

An Unrecognizable Jewish Future: A Queer Talmudic Take

An ELI Talk by Rabbi Benay Lappe

On my first day of rabbinical school the president of the university was late to a reception for the new students. When he finally arrived, he apologized and said that just as he was leaving his office the phone rang. It was a friend of his, a prominent sociologist who was analyzing the statistics from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. The results hadn't yet come out, and the president wanted to know: *Well, what's it gonna show?!* His friend said: There's good news and bad news. The good news is that Judaism will exist in 100 years. The bad news is that it will be unrecognizable to us.

What I'd like to share with you today is why this one queer Jew doesn't think that an unrecognizable Judaism is particularly bad news.

I once heard my friend Rabbi Lisa Edwards teach her students something I'll never forget. She said: If donkeys read Torah, all the donkey stories would jump out at them! Every time they'd see a donkey, they'd say: Hey, there I *am!* That's *me!* They'd see all the donkey stories that we barely even notice.

When I began to learn Talmud, all of my *own* donkey stories started jumping out at me, and when I connected the dots, the tradition I discovered was smarter, more sophisticated, compassionate, bold, courageous, and radical than I ever could have imagined...and I fell in love with it. Now, for the first time in history, queer Jews are learning Talmud, *as queer Jews*, and we're seeing in it things that our teachers never taught us.

What I think I've figured out is that we all share the same basic, big questions of life—Why am I here? What is my purpose? How should I live my life?—and that every culture, every tradition, every religion comes into being for one and only one reason: to answer those basic human questions. And it does so by means of a master story.

If you're Jewish, that master story is called Torah. And if it's successful, that story can last a really long time.

But... *every* story...will ultimately and inevitably, CRASH.

You'll find a more compelling story whose answers you like better, some event may cause your story's answers to no longer be workable, or something inside of you has shifted, *you've* changed, and those old answers just don't seem *true* any more.

Now you have to figure out *who* you are, *what* you believe, and how you're gonna live your life.

There are three and only three possible responses to any crash. Ever.

Option 1: You can deny the crash and revert to your master story and take refuge there. You'll inevitably build a wall around that story to shore it up and make sure nothing threatening gets in. You'll get to keep all your goodies, but it'll come at a price.

Or, Option 2: You *accept* the crash and completely reject your master story, and jump off into a new story. This is a baby-with-the-bathwater kind of thing, and, remember, every story will ultimately and inevitably crash, and this story, too, will crash, and then you'll have to jump off into another story, and yet another, and on and on.

Most people are gonna go Option 1 or Option 2 after a crash. That's just what most people do. If you look carefully, you'll see that Option 1 and Option 2 are actually opposite sides of the same coin—they share the same wrong-headed underlying premise that most people believe—the *myth* that master stories are fixed, eternal, unchanging, and immutable.

But stories DO crash. It's not bad news. And it's not an *unfortunate* fact of life. It **IS** life. It's how life nudges us forward! And so, there's a third option, and that's *good news*.

The biggest crash in Jewish history, or at least the one we know the most about, was the Destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Let's crank back one year, to 69 CE, and look at how these options played out. **Who was going option 1 back then?** Hint: If you're employed by your master story—if you earn your living from it—you're going to be an Option 1 person. And so, of course, it was the priests who were going Option 1. They were the ones who couldn't imagine any other way to be a human being, and were willing to do anything—even fight to the death—to preserve their way of being Jewish.

OK, who was going Option 2? Historical records tell us that about 90% of the Jewish people went Option 2 in the years after the destruction. They left Judaism completely, and melted into the Roman Empire. It was over. *Everybody* knew that.

Except for one small group of queer, fringy, outsider, hippie guys —no more than are in this room right now—who had a *different* idea. They went Option 3. They accepted and embraced the crash, took the elements that still worked from the old master story, and created a new, radically different, Judaism—one that would have been unrecognizable to a biblical Jew. If you're Jewish today, it's because your great great great great great grandparents were some of the 10% who *got* what these *Rabbi guys* were up to and said: *I* see what you're doin'...this doesn't feel very Jewish to me...but it will to my grandchildren, so I'm with you.

And it's important to realize that these queer, fringy, marginalized hippie guys, whom we now call the Rabbis, were already developing this radical new Judaism **while the Temple still stood**. They were gathering in little retreat centers called synagogues even when they could've gone to the Temple down the street. Much of Temple Judaism just didn't work for them any more. It had *long since* crashed for them even while the Temple was still standing.

That Option 3 that became Rabbinic Judaism was *only one of many* Option 3 Judaisms that eventually sprang up. And in a time of crash, that's exactly what you want. You want as many Option 3's as possible, because you don't know which ones are gonna make it.

