

# ISSUES

A · M E S S I A N I C · J E W I S H · P E R S P E C T I V E



## IS **NOTHING** SACRED?

QUESTIONING ASSUMPTIONS, PAST AND PRESENT



**D**ouglas Rushkoff told the UJA that his aim in publishing the controversial book *Nothing Sacred: the Truth about Judaism* was just to “start a conversation.” From that standpoint, he has more than accomplished his goal. Jewish commentators have branded Rushkoff everything from a genius to an “overly provocative” troublemaker—and this seems to be precisely the reaction the media critic turned religious commentator was hoping for—at least people are talking, and buying his book. *(continued inside)*

**SUMMARY**

Rushkoff diagnoses current Judaism as “one of the last places Jews, or anyone, would turn for guidance or support,” adding:

Our civilization is facing the tremendous spiritual, economic, and cultural challenges posed by globalization, the triumph of science over nature, and the incalculable potential of new technologies. Judaism, instead of rising to meet those challenges, is obsessing with self-preservation. (p. 3)

Thus, Rushkoff prescribes what he feels is a long overdue, “radical re-appraisal of Judaism’s ability to contribute to modernity.” He demands we free ourselves from anachronistic beliefs such as the authority of the Scriptures, the idea of the Jews as the “chosen people” and belief in one true God.

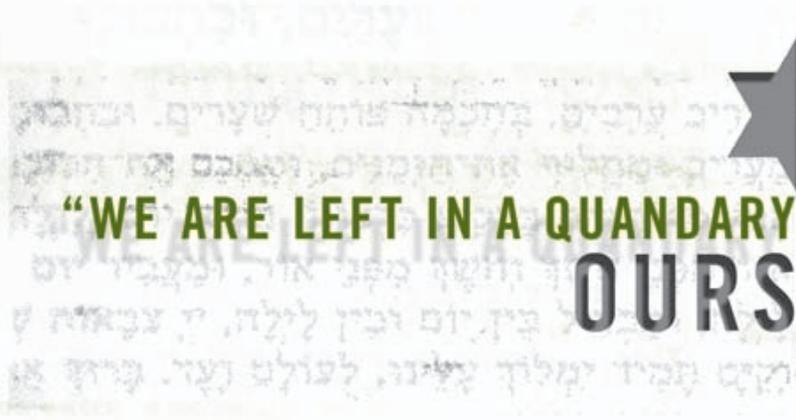
To him these kinds of “fundamentalist” principles are what have brought modern-day Judaism to the brink of irrelevancy. Instead, he insists we must “co-author” our own story, one that is committed to what Rushkoff calls the “Jewish trinity” of iconoclasm, abstract monotheism and social justice, all in a spirit that is community-driven and pluralistic.

Iconoclasm leads to the conclusion that any God must, ultimately, be a universal and nameless God. The natural result...is to then focus, instead, on human beings and life itself as the supremely sacred vessels of existence. There is no one to pray to, so one learns to enact sanctity through ethical behavior. (p. 14)

For Rushkoff, Judaism is a “tradition,” a “concept,” and an “idea” but not a faith. As such, it lends itself to malleability—in fact, Rushkoff would argue that one of the few things meant to be constant within Judaism is its willingness to change. So he advocates an “open source Judaism” which, like open source software, allows for everyone to contribute to writing “code” for a new religious

system. He has launched efforts such as a hypertext Torah on the Internet, whereby people can click on a word and add their own commentary.

And Jewish people are responding and reacting. Now, Rushkoff is certainly not the first person to call for a secular renaissance within Judaism, a fact that has become the basis for some criticism of him.



Rushkoff, who admits to being a “lapsed Jew,” has garnered a lot of attention. Much of the notice is from defenders of sacred Judaism who have told him to stay in the field of his own expertise, media criticism, which he teaches at New York University. Thousands of other Jews have bought into *Nothing Sacred* because they applaud his adulation of secular thought. This gives us occasion to examine, in the light of a messianic commitment, some of the underlying assumptions Rushkoff and others like him are making when they declare that nothing is sacred.

