Orthodoxy and Diversity: Thoughts for Shavuoth

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By
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The Talmud (Berakhot 58a) teaches that one is required to recite a special blessing when witnessing a vast throng of Jews, praising the Almighty who is hakham harazim, the One who understands the root and inner thoughts of each individual. “Their thoughts are not alike and their appearance is not alike.” The Creator made each person as a unique being. He expected and wanted diversity of thought, and we bless Him for having created this diversity among us.

The antithesis of this ideal is represented by Sodom. Rabbinic teaching has it that the Sodomites placed visitors in a bed. If the person was too short, he was stretched until he fit the bed. If he was too tall, his legs were cut off so that he fit the bed. This parable is not, I think, merely referring to the desire for physical uniformity; the people of Sodom wanted everyone to fit the same pattern, to think alike, to conform to the mores of the Sodomites. They fostered and enforced conformity in an extreme way.

Respect for individuality and diversity is a sine qua non of healthy human life. We each have unique talents and insights, and we need the spiritual climate that allows us to grow, to be creative, to contribute to humanity’s treasury of ideas and knowledge.

Societies struggle to find a balance between individual freedom and communal standards of conduct. The Torah, while granting much freedom, also provides boundaries beyond which the individual may not trespass. When freedom becomes license, it can unsettle society. On the other hand, when authoritarianism quashes individual freedom, the dignity and sanctity of the individual are violated. I wish to focus on this latter tendency as it relates to contemporary Orthodox Jewish life.

Some years ago, I visited a great Torah luminary in Israel. He had given a shiur (Torah lecture) for rabbis and rabbinical judges in which he suggested introducing civil marriage in the State of Israel. He offered cogent arguments in support of

this view, and many of those present actually thanked him for having the courage to put this issue on the rabbinic agenda. His suggestion, though, was vehemently opposed by the rabbinic establishment, and this rabbi was sharply criticized in the media. Efforts were made to isolate him and limit his influence as much as possible. Students of the rabbi were told not to attend his classes any longer. This rabbi lamented to me: “Have you heard of the mafia? Well, we have a rabbinic mafia here.” This, of course, is an indictment of the greatest seriousness. It is not an issue of whether or not one favors civil marriage. The issue is whether a rabbinic scholar has the right and responsibility to explore and discuss unpopular ideas. If his suggestions are valid, they should be accepted. If they are incorrect, they should be refuted. But to apply crude pressure to silence open discussion is dangerous, and inimical to the best interests of the Torah community.

Similar cases abound where pressure has been brought to bear on rabbis and scholars who espouse views not in conformity with the prevailing opinions of an inner circle of Orthodox rabbinic leaders. As one example of this phenomenon, a certain rabbi permitted women to study Talmud in his class at his synagogue. One of the women in his congregation consulted a Rosh Yeshiva who promptly branded the synagogue rabbi as a heretic (apikores) for having allowed women to study Talmud. The Rosh Yeshiva told the woman she was not permitted to pray in the synagogue any more as long as that rabbi was there. When the synagogue rabbi was informed of this, he wrote a respectful letter to the Rosh Yeshiva and explained the halakhic basis for women studying Talmud. The Rosh Yeshiva refused to answer, and told the woman congregant that he would not enter a correspondence with a heretic. The woman stopped attending the rabbi’s synagogue.

Is this the way of Torah, whose ways are the ways of pleasantness? Does this kind of behavior shed honor on Orthodoxy? Shouldn’t learned people be able to speak with each other, argue a point of halakha, disagree with each other? Shouldn’t the Torah world be able to deal with controversy without engaging in name-calling and delegitimation?

Over the years, I have been involved in the planning of a number of rabbinic conferences and conventions. Invariably questions are raised concerning who will be invited to speak. Some says: If Rabbi so-and-so is put on the program, then certain other rabbis and speakers will refuse to participate. Someone says: if such-and-such a group is among the sponsors of the conference, the other groups will boycott the event. What is happening in such instances is a subtle—and not so subtle—process of coercion. Decisions are being made as to which Orthodox

individuals and groups are “acceptable” and which are not.

This process is insidious and is unhealthy for Orthodoxy. It deprives us of meaningful discussion and debate. It intimidates people from taking independent or original positions, for fear of being ostracized or isolated.

Many times I have heard intelligent people say: I believe thus-and-so but I can’t say so openly for fear of being attacked by the “right”. I support such-and-such proposal, but can’t put my name in public support for fear of being reviled or discredited by this group or that group.

