? Will the shift to the right, detected in 1980, interrupted in 1984, resume, or will American Jews return to their old electoral habits.

While this matter is hotly debated — along with the related issue: What is politically good for the Jews? — a more significant concern will be widely neglected: What does Judaism require in the political realm? Except for a few liberal rabbis, whose understanding of and commitment to Judaism is commensurate with the dedication of the National Council of Churches to Christianity, the subject will be ignored.

In an effort to rectify this lack of critical analysis, I would offer some observations on the essential characteristics of Judaism and liberalism. It is generally supposed that, because most American Jews are liberals, the faith of the patriarchs and prophets must have much in common with the Church of Mondale and McGovern. Quite the contrary, Judaism and liberalism are diametrically opposed. In every respect, they are theologies in conflict.

Components of Judaism. Any philosophical discussion properly should begin with definitions. As we live in at least a nominally Christian society, it is hardly surprising that Judaism is not well understood, even (or perhaps one should say particularly) by assimilated Jews.

Judaism has three principal components: God, Torah (or law), and nation (or peoplehood). Remove any one of these supporting pillars, and the entire structure — this magnificent edifice of the ages — collapses.

Judaism perceives a Supreme Being, sublime in majesty and power. Among other attributes, he is omnipotent, incorporeal, indivisible, and intimately involved in his creation. The Exodus story retold last month at the Passover seder, dramatizes divine intervention in human affairs. (As the Haggadah recounts, "God brought us from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.") It stands as a monumental refutation of the theory of a mechanistic universe with an uncaring deity sitting on the sidelines.

Confidence in the divine solicitude, the conviction that the Master of the Universe has a master plan and that no sparrow falls unnoticed, is a source of infinite comfort and strength in Judaism. In his excellent introduction to subject, "This is My God," Herman Wouk wrote: "The Hebrew people draws its optimism from its idea of the universe. Disaster, protracted

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poverty, mass murder, have never dissuaded the Jews from the vision caught at Sinai of an unseen God. They believe not only that he exists, but that he is interested in men; that he wants them to become better than they are; and that he gave them a law that points the way to a better world. This is solid ground underfoot for those who find it. If he is indeed in the universe, there is hope. Blind forces balanced precariously can churn into final chaos. A seeing force can control its tools. The Jew orders all his acts on the hypothesis that God is there, so he is a hopeful man. Acting on that hypothesis, he has lasted a very long time."

Religion of Discipline. Judaism affirms that the God of Israel makes certain significant demands of mankind, to wit: ethical conduct, sanctification of the spirit, and devotion. These requirements are enunciated in the second component of Judaism, the Torah. The law, set forth in the Pentateuch and other sacred writings, is the divine blueprint. By following the precepts of this blueprint, man can live righteously and, in so doing, live well. In short, it is a religion of discipline.

Peoplehood, the third component of Judaism, is the vehicle for bringing the light of the Torah to the world. Just as Christians believe they have a mission, so too religious Jews affirm their calling — to repair the world under the rule of God, to be a nation of priests, to bring humanity to an understanding of holiness and an acceptance of biblical morality.

Secular Creed. Although of considerably more recent vintage, liberalism too is a religion, albeit a secular, man-centered, creed. To the faithful, it offers a consistent, well-integrated world view. Like most religions, it is dogmatic. Unlike the others, it is not only empirically unverifiable, but massively refuted by both reason and human experience, none of which prevents followers from blindly adhering to its tenets.

The liberal cult is based on certain axiomatic concepts, which we shall explore directly. It is known, however, primarily by its political consequences. In the economic realm, liberalism favors collectivism: government as the guarantor of the public welfare, happiness (and not merely the pursuit of the same) as a right, income leveling (via taxation and subsidies), and state enterprises.

On defense and foreign policy, it is devoutly isolationist, pacifist, anti-anti-communist. Its stand on social issues is marked by a belief in extreme autonomy, the disparagement of social ties, a lust for experimentation and innovation, and a thoroughgoing permissiveness.

Judaism and liberalism conflict on seven key questions, doctrines so fundamental that they shape the entire ethos of the two philosophies. They are: man's nature, free will vs. determination, moral absolutism vs. relativism, an emphasis on rights or responsibilities, tradition vs. modernism, universalism or particularism, and community vs. isolation or atomization. In each of these crucial areas, Judaism and liberalism are diametrically opposed.

Man's Nature. Liberalism holds that people are inherently good, that basically benevolent individuals somehow are corrupted by the world around them, principally through social institutions (economic relationships, governmental structures, religion, marriage, and the family).