**ASSUMPTION #1: WE AS PEOPLE ARE OUR ONLY ULTIMATE AUTHORITY.**

Rushkoff hails iconoclasm—the willingness to attack and overthrow traditional, popular or sacred ideas, institutions or images—as one of Judaism’s greatest values and contributions. He points out that the patriarch Abraham, according to rabbinic commentary, was an idol-smasher. Judaism, says Rushkoff, is a tradition, “born out of revolution, committed to evolution, and always willing to undergo change at a moment’s notice.” But modern Judaism, he says, has made

icons and idols out of such things as our texts, our narrative history, even our concept of God. He calls for the liberation of these ideas from their sacred stature and dares us to question them: “Our iconoclasm . . . ensure[s] that we never surrender central authority to anyone or anything” (p. 169).

But certainly, in an open source Judaism like the one he proposes, we do give authority to an entity—that is ourselves. “The important thing is for Jews to feel capable of making their own decisions, individually and collectively, about what they believe and how they will practice it into existence” (p. 179).

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Rushkoff is willing to leave up to us much of the task of defining and refining a relevant Judaism “that will draw people in.”

And yet, we have been doing this, at least in part, for years.

Some of us still want to think of Judaism as an absolutely fixed thing, so that our job is to conform to its demands and rationalize its inconsistencies. It is God’s truth, after all. A perfect thing. The most liberal minded among us, in an equally reckless form of extremism, think Judaism should turn on a dime to satisfy our momentary whims. Whether it’s pop kabbalah or the belief that Jews are supposed to smoke marijuana at the closing of Shabbat, the Jews on this end of the spectrum simply bend the religion to support their own lifestyles. (p. 196)

So we can see that problems arise when people allow themselves broad authority to re-interpret Judaism as it suits

them. Rushkoff seems to believe though, that if we adhere to the “Jewish trinity” he sets forth (iconoclasm, abstract monotheism and social justice), we will alleviate the excesses and set limits on these problems.

But the question must be asked, how are we to accept these three things as absolute or universal without going against the very iconoclasm he espouses? Even the subtitle of his book “the truth about Judaism” can be seen as anti-iconoclastic. It’s like saying, “The absolute truth is that there is no absolute and no truth.” We are left in a quandary and have only ourselves to go to for answers.

It must be realized that community-based decision-making does require that we submit to someone else’s authority, even if it is a group of us. Thus, by making humanity the ultimate authority, we come dangerously close to forsaking iconoclasm and making idols of ourselves.

#### **ASSUMPTION #2: HUMANITY KNOWS MORE NOW THAN EVER.**

In Rushkoff’s system of thought, it makes sense to delegate power to modern humanity and to smash the idols of our ancestors. Because, according to Rushkoff, we are much more enlightened today than ever before. After all, for the past few millennia people have held to a belief in God as he is described in the Bible. To render such beliefs as archaic is to say, in effect, that faith may have been good for people back in the olden days, but we’ve come such a long way as humans that we no longer need such a thing. Primitive thought shackles us and keeps us from moving into our rightful present and promising future.

It’s certainly true that humanity has progressed. But for all of our modern achievements, do we in fact “know” more now than people ever did? Look around. Undoubtedly, we can go further into space than ever, see more tiny organisms than ever and construct taller buildings than ever, but if we were somehow disconnected from our technology, how would we be able to cope? How many of us can dig a well or know how to create a fire out of virtually nothing or forage for our own food? Are we really so much more

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intelligent than our ancestors that we can abandon their ideas or their faith? Not only that, but technology taken by itself does not teach us meaning. It does not tell us why we ought to survive or thrive. Technology doesn't give us a clue of what is right or wrong, beautiful or ugly.

Rushkoff declares that faith and reason are opposites when he says, "There is a way to find the true, unchanging values of Judaism without resorting to blind faith or mindless worship." He laments those "returnees" to Judaism who "run back . . . with a blind and desperate faith and are quickly absorbed by 'outreach organizations,' which—in return for money—offer compelling evidence that God exists, that the Jews are indeed the Lord's 'chosen people,' and that those who adhere to this righteous path will never have to ask themselves another difficult question again" (p. 2).

It's humanity's understandable nature to want to resist authority. According to our Scriptures, we've been wrestling with this since the beginning of time. Yet, to claim that those who do believe in an absolute truth, in God, in the sanctity of the Bible, are somehow non-reasoning individuals is to discount such people as Pascal, Newton and the fathers of modern science who—because of their faith, not despite it—had the confidence to make inquiry into nature.

