

The win is in the counter

Let me first say something extremely basic, although that probably is not necessary with this audience. But maybe it is. To talk here about Judaism, Christianity, Islam as if they are similar entities, is right away creating a distortion. Of course one can talk about Judaism as a religion, but to some extent one can say: that is hardly what it is. There are some fundamental differences. For instance, Judaism is hardly functioning as a faith, like Christianity or Islam. You don't believe in God? Fine. You don't stop being a Jew. For most Jews the religion as religion is not the defining factor in their identity. How come? Because Judaism is a civilization, like the Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Chinese are civilizations. And it is the civilization of a tribe. A tribe that was concentrated in a specific territory, became scattered on around the globe, but is still focussed on that same territory; it is a tribe, which assimilated an enormous amount of non-tribesmen and women into the tribe, but still is confined to a limited number of people, and it will always be like that. It is not a race, it is not an ethnicity, it is a tribe, or to use another word: a people. Judaism is the culture of this people. As a tribe we have our own ways of eating - what we eat, what we don't eat, we have our own ways of dealing sex/marriage/divorce/children, when we have sex, when we don't have sex, with whom we have sex, and who is forbidden; we have our own ways of dealing with work/time, when we work, when we don't work, we have rules and disputations about what is considered work and what not. And then as a tribe, as a people we have our history, philosophies (plural), literature, art, dress codes, educational culture, etc. etc. all not necessarily 'religious'. Yes, a great deal of what is called 'superstructure' in Marxist theory, was created and formulated by the rabbis. But the rabbis are essentially judges, they are not priests. And the relationship, the reference towards judges is rather different than to priests. So, yes, the rabbis formulated the culture, structured the culture, the civilization, but they were far from alone in doing that. Plus, there is no institutional hierarchy of rabbinical authority. Yes, the rabbis had power, but at the same time it was limited, seen from a broader perspective. And one factor in that broader perspective was the fact that Jews were, till 1948, always a minority, most of the time a small minority.

Later in my talk I will choose a woman out of the religious tradition. But to stress the point that Judaism is a civilization, I want to answer the first question posed to me by the organisation: which woman in your tradition inspires you the most? with Erin Brokovich. Anybody saw the movie by that name? Erin Brokovich is a American-Jewish woman, she is still alive, high heels, boobs, short skirts when she started out as a single mother

working for a law firm, and defending over hundred people who were sick, and some of them dying, because of pollution by a chemical plant. She fought for the truth, she fought for justice, she fought compensation, she created solidarity and community and support. And she won. The damaged people got hundreds of millions as compensation. She won and did that with her mind, her stamina, her chutzpah - a mixture of courage, lack of respect for authorities, fast thinking, humor. Do you have to be Jewish to fight for the truth? Of course not. Anybody can do that. Do you have to be Jewish to fight for justice. Of course not. Anybody can do that. Do you have to be Jewish to create solidarity among victims? Of course not. Anybody can do that. Do you have to be Jewish to win a legal fight? Of course not. But there is something Jewish to do it as a modern day Sophie Tucker and do it dressed as a sex bomb, and don't give a damn what other people think about that. There is something Jewish to not be intimidated by authorities and to reveal the extent to which people are posing as authorities and are just bluffing.

There are scores of Jewish women who are outstanding or standing out in what they fight for. Helen Suzman fighting against Apartheid. Betty Friedan fighting for feminism. Rosa Luxemburg. Aletta Jacobs. On and on and on. Philosophers like Hannah Arendt, essayists like Susan Sontag or Simone Weil or Renate Rubinstein. Again, on and on and on. But just like the men - Einstein, Kafka, Stieglitz, Feynman - they are not religious Jews. They hardly came or come into the synagogue, and if at all, probably at the bar mitzwa of the kid of somebody else. The Jewish people is massively secularised, a process that started 200 years ago, speeded up in the beginning of the 20th century, and the way most Jews define themselves is as 'non-religious'. Yet, these great figures in politics, literature, music, medicine, physics, economics, etc. are the product of this Jewish civilization.