This attitude permeates the liberal perspective. Because man is basically good, it is reasoned, left to their own devices, people will automatically do the right thing. Crime is the fault not of the criminal but of the environment that shaped his conduct. Hence, rehabilitation is strongly favored over punishment. The myriad expressions of human sexuality are smiled upon, on the assumption that, as movie ads inform us, if it feels this right it can't be wrong.

At War with Institutions. For the liberal, then, the key to improving the human condition lies not in reforming the heart, but altering these modes and structures. He is therefore an inveterate revolutionary, eternally at war with the institutions that he believes to be the nemesis of an otherwise virtuous humanity.

Unlike Christianity, Judaism does not accept the doctrine of original sin. Unlike liberalism, it does not believe in original goodness. At birth, man is a moral *tabula rasa* – innocent, but not virtuous.

Nowhere in 3,000 years of normative Jewish thought – neither in the Torah, Prophets, Mishna, Gemara, or codifications of these holy works – will you ever find expression of the bizarre notion that man by nature is good. Quite the contrary, the Talmud tells us that from birth a man's heart is inclined to evil.

Clearly, historical evidence favors the Jewish outlook. The 20th century (which has enriched our political vocabulary with such quaint expressions as gulag, secret police, torture cell, death camp, euthanasia, and genocide) should once and for all have refuted the seductive theory that man is naturally benevolent.

Our sages tell us that man has both good and evil tendencies. The great challenge of existence is overcoming the latter, while cultivating the former. Judaism teaches that virtue must be inculcated – always an arduous and painful process.

Liberals advise man to trust his instincts, which unerringly will lead him to virtue. Judaism says heed the law, not your natural inclinations. In the words of the Torah: "Do not follow your own heart, after which you used to go astray."

These drastically different perspectives on human nature are reflected in the second principal point of divergence.

Free Will versus Determinism. Liberalism views man as no more than a biological entity (a conglomeration of random molecules), genetically or environmentally programmed. Obviously, under such conditions there can be no individual responsibility. It wasn't the devil that made us do it, Geraldine, but our heredity, family, education, and peer group influences.

Judaism holds that man was created in the spiritual likeness of God, and so endowed by his Creator with both discernment and volition. Obviously, determinism negates both Judaism and Christianity. Absent free will, there is no ability to choose. It makes no sense for God to have given man commandments if individuals lack the ability to follow these rules.

Without free will, morality is impossible. This brings us to the third difference between the opposing persuasions.

Moral Absolutism versus Relativism. Modern liberalism advocates situation ethics — a morality of circumstance, a code of convenience. because it refuses to acknowledge moral imperatives, ethical correctness is gauged by the customs of a given society or culture. Hence the Eskimo practice of leaving the elderly on a ice floe (a refrigerated form of euthanasia, which must excite the admiration of the Hemlock Society), or the Hindu custom of incinerating a widow on her husband's funeral pyre, or the Aztec rite wherein the living heart was torn from the body of a human sacrifice all are justified.

In a Western democracy, situation ethics become morality by the consent of the majority. Thus if Moses were to appear at the annual convention of the People for the American Way, stone tablets in hand, he might anxiously inquire: "Adultery, in or out? Let's see a show of hands!"

Evolving Ethics. If morality is not based on divine instruction, it must be premised on ideology. Thus the excesses of the Reign of Terror are excused on the grounds that a majority of citizens hankered to make aristocrats shorter by a head, and as we all know 20 million Frenchmen cannot be wrong. The mass starvation of Ukrainian peasants and the Holocaust were condoned as advancing the cause of the proletariat or the Aryan race respectively.

In fairness, most liberals view these ghastly crimes with unaffected horror. Yet they endorse the underlying premises on which they were conceived: that morality is not absolute; that along with human knowledge, ethics are evolving; that the voice of the people is the voice of God.

Judaism, on the other hand, holds that ethics are God given, therefore immutable. This was the great Jewish gift to humanity: the concept of a single moral code, for all people, at all places, in all times. What was right for the 1st century Judeans is equally right for 20th century Americans, for Eskimos, for Aztec priests, for the Brahmin on the banks of the Ganges as well as in the Kremlin. In the natural order, people have:

Rights and Responsibilities. Liberalism is obsessed with the former, Judaism emphasizes the latter.

Liberalism is liable for the "rights" explosion of the postwar era. Where formerly the discussion concerned human rights, now we are bombarded with appeals for minority rights, handicapped rights, reproductive rights, women's rights, children's rights, welfare rights, gay rights, even animal rights.

