



## Interpreting Judaism to Promote Understanding and Social Peace

Rabbi Silvina Chemen (Argentina)

Presented to the G20 Religion Forum (R20)  
Bali, Indonesia, 2 – 3 November 2022

*Silvina Chemen is rabbi of the Jewish community “Bet-El” of Buenos Aires, the largest Masorti (Conservative) congregation in Latin America. She has a degree in Hebrew language from the Hebrew college, Michlelet Shazar, a second degree in social communication from Buenos Aires University and was ordained as a rabbi in 2006 at the rabbinical school for Latin America, Seminario Rabinico. An author, religious leader, and human rights activist, Rabbi Chemen has delivered courses and lectures throughout the world and developed educational projects on human rights, culture, and social care resilience across Argentina.*

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to Mr. Holland Taylor, who believed that my voice should be heard at this distinguished gathering, and to Dr. Timothy Shah and Nahdlatul Ulama for taking such loving care to make this possible! It truly is an honor and a privilege to address all of you gathered here today.

My name is Silvina Chemen, and I am a rabbi of the “Beth El” congregation of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The tradition I belong to is called “Masorti,” a pluralistic, egalitarian, and democratic movement among the Jewish People. I am a pacifist and a human rights activist.

As you can see, I am a woman rabbi, a minority in the male-dominated rabbinical world. I represent the largest Masorti congregation in Latin America, who live in Argentina, which is not a strong country. My voice is that of the common people, who are, in fact, those most reliant upon our traditions to improve and defend their lives. So, let me also thank you for giving a space to the people that need us to be united and strong, that need us to provide answers to the despair that surrounds us.

I am deeply moved by the realization that the R20 is being held prior to the G20 Summit, because I understand that religions have much to offer humanity beyond worship and activities within our temples, mosques, and sanctuaries. Our sacred sources, the teachings of our ancestors, and our faiths call upon us to seek peace and justice, to build ties of solidarity, to reinforce hope in a humanity where each and every human being can see himself as the guarantor of the life of his fellow without distinction. New conflicts between people, ethnicities, or religious expressions challenge us to read our sacred texts and find within them the seed for dialogue and peace with our neighbors.

And here we are, gathered in the hope that the speeches heard in this forum will shed light on decisions made by the rulers of the world’s most powerful nations. Let us not forget, decisions



can be transformed into opportunities for a better life, for human rights, for a just economy, and for peaceful coexistence in our wounded and battered world.

Rabbi Allan Brill and I have the responsibility to present in this plenary session, and ask: "What values do our respective traditions need to relinquish, to ensure that religion functions as a source of genuine solutions, and not problems, in the 21st century?" Rabbi Brill has already deepened our exploration of this question by introducing us to an emblematic document titled "The Status of Non-Jews in Jewish Law and Lore Today." This remarkable document is endowed with rabbinic legal authority, and it stands in stark opposition to another document called *Torat Hamelech*, or *The King's Law*. *Torat Hamelech* was written by extremist rabbis, and it abuses Jewish sources to justify the commission of murder. Indeed, it is a manual on how Jewish law can be used to justify hatred and violence. Unfortunately, *Torat Hamelech* has been endorsed by some rabbinical authorities.

I am here to share with you a peculiarity of the Jewish tradition that can help us think about all of our religious traditions. This peculiarity is called *Teshuvah* — a response, a reaction to a religious edict, a document that answers another document. Because "The Status of Non-Jews in Jewish Law and Lore Today" is a *Teshuvah* to *Torat Hamelech* that finds justifications within the Jewish sources that forbid us from harming any person, and instead advocate brotherhood and coexistence.

It is my privilege to share with you the Jewish path of interpretation, so that you may understand how it is possible for a rabbinical statement to be confronted and contradicted, shedding light on sources that promote understanding and social peace, rather than hatred and violence.

I want to talk to you about the Jewish tradition as an interpretative tradition, a living tradition that — as critical perspectives of social reality change — can and should revisit its fundamental texts to find answers that strengthen and solidify the most noble ethical purposes.

Judaism is a tradition that precedes modernity. It is a challenge, therefore, to read our tradition in light of the unique realities lived at each time and in each place.

Since God's revelation of the *Torah* — also known as the *Pentateuch* — we are summoned to read and reread, examine, and reexamine His words, because divine truth is not fossilized in a historical era, but rather requires us to listen again to the voice of heaven in the face of each dilemma that life throws at us.

The sacred encourages us to continue questioning ourselves, so that the divine voice may manifest according to the circumstances of each time and place.

Let me share with you one of the teachings that inspires this path of reinterpretation and recontextualization of the sources.

It is written in the *Torah*:

"These are the statutes, ordinances, and laws that the Lord established between Himself and the Israelites through Moses on Mount Sinai." Leviticus 26:46

It is clear. The Bible is a compendium of laws and ordinances... but the word in Hebrew for "laws" is "*Torot*"- the plural of the word "*Torah*". How is this possible? Didn't God give a single *Torah*, a single revealed text?