The Rabbis knew that crashes would continue to happen, so they built into their new Judaism a methodology for responding to crashes. And they said that the only two requirements a person

would need to be a *talmid chacham*, a crash-responder, a leader, a *player* in the Jewish system, *did not* include ordination or the title rabbi at all, but were simply to be *gamirna* and *savirna*: *gamirna*, being learned/learning, and *savirna*, to possess *svara*. *Svara* literally means “reason,” but the Rabbis expanded its scope from mere logical deduction to deep insight—one’s moral intuition: What you know in your kishkes to be true as long you are steeped in the texts, the values and principles of the Tradition. And they elevated *svara* to the level of Torah. They said that *svara* was *d’oraita*--straight from God, and could even trump Torah if the two conflicted. Kinda scary, right? That’s why you’ve never been taught it. Because ideas like this that have the power to make radical change possible tend to be suppressed during times of crash, precisely when we need them most! But the Rabbis recorded all of this, for us, in a how-to manual for future players. And we call that manual...the Talmud.

I’d like to learn a little Talmud with you now. You game? OK, put on your seatbelts. It’s Ketubot 2b. It’s a story of a woman whose husband has gone off on a long journey. Knowing that these kinds of journeys were very dangerous, and fearing that he might go missing and never return, her husband has given her a conditional get, a divorce document that will go into effect if he doesn’t return in, say, 30 days—some length of time much longer than he expects to be away. Why does her husband do this? Because he loves her and he knows that if he should go missing and never return, without such a document, she would become an *agunah*, a woman *forever chained* to a husband who is no longer present, and whose death can’t be confirmed. According to Jewish law, such a woman can never remarry, or have children in the future.

Well, the 30 days passed, and the woman’s husband did not return. The condition to the get—his failure to return within 30 days—has been met and the get in her hand has gone into effect—she’s now officially divorced. But what is she going to *do* now?

Rava, a 4th century rabbi, knows that she’s likely to say to herself “Oh, something must have happened. He must have been detained against his will. But he loves me; he’ll eventually come back, I know he will.” And she’ll wait—because she *correctly knows* that if someone is forced to do something they don’t want to do, or is prevented from doing something they do want to do, the Torah gives them a get out of jail free card. Any consequence of force majeure, duress, or, in Hebrew, *oness*, can be undone or excused. And so, she knows that if her husband has been detained against his will, the Torah allows him to rip up the get once he finally makes it home. That’s his God-given right. Says so in the Torah.

But if her husband has decided *not* to return for whatever reason—maybe to run off with another woman—though she has a valid get in her hand and is legally free to remarry, Rava knows that this woman *will continue to believe that her husband is coming back*, and will sit and wait, and wait, *forever*, and will make *herself* an *agunah*.

Rava’s heart breaks for this woman. He sees that this piece of Torah is causing her enormous suffering, and he does something about it. He does what you and I have been told can’t be done, and overturns Torah: Ein Oness B’Gittin! he declares. From this point forward, no husband will have the right to claim *oness*—Hey, undo this because I didn’t mean for it to happen—in matters related to divorces. And now, knowing that her husband will never be *able* to come back and say, “I was delayed against my will. I can rip up the get now,” no woman with a get like this in her

hand will ever wait for the rest of her life *in vain* for a deserting husband to return. And though, in the eyes of the Torah, if a husband did this his wife would be revert to being legally married to him, Rava says no, and declares her to be a divorced woman, and free to remarry.

When the Talmud asks, on what authority did Rava do such a thing, Rava declares that his authority, his source, is not some verse in the Torah, not some legal precedent he can stand on...but *svara*, his own moral intuition. His empathy for this woman has crashed his Torah. And his love of Torah compels him to make that Torah better.

The narrator then comes in, and in his best straw man voice, says to Rava: Do you mean to tell me that *merely on account of these women*, you're going to abrogate Torah?! Rava responds with a single Aramaic word: *Een*. Yes. Or, as some Talmudic dictionaries define it: Yes, indeed!

Now, some people might read this as a story about *agunot* or a particular woman in a particular situation. But for me, it's a donkey story. One of thousands just like it. I see myself in this story. I see a woman being made to suffer at the hands of the verse-pointers who say: But it clearly says right here in this Torah...! I know what that's like. And I see the courage of a man who stands up and declares simply: I'm doing this because my *svara* tells me so.

Just as the life experience of this woman crashed Rava's torah, the life experience of so many of us is crashing our Torah. The donkeys in this story are *not only queer Jews* but every Jew pushed away from the Tradition for one reason or another.

We are at the tail end of another CRASH today, and, like it or not, we're going to have an Option 3 Jewish future that will be unrecognizable to most of us. And it will be created, just like before, by the queer, fringy, disenfranchised outsiders of today.

Every one of you, right now, is somewhere on that map. You're either going Option 1, Option 2, or Option 3. Option 3-ers, you are the future! Hang onto your queerness. Own your outsidersness. That's precisely where your *svara* comes from. Most of your fellow Jews are not going to come along. That's just the way it works. And what you create will only *partially* work even for *you*. But in time, it'll get better and thicker. And it might just work for your grandchildren.

We don't have to wait for a Rava to stand up and do for us what he did for the woman in our story, because now we know that if we get gamirna and savirna: if we start learning, and refining our *svara*—then we are no longer that woman. We are Rava.....THANK YOU!