

“Progressive Religious Voices” Podcast Transcript

<http://www.progressiveandreligious.org>

Creator: Dr. Robert P. Jones

Interview with Rabbi David Saperstein (July 10, 2007)

Director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

Part I: Holiness and Social Justice

I'm David Saperstein. I'm the Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

When I graduated college, I knew I either wanted to be an English professor or a rabbi and a lawyer. A rabbi and a lawyer because I thought of law and religion as the two great institutions that are both equipped to help people and to change society. I deeply believe that God called the Jewish people to be a holy people in terms of bringing a message of ethical monotheism to the world and modeling that and being a light to the nations and always took that call very seriously, as I think most Jews do.

There is hardly a classic text of Judaism that does not resound with both spiritual meaning and God's call for us to be engaged in creating a better world, the two major themes from my own life. So you can open up almost any story in the Bible and find such themes – read any psalm, any proverb, any of the stories of the prophets – and feel this deep spiritual resonance that speaks across the centuries in the embodiment of this call that we are capable and called to create a more just and fair world for humanity.

Perhaps most of all, arguably the great defining chapter of the Hebrew scriptures, or the Christian Old Testament, is Leviticus 19, 'You shall be holy because he eternally of God is holy,' and how does God tell us we're to be like God? By setting aside a corner of the field for the hungry, by removing the stumbling block before the blind, by creating courts of justice, by creating marketplaces that are fair, by observing the Sabbath, by honoring our parents. This is the amalgam of what holiness means. It means not only to worship in a certain way, but to honor our parents, to create a just and fair world, all summed up so powerfully in those verses, as well in the same chapter, agricultural rules and rules about sex. There's nothing that the Bible doesn't touch on. It touches every aspect of life and it's all integrated together in terms of what this ethical vision of God wants, so all of those speak powerfully to me.

Part II: A Leap of Faith

There are basically two kinds of Jews: those that believe that the Torah, the Bible – the first five books of the Bible – and the core of Jewish law was literally given by Moses on Mount Sinai as an eternally binding document on the Jewish people, and those who believe that out of the encounter with the divine at Sinai and elsewhere, the Jewish people were called to set forth this vision to the best of their human understanding and knowledge, trying to grapple with what God was calling us to do to create a better world and to make of ourselves better people and to make of the Jewish people a better community. And that is a process that has continued unbroken from Sinai until today and is an ongoing process and will be throughout history. That is really the major demarcation point between traditional and liberal Judaism, and I think an important dividing point in general in various religious groupings: the question of whether or not the sacred texts are literally the word of God or human beings' best effort to put forward what God wants.

On one level it's much easier for traditionalists who believe in the literal word of God to find a keystone for what truth is, as opposed to those who believe they have to discern what God wants us to do and there is not an objective set of divinely given criterion, but rather, a divinely given ability and process that progressive religious people believe in.

Either way it's a leap of faith. It's a leap of faith to believe that God wrote in contradictory terms, in different styles, in different stories, in things that we know to be historically inaccurate. It's a leap of faith to believe that's all a divine work and a divine purpose. It's a leap of faith to believe that these are human created documents from which we distill certain universal truths, and out of that tradition we have agreed upon what many of those truths are. And it's a leap of faith that this is the direction that God wants us to go in. Either way, you have a leap of faith. It isn't that one faith is greater or less than the other.

Part III: Identity and Creating a Fair and Just World

In this room we're sitting in, the Dalai Lama sat here in the seat next to where I'm sitting for a Seder that we did. And he leads a people in exile, and he's often commented, 'What is the secret of Jewish survival in your centuries of exile, that you kept the passion for your religion and your identity burning so brightly?' And he sat at the service that almost every Jew – Seder is the most common religious practice of American Jewry – so almost every Jewish child in America goes through it and almost every Jewish child across the globe, retelling the story of our liberation from slavery to freedom and the difficult journey that we had to take to get to the Promised Land, and the sense of the obligation of every generation to retell the story as if we ourselves were slaves and brought to freedom until we knew that sense of identity and that commitment to freedom. And at the end of it he said, 'You know, I really begin to understand now how you have survived.'

Historically, Jews have felt to themselves as the quintessential victims of religious prejudice in Western society, and out of that history have a strong identity with the victims and the powerless and the weak in our own society, which often leads to an embrace of liberal policies that are far more likely to be aimed at helping the weak and the powerless.

And closely related to that identification with the victim is the recognition that our entire history of oppression, persecution, discrimination reflects the terrible things that can happen when good people remain silent in the face of injustice, embodied most deeply by the Holocaust, the recognition of evil that happens when good people remain silent. Therefore, there is this deep and profound sense that not only do we have a moral obligation to show a different way, but on a practical level, we Jews will never be safe, secure unless we create a society in which there is no room for discrimination, oppression, persecution, deprecation. And that our destiny is bound up as a matter not only of God's call to us, but of self-interest in creating a fair and just world.

Part IV: Recapturing the Prophetic Tradition

We have lost somewhat the deep religious grounding of the social gospel tradition in the Christian community, of the prophetic tradition in the Jewish community, that our engagement in responding to the call of our texts and our God and our religions for us to be God's partners in creating a better world is a deeply and profoundly religious task. And working to recapture that is I think the central challenge.

There clearly is a bias, deeply in American society and American culture and American public views, but I believe also in the world, to believe that the more fundamentalist people are, the more authentic they are. Even people who are liberal themselves often deep down inside have a sense of this. Why is it that so much of the money that, for instance, Chabad, the Lubavitch Hasidim get comes from Reform Jews, Conservative Jews, that they often hold in disdain? Why is it that the media defaults to this notion of authenticity and that somehow the religious vote, the religious voice is those who are fundamentalist in our society? This is a very difficult challenge for genuinely religious, theologically liberal believers to grapple with and has proved very difficult, particularly in the last 50 years, as media has fed this bias, for them to strongly perpetuate their vision of religion. And I think will remain in the 21st century a central challenge for progressive religion.

It's interesting to note that as the mainline Protestant, theologically liberal denominations have declined significantly, that the two groupings in American society that have not declined are the Unitarian Church that's remained fairly steady over the last two generations and the Reform Jewish community that's grown by leaps and bounds. Now there are many reasons for this. They're both open communities that have invited the intermarried couples and gays and lesbians into the communities. But I remain convinced, and I think there's data to back this up, that one of the profound reasons is they've not backed off one iota of their embrace of social justice as a centerpiece of what God calls on us to be engaged in and a centerpiece of our religion.

And any religion that does not speak to the great moral issues of the lives of its people, particularly its young, or the great moral issues of their world will fail to capture their imagination, their loyalty, their engagement, and we back off of that prophetic thrust for justice and peace that was so central to the Abrahamic traditions at our peril.

Concluding Tag:

You've been listening to Progressive Religious Voices. I'm Dr. Robert P. Jones. To hear more interviews with progressive religious leaders, you can visit our website at <http://www.progressiveandreligious.org>. You can listen online, or subscribe to this podcast to hear the entire series of these hopeful interviews that we will feature throughout 2008 and 2009. You can also read more about the growing progressive religious movement in my book, *Progressive & Religious: How Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist Leaders are Moving Beyond the Culture Wars and Transforming American Public Life*, which is available from Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Amazon.com, and bookstores nationwide.