Going back to Erin Brokovich - she is not a religious Jew. It would not surprise me if she hardly knows anything about religious Judaism. Yet, she inspires me because of the high heels, because of the boobs hanging out, because of the short skirts. I truly believe that there is no power for women unless they have power over their sexuality, that is to say the power to say: I am a woman, and I am deciding - and nobody else - how I am going to live out my sexuality. And I also staunchly defend the position that this autonomy, based in sexual autonomy, is built in Judaism through the role models given in Tanach, Old Testament. Really. Yes, really. Of course you will immediately say: but how about all the laws in Tanach about sexuality: no sex during menstruation, the stoning of adulteress women, etc. etc. Admitted, there are some pretty difficult statements and laws given. But, if one really looks at the female figures, the pictures become quite different. And I take this from David Biale, who wrote a phantastic book about Eros and the Jews, the title of one of

his books. Practically all the important female personae in Tanach employ their sexuality in a subversive way. They do things that are not done, or forbidden, or go completely against the grain of society but they come out as the winners.

Sara - twice she almost (or maybe really) ends up in the bed of a foreign king. Strange.

Ruth - great grandmother of king David and arch mother of the messiah - almost sleeps with (or maybe she did) with Boaz, although she was an agoena, a bound women, and not released yet by marriage to him.

Esther - her sexuality is used in a Machiavellistic way, by marrying her out to the king for political purposes.

Lea and Rachel - a pretty upsetting story in terms of sexuality, a story of deceit, of competition.

There are more stories and more figures, but the boldest is Tamar, my name sake.

The story is known. She is married to Er, the oldest son of Jehuda, one of the chiefs of a tribe. Er invokes the anger of the Eternal One and is killed by the Eternal One. Then Tamar, according to custom, is married to Onan, Ers brother. But Onan too invokes the anger of the Eternal One and is killed. Why, Onan has the duty to make children, in name of his dead brother, but he sleeps with Tamar but does not inpregnate her, he spills his seed. Jehuda, the father, thinks of Tamar as the cause of the death of his sons. In stead of marrying her to his third and last son, he sends her back to her father's home. There she stays for 18 eighteen years. All the time hoping to be called back to be married to Sela and finally be a mother. But she is not called back to the house of Jehuda and her biological clock is ticking away. And then she acts. And she does something that is completely, completely unthinkable. She acts and totally puts her own life - nobody else's life - at stake. When she hears that Jehuda will travel down south, she too travels down south, dresses up as a prostitute, sits by the side of the road, he sleeps with her, and she gets pregnant. How does she dress up like a prostitute? She veils herself, basically she dresses in a sort of burka. Veils are the attribute of the prostitute - I wonder how many people really understand this. Anyway, she veils herself, make herself unrecognizable, even in sex, and does get pregnant. She knows she will stoned as a adulterous woman once the society finds out, so she puts all her thinking in strategy. She asks Jehuda for all his signs of power as a collateral, a guarantee, that he will pay later. She asks for his girdle, where in that time they would put that weapan, a knife, she asks for his ring, also a sign of power and she asks for his staf, the ultimate sign of authority. When finally she is found to be pregnant and Jehuda orders the tribes people to bring her out of her house and stone her, she appears for him, in his function of judge. And there something incredible happens. She is so smart, she does not tell him blunt and directly that he is the

father, she confronts him with his girdle, his ring and his staff and says that these belong to the father of her child. Basically, she gives Jehuda the space to act as he wishes. It is her own life that she endangers, and yet she is so powerful that she creates the emotional and mental space for him to consider how he has treated her and the wrong he has done her. That is already incredible. After eighteen years of being wronged, she does not resort to bitterness, to hatred, to spite, to any negative feelings - we don't see any of that - she keeps using her mind, she keeps the vision of her destiny, she keeps the vision of the future of the people and she acts in a pro creative way.

And then another incredible thing happens, he, Jehuda, chooses consciousness, he chooses responsibility, he does not put the blame on her for what has happened, he does not take the road of millions and millions of men and reject her, reject reality, reject the truth, reject the confrontation with their own involvement, but he accepts the confrontation, accepts the responsibility. He acknowledges her as the one being righteous. Tsedek keTamar, righteous as Tamar, we sing every week or more often in the synagogue. The children are born, because of Tamar the Jewish people exist. Of all the twelve tribes of only the tribe of Jehuda survives in history (together with the tiny tribe of Benjamin). As a Jew, a Jehudi in Hebrew, I bear the name of Jehuda, and it makes me extremely proud to bear this name. Jehuda could just as well have her stoned anyway, their relationship was forbidden, but he did not. He chose to be a man of justice.