Locke's "life, liberty and property" and Jefferson's "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" have been transformed into a guarantee of happiness, however perverted and ultimately self-destructive that pleasure may be. The international symbol of liberalism should be an outstretched hand, palm up.

Many of these demands actually are anti-rights, spurious formulations the exercise of which derogates legitimate rights (including freedom of association, freedom of belief, and the right to property). When liberals inform us that individuals have a right to a "livable income," "affordable housing," and the public validation of their sexual proclivities, we must inquire: at whose expense?

Liberalism never speaks of obligations, unless the term is employed in the cause of redistributionism, as in our duty to the underprivileged or America's responsibility to underdeveloped nations. There is no consideration of an individual's debt to his family, nation, posterity, or God. Indeed, such concepts are ridiculed as barbaric relics of a tribal past. By accepting liberalism's logic, we are becoming a nation of takers, a people constantly inquiring what our country can do for us, heedless of its cost to society or future generations.

Special Kinship. In Judaism, the focus is on responsibilities. Not that rights are unimportant. Judaism pioneered the concept of liberty, both individual and national. The Exodus from Egypt and the Maccabean revolt, commemorated at Hanukkah, are shining moments in the annals of man's struggle for liberty. The Hebrew Scriptures advanced the revolutionary concept that the individual, regardless of his or her station in life, has innate dignity and worth. In recognition of this, our colonial forefathers, who felt a special kinship to ancient Israel, chose a verse from Leviticus for inscription on Philadelphia's Liberty Bell: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

Nonetheless, Judaism views freedom as the means to an end, never an end in itself. The Passover story didn't conclude with the flight from Egypt. In Jewish tradition, the Exodus culminates with the giving of the law at Sinai. Liberation from human bondage was preparation for voluntary assumption of another form of servitude, the acceptance of divine law, for freedom without commitment is spiritual anarchy, which in turn leads to a different sort of indenture, sensory enslavement.

Yoke of Heaven. Physical freedom and spiritual commitment are interdependent. Man cannot serve God while in thrall to other human beings. Neither can he be truly free outside divine suzerainty. He who will not accept the yoke of heaven's mandate will wear the slave collar of tyrants.

Judaism, then, stresses responsibilities, commitments, dedication. There are 613 positive and negative *mitzvot* or commandments, regulating an individual's relationship with God, family, neighbors, strangers, and business associates.

An example should illustrate this difference of approach. One of liberalism's pet causes is workers' rights. Have you ever heard the self-styled proletarian champions speak of worker's obligations? Judaism does. Under Jewish law, an employee has a responsibility to give fair labor for his wages. He is admonished not to waste his employer's time. This principle is applied so scrupulously that, at the hour of devotion, a man working on a roof is enjoined to say his prayers on the spot, rather than to climb down to the ground, thereby wasting his boss's time descending and ascending the ladder. A small matter, yet an accurate reflection of Judaism's concern for the mutual obligations that serve as the mortar

for a decent society. Such a society is rooted in the past. Judaism and liberalism diverge once more in their allegiance to:

Tradition and Modernism. Liberals have an almost childlike faith in the value of progress. Ancient ways are contemptuously dismissed with the designation "old-fashioned." The past is characterized by ignorance, poverty, superstition, and cruelty. For liberals, the sum total of 2,000 years of Western civilization comprises witch hunts, inquisitions, slavery, barbarism, and brutality.

By contrast, the present and future are distinguished by science, reason, justice, and bounty. Constant change becomes the *sine qua non* of human advancement. Customs are carelessly discarded like yesterday's fashions.

Ancestral Wisdom. Judaism lives in the past. Men are called to the Torah by their father's name. Jewish life is regulated by laws and judgments handed down over the course of several millennia. The Passover seder memorializes an event that transpired over 3,000 years ago.

This Jewish affinity for the old ways, for ancestral wisdom, is popularized in the writings of Holocaust survivor Esther Jungreis. In "The Jewish Soul On Fire," the rebetzin, or rabbi's wife, tells the Midrashic tale of Solomon, who built the first Temple, being barred from the Holy of Holies when he attempted to enter with the Ark of the Covenant. Every device of this man whose name epitomizes sagacity was futile until, says Jungreis: "In desperation, Solomon cried out: 'Almighty G-d, remember the righteousness of David my father!' Instantly the gates opened and the Holy Ark was brought into the Sanctuary.

From this, the rebetzin concludes: "There are moments in every man's existence when life's gates lock against him, when he feels trapped and hopeless. If at such times he could only echo the words of Solomon, his forefathers would come forth, show him the way, and lead him to those still waters for which his soul so desperately yearns."

