

REVIEW

Brad Hirschfield

*You Don't Have To Wrong For Me To Be Right:
Finding Faith Without Fanaticism*

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"Fanatic orthodoxy," wrote Reinhold Niebuhr, "is never rooted in faith but in doubt; it is when we are not sure that we are doubly sure." In this book, *You Don't Have To Wrong For Me To Be Right: Finding Faith Without Fanaticism*, prominent American rabbi Brad Hirschfield reflects on these profound words, arguing persuasively that mature faith does not entail surety or absoluteness, but rather abides in mystery, in being unsure. This is, in Hirschfield's analysis, best captured in the story of Abraham, who left behind the security of home in his search for what God called the Promised Land. "Abraham's journey was one of wandering," Hirschfield writes, "of not knowing, of discovering. He had nothing except faith – indelible, extraordinary faith" (p. 18).

This observation sets the tone for the entire book, which frames the "authentic" religious path as one that both acknowledges and embraces the mystery of existence, the limitations of human perception, and the ultimately ineffable nature of God. To be sure, Hirschfield's style is more motivational than academic, more personal than theoretical, and more pastoral than analytical. Part memoir and part personal philosophy, this "light" read may disappoint some readers expecting an exposition on the historical dangers and failures of religious fanaticism. But, this is not necessarily a weakness of the book. On the contrary, it is Hirschfield's candid, conversational tone that makes this a compelling read, especially when he addresses particular areas in which he disagrees with his more dogmatic orthodox Jewish brethren (see, for instance, his measured acceptance of intermarriage, pp. 114-15).

Hirschfield's targeted audience is broad: students, scholars, religious leaders and laity, and anyone else seeking (or at least open to) a lucid and practical argument for cultivating dialogue between people of different faiths. In ten breezy chapters – with clever titles like "Mosquechurchagogue" and "Adam and Eve Weren't the Cosbys" – Hirschfield charts the evolution of his own religious views (referencing scholars like Neusner, Wuthnow, Heschel, and Cox), all the while suggesting that interfaith understanding must begin with a Buberian, "I-Thou" approach.

Importantly, Hirschfield's views did not come to him overnight. In the 1980s, he left his upscale, liberal Jewish home for the West Bank, where he joined a radical group of Jewish settlers seeking to restore Israel to within its biblical borders. A gun-wielding, fiery youth driven by self-righteousness and intolerance for opposing views, Hirschfield eventually recognized that he embodied all that is wrong with "being right." As he describes it, "First you exclude everyone who isn't a member of your religion or nation. Then it's everyone in your nation or religion who doesn't agree with you. And then it's everyone who only 'sort of' agrees with you. And pretty soon it's down to you and me, and frankly I have my doubts about you" (p. 139).

Hirschfield was later ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and currently serves as president of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL), a pluralistic organization that works toward Jewish unity, while respecting differing ideologies and approaches. At CLAL, Hirschfield has found a place where he can maintain his orthodox lifestyle and the spirituality he felt in Israel, while at the same time embracing an attitude of inclusion and openness, far removed from his fanatic past.

Hirschfield has likewise applied the ideals of inclusiveness, diversity, and mutual respect to his interfaith work. "I have tried to help people discover that no one is ever one hundred percent right or one hundred percent wrong," he writes. "I have wanted to nurture our ability to make deep communities while remaining open to new ideas and new experiences" (p. 11). Focusing on Isaiah's prophecy, "My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isa. 56:7), Hirschfield envisions a future in which all points of view are respected, and all distinctions are tolerated. In such a world, he insists, "We won't need to check any part of who we are at the door in order to get in, whether we're 'born again' Christian, Hindu, Shiite, Sunni, Republican, or Democrat" (p. 134).

Particularly in this age of increasing ideological polarization, religious and otherwise, it is important to recognize that the more certain we are about what is right, the less we acknowledge that what is right for us is not always right for others. This humbled evaluation of our own convictions echoes that of Rabbi Ben Zoma, who defined the wise person as one who learns from everybody, including those with differing opinions and convictions (*Pirkei Avot* 4:1). It is, perhaps, naïve to think that this "enlightened" view will permeate the minds of religious fanatics worldwide or pave the way for peace and harmony of global proportions. Nevertheless, this worthwhile book gives ample hope that such a goal can indeed be attained on a more modest scale, between individuals and among communities.