



Jewish Studies Initiative  
of North Texas

Faiths in Conversation  
Divine Authority and Personal Conscience  
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Handout to Accompany Oral Presentation

**Source 1)** Hebrew Bible, The Torah, Book of Genesis, chapter 22, verses 1 – 19  
Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac teaches obedience to God at all costs

**Source 2)** Hebrew Bible, The Torah, Book of Leviticus, chapter 25, verses 42 and 55  
The Israelites are God's servants/slaves

**Source 3)** Hebrew Bible, The Torah, Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 17, verses 8 – 12  
The obligation to accept rabbinic authority to interpret the law

**Concept A)** Nullification of individual autonomy  
Practiced by Jews that call themselves Haradim / Ultra Orthodox.

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**Source 4)** Hebrew Bible, The Torah, Book of Genesis, chapter 18, verses 17 – 33  
God challenges Abraham to speak his mind about justice and mercy, and Abraham does so and prevails upon God to see a new perspective

**Source 5)** Hebrew Bible, The Torah, Book of Exodus, chapter 32, verses 1 – 14  
Moses successfully argues against God's plan to destroy the Israelites

**Source 6)** Hebrew Bible, The Torah, Book of Numbers, chapter 14, verses 11 - 20  
Again Moses successfully argues against God's plan to destroy the Israelites

**Source 7)** Hebrew Bible, The Torah, Book of Leviticus  
Aaron the High Priest makes a moral judgment that given the extenuating circumstances of the death of two of his sons, God would not require what He originally commanded

**Source 8)** Hebrew Bible, The Torah, Book of Numbers, chapter 9, verses 1 – 14

Some Israelites protest against the unfairness of the law of the Paschal Lamb that leaves them out. They bring their case to Moses who brings it to God, who amends the law

**Source 9)** Hebrew Bible, The Torah, Book of Numbers, chapter 27, verses 1 – 11  
The daughters of Tzelophchad protest that the divinely promulgated law will deny them an inheritance in the Land of Israel. They come before Moshe who presents their case to God, who amends the law accordingly

**Concept B)** Moral engagement and activism and not mere acceptance of authority

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**Source 10)** Midrash Genesis Rabbah – Genesis, chapter XXX, section 10  
NOAH WALKED WITH GOD. R. Judah said: This may be compared to a king who had two sons, one grown up and the other a child. To the child he said, 'Walk with me,' but to the adult, 'Walk before me.' Similarly, to Abraham, whose [moral] strength was great, [He said,] 'Walk thou before Me' (Gen. XVII, 1); of Noah, whose strength was feeble [it says], NOAH WALKED WITH GOD. R. Nehemiah said: He might be compared to a king's friend who was plunging about in dark alleys, and when the king looked out and saw him sinking [in the mud], he said to him, 'Instead of plunging about in dark alleys, come and walk with me.' But Abraham's case is rather to be compared to that of a king who was sinking in dark alleys, and when his friend saw him he shone a light for him through the window. Said he to him, 'Instead of lighting me through the window, come and show a light before me.' Even so did the Holy One, blessed be He, say to Abraham: 'Instead of showing a light for Me from Mesopotamia and its environs, come and show one before Me in Eretz Israel.'

In this context see also Zohar Hadash, Midrash Ne'elam, Parshat Noah

**Concept C)** Powerful metaphor that beautifully describes the human divine relationship at its best – the relationship of grown, mature children to their wise parent. We love our parent, we honor our parent, but also – within the parameters of the raw materials that are parents have passed on to us – we think for ourselves.

**Concept D)** Another, parallel metaphor is that of partnership. Our sages tell us that just as the opening chapter of Genesis places upon us the imperative to join with God and become co-creators of the natural world, so are we to be co-creators in the moral and religious realm. God brought the physical world into being and told us to fill it and conquer it, creatively constructing a better reality from its natural resources. The same is true of the values according to which we live our lives. God's Torah sets the parameters and provides the raw materials, but it is up to us to take those values and apply them according to the exigencies of the time, the place and the person

In this context see also Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menachot, page 29b and Midrash Eliahu Zuta 2

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**Concept E)** Creative study; rabbinic application to the existing law of new insights that result from creative study; interaction of the simple Jew with a insight or an issue with his rabbi.

In practical day-to-day life much of Judaism is about obedience to a holy regimen. But this is not about submission to a fossilized and unresponsive tradition, but to a tradition that is constantly being renewed by a dialogue between its ancient sources and its modern discoveries, a tradition that the individual Jew himself, through his studies and through the issues he brings before his rabbis, has a role in developing.

**Concept F)** Every Jew is encouraged to find his own letter in the Torah, and to chose one particular commandment that he devotes special energy and thought to.

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**Source 11)** Rav Mordechai Leiner of Izbitch, Mei haShiloach, volume I, pages 46 – 47, 96, 159 – 160, 170-171

**Source 12)** Rabbi Abraham Issac haCohen Kook, Shemonah Kevatzim part 2, section 30 / Arpelai Tohar

A certain times there may be a need for the transgression of laws of the Torah, but there is no one in the generation who is able to show the way, so the matter comes about by way of the breaking down of boundaries. It is better if this happens unintentionally... At a time when prophecy is extent among the Jewish People, it would be possible to deal with the matter through a temporary prophetic ruling, and then it would be done through a normal channel and a clear commandment. But when the light of prophecy has been blocked, the improvement is accomplished by way of breaking, that in itself saddens the heart but as far as its purpose its brings great joy.