



The Principles of Pluralism

Irving (Yitz) Greenberg

Harold Schulweis is so sensible and so right. So why isn't everyone persuaded by the Talmud's pluralism? Why don't all the denominations practice joint learning, cooperative youth activity, and celebrate each other's strengths?

I submit that it is because most people do not understand the principles of pluralism. Most still believe that pluralism means that nothing is absolutely true; that that is why it is okay to let everyone teach and practice as they see fit. In the public mind, pluralism is the same as relativism. Naturally, the Orthodox will not accept this approach. Therefore, they legitimate only those who affirm the authority of revelation and of the Talmud itself.

Many liberal Jews share the conviction that were there an absolute truth, it should be upheld at all costs and the contradictory voices would not need to be heard. Such liberals often yield to the impositions of *haredim* because they sense that the others believe in something fixed and should therefore be deferred to (even if one resents them). Where such liberals have an absolute principle — say, the emerging value of egalitarianism — they then dismiss the legitimacy of alternate voices. More than a decade ago, the National Havurah Coordinating Committee (set up as a pluralist institution) organized all forms of *minyanim* at their summer session — except for the traditional Orthodox liturgy. When I remonstrated with the organizers, they explained that inasmuch as the *mechitza minyan* violated the ethical principles of equal women's rights, it was not entitled to legitimacy or equal presentation.

It is essential to teach people the nature of principled pluralism. There are absolute truths; there are true and false positions. There are contradictions that are rejected because they are wrong or, even in some cases, illegitimate. However, pluralism stems from the recognition that even absolutes have limits. The

limit may grow from the discovery that beyond my world there is another realm of discourse and truth that may coexist with mine. In the past, one's own cultural centrality left the impression that one's truth extended over the whole of reality; others were non-existent or were experienced as inferior and non-legitimate. In the open society, however, "the other" appears in all its dignity and independent existence.

As a result, one often discovers the limits of one's own truths. Perhaps these other truths are beyond the parameters of my own; since they fall outside, they are not contradicted or excluded even if they differ. Or, I discover that my truth does not cover the situation of all people. Sometimes, even if my value system addresses all people, it simply cannot reach them all — thus leaving room for other systems. Or perhaps, my truth does not cover all

people all the time in all circumstances — and this leaves room for other (even contradictory) truths. Thus I allow for other views, even as I challenge or reject truths that fall within the same circle as mine when they clash with it.

Pluralism may also grow out of my recognition of the limits of specific teachings or truths, which allow room for incorporating contradictions (Schulweis' example) or even for coexisting with clashing truths/religions/faiths. The very concept of *brit*/covenant suggests that God enters into circumscribed, humanly concrete partnerships with different people including differing prophets and teachings that may vary or even clash without being totally invalidated. (Compare Isaiah's vision of Israel, Egypt and Assyria all being covenanted peoples, all being a source of God's blessing for humanity. Isaiah 19, 24-25).

Ultimately, pluralism grows out of the essential dignity of human beings in the image of God. Given their dignity as images of God, i.e. as crea-

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tures of infinite value, equality and uniqueness, they are entitled to be heard. This dignity means that they should not be coerced or suppressed even if they are wrong in their views — as long as those views do not turn them into inhuman beings or lead them to evil behaviors that destroy the images others have of God (such as in the case of Nazism).

In appreciation of an open society and of the equality and uniqueness of others, I come to affirm the value of living and of teaching in the presence of other truths and systems. Other approaches teach me the limitations of my own views — preventing an imperialist extension of my truth/faith beyond its legitimate sphere into realms where it becomes a lie or is wrongly applied. And while I may come to refute or reject some contradictories, I may also learn from others' insights and may even integrate them, thus improving my own system.

Both the standard practice of all the synagogues to preach their own views, separate and "undiluted" and the "de facto apartheid" between youth movements, prove that all the movements have failed to grasp the profound transformation of culture in an open society. If youth (or adult members) cannot handle the variety of views found in the denominational variations, how will they be able to handle the incredibly wider, richer, more contradictory variations found in the overall society? In fact, hearing a truth/faith/religion in the presence of other (even contradictory) varieties gives it a richer, more unique, more persuasive character. The monolithic view sounds thinner, less nuanced, less convincing. That all denominations practice censorship and offer exclusive voices reveals the dirty secret of the absolutist/relativist alliance in each denomination. When we break this fallacious all-or-nothing conception, we will be able to teach and practice the profoundly enriching, more human truths of pluralism in the Jewish community — and far beyond.

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