We must face this problem squarely and candidly: The narrowing of horizons is a reality within contemporary Orthodoxy. The fear to dissent from the “acceptable” positions is palpable. But if individuals are not allowed to think independently, if they may not ask questions and raise alternatives—then we as a community suffer a loss of vitality and dynamism. Fear and timidity become our hallmark.

This situation contrasts with the way a vibrant Torah community should function. Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein, in the introduction to Hoshen Misphat of his Arukh haShulhan, notes that difference of opinion among our sages constitutes the glory of Torah. “The entire Torah is called a song (shira), and the glory of a song is when the voices differ one from the other. This is the essence of its pleasantness.”

Debates and disagreements have long been an accepted and valued part of the Jewish tradition. The Rama (see Shulhan Arukh, Y.D. 242:2,3) notes that it is even permissible for a student to dissent from his rabbi’s ruling if he has proofs and arguments to uphold his opinion. Rabbi Hayyim Palachi, the great halakhic authority of 19th century Izmir, wrote that “the Torah gave permission to each person to express his opinion according to his understanding…It is not good for a sage to withhold his words out of deference to the sages who preceded him if he finds in their words a clear contradiction…A sage who wishes to write his proofs against the kings and giants of Torah should not withhold his words nor suppress his prophecy, but should give his analysis as he has been guided by Heaven.” (see Hikekei Lev, O.H. 6; and Y.D. 42)

The great 20th century sage, Rabbi Haim David Halevy, ruled: “Not only does a judge have the right to rule against his rabbis; he also has an obligation to do so [if he believes their decision to be incorrect and he has strong proofs to support his own position]. If the decision of those greater than he does not seem right to him, and he is not comfortable following it, and yet he follows that decision [in

deference to their authority], then it is almost certain that he has rendered a false judgment." (Aseh Lekha Rav, 2:61) Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, in rejecting an opinion of Rabbi Shelomo Kluger, wrote that "one must love truth more than anything." (Iggrot Moshe, Y. D., 3:88)

Orthodoxy needs to foster the love of truth. It must be alive to different intellectual currents, and receptive to open discussion. How do we, as a modern Orthodox community, combat the tendency toward blind authoritarianism and obscurantism?

First, we must stand up and be counted on the side of freedom of expression. We, as a community, must give encouragement to all who have legitimate opinions to share. We must not tolerate intolerance. We must not yield to the tactics of coercion and intimidation.

Our schools and institutions must foster legitimate diversity within Orthodoxy. We must insist on intellectual openness, and resist efforts to impose conformity: we will not be fitted into the bed of Sodom. We must give communal support to diversity within the halakhic framework, so that people will not feel intimidated to say things publicly or sign their names to public documents.

Let me add another dimension to the topic of diversity within Orthodoxy. Too often, Orthodox schools and books ignore the teachings and traditions of Jews of non-Ashkenazic backgrounds. Information is presented as though Jews of Turkey, the Balkans, North Africa and the Middle East simply did not exist. Little or no effort is made to draw from the vast wellsprings of knowledge and inspiration maintained by these communities for many centuries. Yet, these communities—deeply steeped in tradition—produced many rabbis and many books, rich folklore and religious customs; and these spiritual treasures belong to all Jews. To ignore the experience and teachings of these communities is to deprive ourselves and our children of a valuable part of the Jewish heritage.

Why, then, isn't there a concerted effort to be inclusive in the teaching of Jewish tradition? Among the reasons are: narrowness of scope, a tendency toward conformity, lack of interest in reaching beyond the familiar. Yet, unless we overcome these handicaps, we rob Orthodoxy of vitality and strength, creativity and breadth.

Orthodoxy is large enough and great enough to include Rambam and the Ari; the Baal Shem Tov and the Gaon of Vilna; Rabbi Eliyau Benamozegh and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch; Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Rabbi Benzion Uziel;

Dona Gracia Nasi and Sarah Schnirer. We draw on the wisdom and inspiration of men and women spanning the generations, from communities throughout the world. The wide variety of Orthodox models deepens our own religiosity and understanding, thereby giving us a living, dynamic, intellectually alive way of life.

If the modern Orthodox community does not have the will or courage to foster diversity, then who will? And if we do not do it now, we are missing a unique challenge of our generation.

Angel for Shabbat