Our Masters noticed this dilemma and explained its significance in an exegetical text called a *Midrash*: They said that at Mount Sinai two *Torot* were given, two sacred laws: one written and the other oral.

And they continued asking: "What is the Oral *Torah*, the Oral Law?" The answer they found was: "All the updates and interpretations that all generations until the end of time will make to the text."

This is especially important. Every interpretation for every period was revealed on the day the Law was given, and every word must be inscribed sacredly in its historical time.

From the very beginning, our tradition has understood that the Torah was written by God for all Jews and for all times.

This is how the first great Jewish interpretative document — the *Talmud* — was created. The *Talmud* is a compilation of centuries and centuries of oral traditions, of rabbinical schools that discussed and found new insights revealed by the existential questions posed in each time and place where Jewish communities settled in exile.

From God's revelation of the *Torah* until today, the Jewish tradition in its various expressions continues to create new literature based upon the new interpretations required to remain faithful to the spirit of the law, so that the ancient teachings maintain their original vitality and relevance to every time and place.

Studying the sacred texts over and over again implies a continuous revelation of the *Torah's* teachings. It requires us to comply with the law, but it also forces us to question ourselves if, as we understand it, we are pursuing the law's true purposes. The text becomes alive and current, it speaks to us and moves us forward toward the harmonious world all of us yearn for.

Already in the first century, there were two interpretative schools that claimed sole ownership of the truth — the followers of Rabbi Hillel and the followers of Rabbi Shammai — and each school opposed the other in their decrees and definitions. The Talmud describes them as follows: "The scriptures say: These words... those words... all words have been given by a shepherd and come from the Lord of creation, blessed be He, so procure for yourself a heart of many quarters to house the words of the school of Shammai and the words of the school of Hillel" (*Talmud Tosefta Sota 7:12*)

For us Jews the *Teshuvah* is a category of document with ancient origins that is both a legal document and a means of keeping a live awareness by posing the questions necessary to arrive at fruitful answers.

*Teshuvah* comes from the need of the people to be tied to the essence of God's voice by continuing to ask and inquire in every time and place. This methodology is called SHE'ELOT U-TESHUVOT, which, literally translated means "questions and answers." As *Teshuvah* is a legal response, however, a better translation of this methodology could be "interpellations and decisions".

When a person or congregation doubts how to behave or proceed in a particular situation, they present a question to a rabbi or court of rabbis, who issue a response, a *Teshuvah*, that remains in force as a legal decision for future generations. In my case, the movement I belong to has a Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, composed of prominent rabbis and scholars, that sets legal policy for the Masorti movement as a whole.

Throughout the history of the Jewish community, many *teshuvot*, or responses, were written and have become part of the cultural and religious heritage of our people.

It is important to point out that the inclusion of women rabbis and women jurists in legal discussions and decisions is a new phenomenon only reached by the Masorti movement in the 1980s and by Modern Orthodoxy 25 years later. And still the battle is not done.

Throughout the centuries, the primary function of rabbis was not to give sermons, conduct marriages, or eulogize the dead, but to rule on matters of Jewish law, the *Halacha*.

For over a thousand years, leading rabbis have published their "responses": collections of questions they received, along with their answers. In this format, rabbis engage in learned discussions showing how the texts of the past support legal conclusions that answer modern ethical dilemmas.

To perform this function, rabbis invoked a superior principle to make a revision to the sources on ethical grounds.

These superior principles include:

*מישום איבה mishum eiva* ("on account of hatred"). This principle allows rabbis to avoid carrying out actions that, though legally correct, would offend people or cause strife.

Or the principle of:

*דרכי שלום darkei shalom* ("the ways of peace"). We require certain behaviors — even if they are not what pure *halacha* would like or demand — to avoid quarrels or confrontations.

Another important principle is:

*תיקון עולם tikun olam* ("establishing the world aright"). Healing humanity's wounds so that we are able to live according to our own religion while also respecting the faiths of all.

We also have the principle of:

*דרכי נועם darkei noam* ("the ways of pleasantness"). Rabbis use this precept to avoid insisting on certain strict legal practices if they have unpleasant consequences.

In our sacred text, in the book of Deuteronomy 6:18, it is written: "You shall do the straight and the good in the eyes of God". To do the right and the good in every time and place requires us to adhere to the covenant and given laws, but for a covenant to continue to have a binding force upon our behaviors, the spirit in which it was originally written must be translated into our current era.

The *Talmud* (*Bava Metzia* 30b) cites the verse, "You should do the straight (*yashar*) and the good (*tov*) in the eyes of God", as the source for the importance of acting *lifnim mishurat hadin*, or beyond the strict requirements of the law.

To behave beyond the letter of the law requires us to make an active commitment not to hide behind sources that enjoin us to betray the main principles of ethics and morality. Adhering to the spirit of the law inspires us to struggle against fundamentalism and extremism, which is a real threat to all human expressions in our fragile world.

It is upon this basis that we should understand the *Teshuvah Torat Hamelech*. Scripture can become a living covenant when we fulfill God's boundless mandate to be a "holy people." (Exodus 19:6)

This "holy people" is in reality the entire human race, which deserves to live in peace, freedom and justice.