

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

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HAPPY 50th BIRTHDAY TO BARRY,

A *RARA AVIS*

Why are you a *rara avis*? Well, you've said you are one of those rare theologian birds who understands relativity theory, and an odd duck of Modern Orthodox Jewry. I'll let that be feathered enough for me.

First I must thank you again for the opportunity of familiarizing myself with your book, *Cassandra's Curse*. I've downprinted about a third of the essays, selecting titles from each category that particularly caught my fancy, and I am simply blown away by how smart you are. I know I shouldn't be (surprised, that is), but the premeditated written form lays it all out in such a new way. You write precisely because you are capable of thinking precisely -- a far less common skill than one might think (unless one was an editor, like me).

I found myself most taken up with the pieces on being Jewish (probably my most abiding preoccupation in general) and homo/sexuality (I guess sex must be pretty abiding too) and was interested in the way the two seem to intersect for you too (titling your piece on religious belief and practise "Cross Dressing" and likening the communal erasure of homosexuals to the Holocaust). But it seemed to me that the centerpiece of your book might well be "God Throws Dice," and the heart within that the sentences "What is actually going on we are unable to imagine" and "...a phenomenon that can be detected by instruments [made by humans] cannot be imagined by humans." What this means to me is not that God does or doesn't play dice with the universe, or that we should or shouldn't think either one, but rather that God is, in the most immense sense possible, not available to anthropomorphism.

You will notice I don't spell God with a hyphen. (I also don't use pronouns for God. We once had a wonderful female rabbi who was the first person I heard do that, and it sounded queer at first [a word I use advisedly]. By the time she left us I was extremely grateful for the exercise.) I also don't believe God wrote the Torah, though I hold in reserve comments on its inspiration (and the Prophets', for that matter). Since I tremble at the thought of disgusting you, I am gratified that I can legitimately say I am not Reform, agnostic or atheist. I'm not Reform because I was reared in it, which sufficed to demonstrate to me that I wasn't it. I'm not agnostic because I suspect this is a philosophical impossibility, and I'm not an atheist because that's an unbeliever for whom the existence of God is an issue. (They don't believe in God, but it *bothers* them.) I would find it easier to say I didn't believe in God if only I haven't always had the feeling that saying this is leaving something out. Now, thanks to your essay, for the first time I have an inkling of what that something might be: I don't know how to talk about believing in God because I don't know enough about what God is.

There are other issues on which we're not on the same page, namely psychology/psychoanalysis, which I don't not believe in. (My mother was a school psychologist, all the dead should rest in peace, including her.) But I haven't had your experiences *la-dedans*.

But how wonderful it was to read "Cross Dressing" -- how lucidly intelligent it is, how unsparingly (but unselfaggrandizingly) honest, how theologically clear-sighted, and how I recognized in its nuances all the distinctions I'd always wanted to make myself on the subject. (And how luxurious, to me, the utter banishment of sentimentality.) I loved your saying your rabbi eyed you warily, and I nodded my head off its hinges at "wishy-washy Chinese menu of principles," etc., etc.

I notice by the way that you refer to "the movement" in this piece. I assume from the context that must refer to Modern Orthodoxy. You make a similar reference in your essays on homosexuality and AIDS, and there I imagine you mean the Conservative movement, though it's not spelled out in either place and I found that a bit of a stumbling block. In the complete book, perhaps, it's clearer.

I somehow have the feeling I don't have to tell you that my perspective on these two issues is at one with yours, and that I found your writing on the subject as moving as it was apposite for that reason. I would question one thing, that you write as if you believe the Judaic objection to homosexuality is that it stymies procreation. It was something "the nations" did, for starters, but beyond that the Judaic tradition, while absolutely not the Christian one, in fact opposite to it on this matter, still has a major sex-negative streak, at least in its classical manifestation, and if even married heterosexuality comes in for stuff like the laws of *tumat niddah*, homosexuality must be something like sex squared.

You say that "the Torah puts the movement in a difficult and delicate bind" regarding homosexuality. I wonder if you're familiar with the work of Rabbi Herschel J. Matt of blessed memory on the subject. He was the acting director of Princeton Hillel in 1978 when he wrote "A Jewish Approach to Homosexuality" in *Judaism*. In it he proposed, invoking the involuntary nature of sexual orientation, that the homosexual be regarded as coming under the halakhic category of *me-ones*, one who sins through compulsion (and is therefore not considered a sinner in the conventional sense). It was a response that took the situation seriously in halakhic terms while proposing a remedy that directly addressed the objection raised by the modern sensibility. As such I loved it and could never understand why it didn't catch on like wildfire. Years later I actually read the article and saw how rooted it was in the pathologizing perspective on homosexuality. Even so, at that time it was cutting-edge.

Finally, I absolutely love the Angel of Death's patter song. I love light verse and consider the lines

Most souls i am fetching
Are aged and retching...
Or wretched and aging fast.

to be up there with the very heights of the genre. Also, that the Angel is not only the Executioner of God but God's Executive in keeping those alive who must not die (yet). And the Holy One, Blessed be He, slew the Angel of Death that lay in the house that Jack built.

Happy 50th Birthday, Barry! Your work demonstrates to me once again that perhaps intelligence, seriousness, morality and reality are all four faces of one and the same thing. May you have many golden returns of this golden day. Love, Carol