

## Context

*The concept of authenticity in Jewish life is one that exercises many across the denominational spectrum. In this essay, which first appeared in the Jewish Chronicle<sup>i</sup>, **Rabbi Josh Levy**, Rabbinic Partner at **Alyth** challenges the use of the concept as ambiguous and unhelpful in a religion which is complex, broad and contains multiple voices.*

## Content

*"[It is] a form of Judaism in their own minds, but it is not an authentic Judaism"<sup>ii</sup>*

*"Judaism should be authentic, honest and open-minded"<sup>iii</sup>*

*"A movement that is authentic, organic, energetic, growing"<sup>iv</sup>*

It's a word that's everywhere in our Jewish conversation, used throughout the Jewish world: "authentic". Often used to dismiss the religious life of others; sometimes as a self-applied hechsher, a certificate of "kashrut". Occasionally as brand-identity — "Authentic Judaism".

But what does a claim of Jewish authenticity actually mean? On what basis might one person claim that someone else's Judaism is inauthentic? "Authentic" is used as a descriptor, but what does it describe?

One possibility is that the word "authentic" is supposed to mean "connected to the original", rather than a copy. The "authentic" Judaism is meant to represent a legitimate, unbroken link to an original, eternal version. The problem with such a usage is that it's not clear what "the original" means.

Judaism has always been complex. When we speak of authenticity, what are we being authentic to: Israelite ritual practice, the ancient Temple cult, a prophetic ethical movement, various Second Temple sectarian groupings, the polyvocal, radical rabbinic Judaism?

The rabbis utterly transformed a biblical ritual cult into the Judaism that we live today in response to the historical context in which they found themselves. So, is it more "authentic" to play music in worship on Shabbat as they once did in the Temple, or not to, as ordained as a *shevut* (literally 'rest'), a secondary rabbinic prohibition, in the Mishnah?

Similarly, much of Chasidic Judaism was an innovation of the 18th century, making use of Lurianic Kabbalah, which flourished in the 16th. How can we possibly make claims of unique authenticity when Judaism has always been so broad, and constantly evolving?

Perhaps what is meant by "authentic" is not "original" but "unadulterated", unsullied by outside influence. There would, of course, be a certain irony in using an ancient Greek word, *authentikos*, if what you're trying to say is that Judaism needs to be pure from external influence. Nonetheless, this might be the meaning. Except that Judaism has always been a religion of innovation in response to new and external forces.

Judaism evolves in response to place, to time, to its neighbours. This is why the Judaism of Mizrachim looks different to that of Ashkenazim, that of North Africa different to that of North America. When Maimonides attempted to codify Jewish law, and to define Jewish belief, he was heavily influenced by the religious context in which he found himself, and especially systematic Islamic law and theology. Do we view this exercise as authentic, or inauthentic?

Are the new religious rituals of the state of Israel, for example the mourning of Yom HaZikaron — the Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers — to be condemned as inauthentic because they are a response to our modern situation and we cannot find verification for them in the Talmud, or an authentic expression of the modern Jewish people?

Use of the term “authentic” is not really descriptive at all. It is a subjective claim about legitimacy. It is to claim, either explicitly or by implication, that one’s own form of Judaism is more legitimate than that of another; to claim the right to define where the boundaries of acceptable “Judaism” lie, while often claiming exclusive right to dwell within those boundaries.

And that, ironically, we could call “inauthentic”. We may be more diverse in modernity, but Judaism has always been diverse. To claim otherwise is “inauthentic” to both rabbinic Judaism and to Jewish life in the UK. Rabbinic Judaism was always polyvocal, including multiple different voices in tension with one another.

The rabbis recorded minority views that they rejected and retained within the Jewish story even those whom they considered heretical. The Tosefta, an early collection of rabbinic traditions, tells us: “make for yourself a heart of many rooms, and enter into it the words of [this school and that school], the words of those who declare a matter impure, and those who declare it pure”<sup>v</sup>.

Those who condemn others as inauthentic imply that our Judaism no longer has those broad shoulders, can no longer carry the diversity it once did. This is not true.

In the UK to reject diversity with the weapon of “authenticity” is a new phenomenon. There used to be such a thing as the Union of Anglo-Jewish Preachers, a meeting place for rabbis from across the Jewish spectrum. My grandfather, the Reverend Dr Isaac Levy, whose ministry was in that period, wrote: “We met as colleagues, we aired our differences, and we shared our common concerns. There was no acrimony and an atmosphere of tolerance pervaded these gatherings”<sup>vi</sup>. In those days there was a recognition that we are all, in different ways, heirs to a rich textual tradition, one that we can share and that can sustain us all.

A healthy community, and a healthy Judaism, is one in which we are open about what we share and where we disagree. One in which we recognise that, in the words of Rabbi Joseph Hertz in 1934, “Far more calamitous than religious differences in Jewry is religious indifference in Jewry.”<sup>vii</sup> We should honour the talmudic ideal, *af al pi she’chata, Yisrael hu*, “a Jew who strays is still a Jew”. That is, even where we might feel that someone else’s religious life is not correct, they are still family.

There is no place in this conversation for the word “authentic”. Whatever it might be supposed to mean.

## Contemplation

*In this essay, Josh challenges us to reject the concept of ‘authenticity’ which is loaded and polemical, and which is in opposition to the diverse, polyvocal Judaism of the early rabbis.*

*What might this mean in practice? What would it look like if we created a Jewish world in which we engaged with one another as thoughtful Jews rather than seeking to define for others the legitimate boundaries of Jewish practice? How do we, as individuals, bring our personal religious integrity into such a conversation?*

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<sup>i</sup> Jewish Chronicle, 7 August 2017

<sup>ii</sup> Rabbi Moshe Freedman on Reform Judaism, Radio 4, July 2017

<sup>iii</sup> [www.masorti.org.uk/](http://www.masorti.org.uk/)

<sup>iv</sup> [www.reformjudaism.org/authentic-reform-judaism](http://www.reformjudaism.org/authentic-reform-judaism)

<sup>v</sup> Tosefta Sotah 7:12

<sup>vi</sup> “A Lament for Moderation”, Manna

<sup>vii</sup> Speech by Rev Dr J H Hertz, the then “Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire” at West London Synagogue on 27 May 1934