Why chose Tamar as my source of inspiration? I don't have children, I will not have grandchildren, it is not through me that the Jewish people will survive. Or mankind as such. No procreation for me, however sad I am about that. But I would never have achieved what I have achieved if not for the sexual freedom I have enjoyed throughout my life. This freedom gave me the chance to work through neuroticism, this freedom gave me the chance to investigate different place, different cultures, it even gave me the freedom to develop spiritually. The non-development of women - lack of education, lack of societal roles, lack of creative roles in art and literature, even lack of economic development - are all tied up with the lack of freedom in sexuality. The non-development of women is tied up with men not taking responsibility for their own sexual impulses and desires and mores, or to say it differently, with men not behaving like Jehuda.

Of course Judaism has its fundamentalists. Part of the Jewish people, about 5 to 8 percent, is ultra-orthodox. The education of the ^یwomen is lower than the education of the rest of the Jewish women, who have a very high education. An enormous number of ultra-orthodox are living in poverty, with the women bringing in the money, because they work and their husbands don't. That is not the case for the non-ultra-orthodox. These women

have eight to twelve children, sometimes even more. Everybody knows that this shortens their life-span. Everybody? The ones who care about scientific research.

Does this mean that everything about the ultra-orthodox life style is suppressive for women. No. There is a strange mix of suppression and high esteem. There is a strange mix of a lack of freedom and loving relationships. Reality is never simple.

Does it mean that Judaism, except for the ultra-orthodox, is only positive for women. No. It has its rabbis and thinkers who are fobic about women, men who say that women are the source of all evil. We do have our traditions that are negative for women. But on the whole, I would like to defend my civilization as pretty good with regard to women. Not good, but pretty good. Thanks, also, to all the subversive and outspoken women in Tanach. Chawa/ Eve, Dewora, the general/judge, the daughters of Tslofchad who made sure that women were inheriting, thanks to the woman in the Song of Songs who expresses her erotic love, thanks to Channa who is the first to pray, thanks to Mirjam who saves her brother, thanks to Rachab, a prostitute. Women are not silenced in Tanach, on the contrary.

But they are silenced in Jewish tradition, isn't it? Yes. For the last 2000 years, they are not the authority figures, they are not rabbis, not judges. They are not the ones making decisions about the way of life. With the transition from Temple Judaism to synagogue Judaism, each individual man started being counted, the women were not. They were relegated to the back seat. In religious terms. But less so in societal terms. Because the other focus of Jewish life became the household and the family meal on Friday night and the family time of every seventh day of the week. Somehow there was a balance between the men being counted in synagogue and the women being valued as a crucial figure in the social life of the family, that is social life as such.

I don't think it is by chance that Jewish women are everywhere. Literate, well educated, free to go where they want, they are in all the institutions, on every level. And since 1972 also as rabbis and cantors. Not yet in the orthodox world, but interestingly, something big is chancing there as well. There are quite a number of orthodox women who are trained as advisors to the orthodox rabbinical courts. They have a vast knowledge, they are really functioning on a high level. At least two orthodox women are publicly recognised by their teachers as rabbis. Their teachers have given them the rabbinical authority. There must be more, who do not come out in public. This is a real revolution. It will take another century to really get in impact, but that impact will come.

But is this really important for the bigger picture. I doubt it. That is why I started by presenting Judaism as a civilization, not necessarily as a religion. For 80 percent of Jews religion is hardly relevant, even if they circumsize their sons, even if they are buried in Jewish cemeteries, and a lot of ceremonies that are in between. The overwhelming amount of Jews live a secular life. For most of them Israel and/or the Holocaust and the family history that is tied up with Israel and Holocaust are the defining factors in their identity. That is what makes them tick, not what a male or a female rabbi might want to tell or teach them. It is in secular life where Jewish civilization shows its power, whether it is through Woody Allen, Steven Spielberg, Elie Wiesel, Irme Kertesz, Pearl Abraham or Rita Levi-Montalcini, the Noble prize winner.

This brings me to the other two questions. How do I play my role of authority and how do other women around me do it, and when do I consider inter-religious dialogue as a success.