It's one thing to ask people to inquire about, or even challenge, their own ideas. It is quite another to discount thousands of years and millions of people who have chosen to believe as they do, even in the face of persecution. One is not sure where Rushkoff got the idea that faith is easy, but certainly neither history nor our texts support this.

Rushkoff himself actually seems to prefer a religion that comfortably suits his own preconceived ideas rather than one that perhaps questions the actual ideas:

To mention my affinity for Jewish ideas is to risk marginalizing my work and associating myself with a group whose most public expressions are contrary to the tolerance, pluralism, and universal truths I aim to convey. Sometimes I feel like giving up and accepting the fact that Judaism is simply irrelevant. But then, during a talk or while writing an article, I'll realize that I'm quoting Talmud or reinterpreting a biblical myth in order to support an idea. I don't want to deny myself this greater intellectual and sociological context or the reassurance it affords me. (p. 5)

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Rushkoff says, "Religion can be a great thing, as long as we don't believe in it" (p. 178). He wants a religion he can use, not hold to. He especially wants to avoid a religion that holds or constrains him. Absolute faith does not serve a purpose in a world such as ours, he says, which essentially makes another assumption . . .

### **ASSUMPTION #3: RELIGION'S PRIMARY PURPOSE IS PRAGMATIC.**

The initial and prime Jewish imperative was never to worship God for his own sake. . . . Jews evolve their concept of him, and their relationship to him merely as a means toward implementing more humane ways of living. (p. 30)

According to Rushkoff, the three primary Jewish values (iconoclasm, abstract monotheism and social justice) form the basis of a "practical theology," one that can "improve the world."

Since social justice and "improving the world" feature so highly in his list of values, Rushkoff claims that the "lapsed" Jews are actually the most adherent to Judaism. Those who have concentrated on their careers in law or social work or media "might actually comprise Judaism's most devoutly practicing members" (p. 43). His argument is convoluted. It's like saying that prostitutes are authorities on or instruments of social purity and sexual health. Or that the man who uses hate speech essentially understands the constitutional right to free speech more than anyone else. Rushkoff basically excuses those who haven't made spirituality a priority, while simultaneously treating those who follow Judaism, or any faith for that matter, with derision.

Rushkoff claims that because faith is so mired in absolutes, it is not helpful for anyone trying to cope with modern dilemmas or make the world a better place. But have

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people not been turning to the Bible for answers for years? And doesn't social justice play a huge part in the Bible? God is a god of justice and mercy. Is this somehow not relevant for today? He commands us to take care of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Rushkoff seems to overlook the fact that the Bible motivates us away from self-indulgence and greed and makes charity and care of others a social imperative.

But first and foremost, we are commanded:

You shall **love** the LORD your **God** with all your **heart** and with all your **soul** and with all your **might**. (Deuteronomy 6:5)

Moses gave this command to the Israelites, and they responded out of gratitude for what he had done for them in bringing them out of Egypt. And it is in light of this love that love for our neighbor is born. Why are there so many faith-based charities that reach out to the sick and the disenfranchised? Could it be that all of this is not done out of blind, fearful allegiance to an out-of-date set of rules, but out of gratitude to a God who loves us? Not for Rushkoff. He says that Judaism is obligated to repair the world . . . because if not, who will?

## ASSUMPTION #4: GOD IS UNKNOWABLE.

Rushkoff's assertion that nothing is sacred is based on this first presupposition and his fundamental idea of abstract monotheism.

