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To Challenge Authority

Phillip Roth’s short story “The Conversion of the Jews” takes place in a strict Jewish religious community and demonstrates that orthodox communities do not encourage questions that challenge their authority or doctrines. Ozzie gets into trouble at his orthodox Jewish school when he questions how if God “could create the heaven and earth in six days…why couldn’t He let a woman have a baby without having intercourse” (Roth 205). Since Rabbi Binder’s response does not truly explain what Ozzie doesn’t understand, Binder interprets Ozzies’s subsequent confusion as a threat. He pegs poor Ozzie as a difficult teenager trying to create waves in the classroom, rather than trying to understand the student’s inquisitive nature. Later in the story when Ozzie tries to keep quiet during question time, Binder instead pushes him to wrestle with his frustrations without patiently answering them and the scene escalates to a conflict where Binder threatens Oscar to “apologize” (210) and then hits him after he yells obscenities. If Binder did not see this genuine curiosity as such a threat to his authority as a religious leader, maybe he could have helped Ozzie understand the key ideas of the Jewish faith. Instead, Binder’s impatience and frustration only lead to greater conflict that involves the whole school. In addition, Roth adds the “foreign relic” (208) janitor Yakov Blotnik to the story to illustrate more traditional Judaism. Binder so hoped Ozzie would be more like the janitor and just mumble the prayers like Blotnik, without them really having any meaning. Blotnik’s blind devotion to his faith is a stark contrast to Ozzie’s quest for understanding. This stark contrast between Orthodox Judaism and questioning youth articulates the key theme of the story: the older orthodox generation does not approach their beliefs with the zeal of questioning, nor challenging youth.

Works Cited

Roth, Philip. “The Conversion of the Jews.” *Contemporary American Short Stories*. Ed. Douglas and Sylvia

Angus. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1996. 203-220. Print.