Judaism does not reject change out of hand. After all, religious Jews have survived by responding to every fluctuation in the course of recorded history. It does, however, measure change against eternal standards. Eschewing the advice of pop psychologists, it does not go with the flow.

The imperative of Jewish survival (clearly the message can't be disseminated without messengers) leads us to another point of contention.

Universalism versus Particularism. Liberalism abhors diversity. Specifically, it views religious, ethnic, and national differences as divisive — the genesis of discrimination, injustice, and war.

The sooner we can overcome these artificial barriers, and merge into a bland universal mass, the better we all will be, liberalism postulates. The only deviation allowed is for certified victim groups, in which case dissimilarities (including behavior at times bordering on the obnoxious) must be encouraged to cultivate pride among an oppressed minority.

Judaism is rich in the differences that divide. Its dietary laws place certain constraints on social contact with the rest of humanity. In an age when even Roman Catholic prayer is said in the vernacular, observant Jews cling tenaciously to Hebrew.

The Jewish calendar is punctuated by holidays that only Jews observe — Passover, Shavuot, Simhat Torah, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Hannukah. Even our Sabbath is chronologically distinct from that of Christians and Moslems, and unique in its mode of observance.

Judaism has a universalist component, its belief in the divine origin and sanctity of each individual. However, the survival of a relatively small people, with beliefs and customs often inherently at variance with those of the surrounding culture, requires a degree of particularism (if you will, semi-self-segregation) wholly incompatible with the liberal ethos.

Ironically, while preaching universalism, liberalism results in the radical isolation of the individual from the rest of humanity. As noted earlier, liberalism deifies the individual, enshrining his wants and whims. Thus the final divergence:

Community versus Atomization. Without shared traditions (which liberalism deprecates) and responsibilities (which liberalism denies) it is impossible to foster sense of community. Under the sway of liberal culture, America is rapidly becoming a nation of cloistered individuals, increasingly unable to share each other's joys or sorrows.

We find it difficult to relate even to our own kin, thus the rise of divorce and single-parent families, the desertion of the elderly, and the escape from parenthood via child care. The only exception to this depressing, potentially devastating trend is the spiritual community fostered by traditional religious denominations. Judaism is premised on such spiritual solidarity, according to which every religious Jew feels responsible for every other.

Said attitude is underscored during Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. As part of the liturgy, Jewish congregations around the world say the Al Het confessional, a public recitation of sins — dishonesty, avarice, lust, cruelty, indolence — repeated by every worshipper, whether or not he actually committed all or any of the enumerated offenses.

Community Burdens, Joys. It is not that Judaism believes in collective guilt, rather it recognizes a degree of collective responsibility. This public recitation is an acknowledgement that, as members of the community, we are liable to an extent for its shortcomings. By our example, in educating our children and assisting in the education of others, did we do enough to promote virtue? When we saw others going astray, did we try to dissuade them?

With the burdens of community comes its joys. In traditional Jewish society, children are reared with love and discipline. The elderly are cared for and treated with respect, and firm bonds of friendship and neighborliness are engendered.

Thus it may be seen that liberalism and Judaism represent fundamentally different perspectives on existence, human nature, human conduct, ethics, rights, tradition, diversity, and community.

In light of the foregoing, it is logical to inquire why so many Jews identify with the Left. The answer would take another lecture, at the very least. And, hopefully, The Heritage Foundation will invite me back to deliver that discourse.

In the meantime, I would note that the Jewish drift to radicalism was impelled by certain historical forces: the fact that in the Old World anti-Semitism was the province of the Right (of the religious parties and extreme nationalists alike), the affinity of the intellectuals for Utopian politics, the false identification of fascism as a right-wing ideology, and the success of the Democratic Party in courting Jewish voters, beginning with Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Born for a Cause. Above all, the Jewish movement to collectivist politics paralleled the emancipation of European Jewry and the corresponding decline of Torah values. Jews are a people born for a cause. Commitment is in their blood. They cannot exist in a metaphysical vacuum. When they forsake the eternal truths of their fathers, many find less enlightening doctrines to embrace.

In this regard, there is cause for optimism. As traditional Judaism experiences a renaissance, both here and abroad, Jews are deserting the false gods of modernity. In Orthodox communities, such as New York's Boro Park, Ronald Reagan received landslide votes in the past two presidential elections.

As the trend continues, conservatives can take comfort in the realization that they share considerable common ground with the world's oldest monotheistic faith, the fount of traditional morality. In other words, as we have long suspected, God is on our side.