For all practical purposes, God has receded from human affairs. He is as distant from us as if he did not even exist in the first place. . . . We must assume there is no great God protecting us and guaranteeing our collective fate and instead learn to take care of one another. (p. 173)

Maybe it's a matter of perception, but the mere fact that the Jewish people have survived for thousands of years has caused several people to stop, take notice and question how this could be without God. Rushkoff does not allow for this possibility:

In order to live in the world as Jews, we need not believe we were created by Yahweh or that we are following his stated commands. We can just as easily conceive of God as something completely dependent on *us* for its existence. God is present—created if you will—whenever a person chooses to act according to his higher principles, meaning on behalf of someone other than himself. We grow God, and evolve God to greater and more realized forms, the more we dedicate ourselves to acting according to the principles that we can identify as holy. We create God . . . by providing him with the arms, legs, and voices to manifest love for our fellow beings. (p. 187)

It would be understandable for Rushkoff to conclude as he does that there is no God out there that can be trusted, if we didn't have two things. The first is a book that has withstood the test of time. Even if Rushkoff doesn't want to see it, the Hebrew Scriptures reveal a coherent picture of a God who takes an active interest in his people, in all people. Are the Scriptures reliable or does the fact that people have trusted them for thousands of years mean nothing? Surely, as Rushkoff says, we must look at the Scriptures for ourselves. But instead of starting with the presumption that the Bible is merely mythic literature, perhaps it would be more open-minded to read the Bible for what it says it is—divinely inspired communication from our Creator.

The second thing we have is evidence of the most amazing fulfillment of biblical prophecy ever. We're not talking about an ancient scroll, burial stone or any other archaeological discovery, but about a person named Y'shua (Jesus) who came to us and fulfilled everything that had been written about the Messiah hundreds of years before. And for more than two thousand years he has been changing people's lives. Y'shua claimed to be the manifestation of the invisible God. He was a revolutionary, but he didn't throw out the Torah or the Prophets. He didn't ask us to dismiss our history as myth or wipe away our traditions; he fulfilled them by dying as a perfect sacrifice for all the mistakes that humanity is bound to make. Rushkoff claims that since God is so abstract and

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unknowable, we must give God hands and arms and voices—we would maintain that Y’shua already did this and more. Again, you should examine his claims about himself and compare those claims to the records we have of him.

## CONCLUSION

In his rally against the fundamentalist absolutes, Rushkoff declares that nothing is sacred, which is itself an absolute. Somehow he doesn’t see his absolute as being uncertainty. But that aside, we must deal with the issues he raises, as he readily admits he comes to the table with more questions than answers.

Rushkoff is right; Jews have always been willing to question things. And it’s good to keep on questioning. This publication, for instance, wouldn’t exist were it not for Jews who went against the grain of tradition and those authority figures who told us we couldn’t believe in Jesus and still be Jews. We dissented from the majority of Jews and we have been dealt with more harshly than Rushkoff.

But ultimately we come back to the issue of authority. Are we endowed with godlike attributes that make us capable of rewriting our own narrative? Or could there be a force outside of us who does know us and care for us, and who wants to be known and loved? Is it just possible that he has reached out to us through the Messiah, just as he claimed he would?

Rushkoff calls for a renaissance, a dramatic leap into a new dimension of Jewish thought. Likewise those of us with a messianic Jewish perspective call on other Jews to dare to think that just maybe Jesus is the Messiah, that just maybe the New Testament is true. That just maybe God is telling Jews to follow Jesus. Rushkoff has given us license to do this by asking that we reconsider what is sacred. We have and we will. Perhaps this will require a hard look at the things we consider sacred, not to dismiss them outright, but to see what they really say to us.

After all, we’re just trying to start a conversation.

—*Naomi Rose Rothstein*



THUS SAITH

**I**n traditional Judaism, the portion of Scripture known as the New Testament is often condemned because it claims to be as authoritative as the Torah. Yet the rabbis also have a series of documents that were written many years after the Torah, most notably the Talmud, that are considered authoritative. Why is this?

According to traditional Orthodox Judaism, Moses was given two sets of laws on Mount Sinai. The written Torah consists of the five books of Moses. An accompanying “oral law,” it is claimed, was also given to be handed down to the leaders of Israel. This oral law is a series of arguments, opinions and commentaries that enabled each succeeding generation to interpret the law according to the needs of the current time. This way, say the rabbis, the law does not remain static and irrelevant.

The main need for an accompanying law is usually expressed like this: “God told us not to work on the Sabbath. But what exactly constitutes work? God certainly would not tell us to do something without explaining to us how to do it properly, would he? Therefore, an oral law is absolutely necessary.” Because of this argument, the rabbis have a seemingly endless number of volumes explaining every aspect of daily life.

One of the most remarkable things about the oral law is that it makes the rabbis not only the messengers of these new laws—but the creators of these laws as well. Orthodox Jews would say that this transference of power is all within God’s plan, as if God ordained this decision making process. One Orthodox rabbi explains:

In a sense, God has limited his right to intervene in the halachic process. He prefers orderly legal procedures to miracles and heavenly voices. Were supernatural phenomena allowed to influence the decision of halacha, the entire structure of torah

# THE LORD

IS THE ORAL LAW SACRED?

Like Douglas Rushkoff, we Jews who believe Jesus is the Messiah deem it acceptable to question things, even those things within Judaism that many hold to be sacred. One example of this is the Talmud.

study—the pillar upon which all of Judaism rests—would collapse. Remove the sages’ ability to interpret the law and you render the debates and dialogues of the Talmud meaningless. The sages’ right to determine the halacha must be independent of divine negation if Judaism is to be an ever-fresh and dynamic way of life. (Nathan T. Lopes Cardozo, *The Written and Oral Torah*, Jerusalem, 1989, Jason Aronson Inc., p. 76)

The question then, is similar to one raised in the main article: How do we get to be the ones to determine God’s involvement or lack thereof?

The first time the oral law appears in writing is in the Mishnah (which is the first part of the Talmud, written down around 200 C.E.). The Mishnah contains information which was previously available—perhaps for one or two hundred years. But is there any proof that these “laws” originated at Sinai? This claim is all-important. If the rabbis’ ability to comment and make rulings was not handed down at Sinai, then their authority is not God-given.

Similarly, non-Orthodox Jews should realize that their faith tradition is built upon a man-made system. It is this system that is often most adamantly and consistently against belief in Jesus as the Messiah. Many point to portions in the Talmud that speak against Jesus as evidence that Jesus isn’t who he claimed to be. But are these portions in the Talmud merely reactions by the rabbis of Jesus’ day, who summarily decided that Jesus threatened their authority?

For thousands of years, those thought to have had the most understanding of Judaism have looked to these extra-biblical writings for support. But questions remain regarding the authenticity (Sinai origin) of the oral law.



## How accurately was the oral law handed down?

Between the time Moses went up to Mount Sinai and the writing of the Mishnah there was a period of well over 1,000 years. During that time the Jewish people had quite a turbulent time of being in the land, being exiled from the land, facing assimilation, and frequently forgetting God’s law. And if the written law was so easily forgotten, how feasible is it that there was an oral tradition passed down without complications?



## Who told the rabbis to write down the oral law?

The rabbis give many reasons for the importance of the oral law remaining oral. For example, it should not fall into the wrong hands. But, if this was so important, what was the purpose of writing it down at all? The rabbis usually point to the conditions of the time, and most notably the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Some feared that Judaism would not survive without these laws being written down. But this time in history was not unique. The Temple had already been destroyed once before, and the Jewish people had faced even more harsh opponents than the Romans. So, what was the difference? If the oral law had truly survived the previous hardships—would not God continue to preserve it?



## Does the written Torah give any hint of an oral Torah?

The rabbis point to passages which suggest that God gave the children of Israel rules which were not mentioned in the written Torah (see Deuteronomy 12:21). But, at best, these passages make the argument that God communicated to them apart from the written law. These verses do not suggest that these laws came from Sinai, nor that traditions that would affect later questions in Judaism were being handed down at that time.

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While the canonized Hebrew Scriptures say little or nothing about an oral law, they do talk about a New Covenant that was to come. Jeremiah 31:31-33 says,

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

And the Scriptures also say quite a bit about the One who would come and have the God-given authority to

explain this New Covenant—the promised Messiah. The Messiah’s birth, life and death are all predicted in the Torah, Prophets and Writings, which have remained intact for millennia and have not been adjusted at the whims of scholars.

It’s not that the Talmud doesn’t have valuable teachings. But when the rabbis look to the writings of previous rabbis rather than Scripture to validate their own authority and negate the claims of Jesus, the oral law itself must be called into question. Our challenge to our readers is to examine the Scriptures themselves for answers about who the Messiah is. And it certainly wouldn’t hurt to inspect the New Testament record, which has also been unchanged for thousands of years, to see if Jesus was the One whom the prophets wrote about and what this New Covenant is all about.

—David Mishkin

