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INSIDE

Norman Lamm: Divided we stand • Alan Unterman: The Anglo-Jewish ethos
New Year Greetings Section begins on page 39

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IT IS WITH a troubled heart that, as an Orthodox Jew, I address a concern that unites us, namely, those issues that *disunite* us from each other.

The predictions of an unbridgeable and cataclysmic rupture within the Jewish community agitate all of us who love and care for and worry about our Jewish people and its future. The twin issues of conversion and of Jewish marital legitimacy — proper *gittin* (divorces) and, in their absence, subsequent adultery and the blemish of *mamzerut* (bastardy) — should give us no rest.

The non-marriageability of a significant portion of the Jewish people with the rest of *am Yisrael* is too horrendous to contemplate — and yet we are forced to do just that lest our fragile unity, such as it is, be shattered beyond repair.

We have to try our very best, within the limits of our integrity, to promote unity and to oppose the seemingly inevitable disaster that looms before us.

The critical phrase is "within the limits of our integrity." I am an advocate of enhanced Jewish unity. But no honourable person can afford to dispense with his or her integrity even in the pursuit of unity.

The issues are too critical to permit us to indulge in a Jewish equivalent of the old "interfaith" meetings in which warmth substituted for light and good fellowship for genuine understanding. It is too late for that kind of goodwill posturing.

It goes without saying that we must relate to each other in friendship and fraternity. Now we must also be honest and truthful with each other.

The great Rabbi Saadia Gaon pointed out 1,000 years ago in the introduction to his "Emunot Ve'deot," in analysing the causes of scepticism and disbelief, that the truth is bitter and distressing and it is more convenient to ignore it. But without it we are wasting our time; more — without it we are lost. So, if my thesis proves disappointing and unpopular to some or even to all, it is because I am trying to be honest in keeping to the truth as I see it, even while attempting to be as accommodating as I can.

It is in this spirit of searching for unity within the limits of integrity that I address first the issue of pluralism.

I once thought I knew what the word meant. I have a passing acquaintance with pluralism, in contrast to monism, as a metaphysical concept. I believe I understand what cultural and political pluralism are about. I have written in favour of pluralism within the halachic context. But I confess to being confused by all the current talk of "religious pluralism" within the Jewish community.

The term has been used in a variety of ways, both with regard to Israel and to the diaspora, so that I am at a loss really to understand it. Moreover, my perplexity is deepened by the elevation of

DIVIDED WE STAND

"pluralism" to the rank of a sacred principle.

It has become a symbol, and whenever an idea is transformed into a symbol, it becomes so enmeshed in emotions and so entangled in mass psychology that it is exceedingly difficult to treat it analytically and critically. Sacred cows, like golden calves, inevitably lead one astray.

The way "pluralism" has been used in recent months and years makes it sound suspiciously like relativism, reducing all differences in principle and value to questions of taste.

Relativism is the proposition that because there are many kinds of "things" or points of view, and each has an equal right to be heard and advocated in a democratic society, they are therefore necessarily equally valid. If pluralism is just the newest name for that kind of discredited ethical or religious relativism, it is not deserving of our attention.

My conception of pluralism in the Jewish religious community can best be summed up by reference to a famous dictum in the Jewish tradition — that there are *shittim panim laTorah*, there are 70 faces or facets to Torah. No one is more valuable or significant or legitimate than the other 69.

Judaism is not monolithic. However, there are only 70 (the number, of course, is arbitrary) and not an infinite number of such faces or facets. A pluralism that accepts everything as co-legitimate is not pluralism, but the kind of relativism that leads to spiritual nihilism. If everything is kosher, nothing is kosher. If "Torah" has an infinite number of faces, then it is faceless and without value or significance.

Orthodox Jews are fully aware of the Talmud's comment on the disputes between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai, that "both these and these are the words of the living God." Unfortunately, this profound statement has been abused and turned into a slogan

by ignoring the fact that the controversialists were at one in their commitment to the halacha and its divine origin, and disagreed only on its interpretation with regard to very specific matters. The dictum implies a pluralism *within* the halachic context — only. It simply cannot be stretched to cover all "interpretations of Judaism" as co-legitimate.

There is another and similar issue that has the capacity to befuddle rather than clarify. This deals with the terms "recognition" and "delegitimation." "Recognition" has become a red herring in the Orthodox camp, and "delegitimation" is the newest member in the semantic rogues gallery of the other groups.

There has been a great deal of talk over the past several years about Orthodox rabbis granting or withholding "recognition" from non-Orthodox rabbis, and the latter, in turn, angrily demanding to know who authorised the former to grant or withhold recognition.

So heated has the debate become, so inflamed the personal and political passions, that cool and disinterested analysis has become virtually impossible. But we are not going to make any headway unless we stop simmering for a while, separate our collective egos from the issues, and try to listen to each other and then argue calmly and dispassionately.

First, let it be understood that *no* Orthodox Jew, if they are true to their faith, refuse to recognise fellow Jews as Jews just because they are non-observant. It is sad that such a denial is at all necessary, but one must give the lie to a canard that has been gaining wide currency. A Jew is a Jew even if he sins, as the Talmud teaches, and whether or not he thinks he is sinning. Those who deny this teaching are not Orthodox.

Second, should non-Orthodox rabbis want to know, out of curiosity, whether I, as a centrist Orthodox Jew, "recognise" their credentials as rabbis, I will gladly oblige them. It is helpful to each of us to know where the other stands, if we are to make progress on the truly critical issues of the day.

Where I stand: My premise is that Orthodox Judaism is, by its very nature, tied to a transcendent vision, to a Being who is beyond us; that vision includes the revelation of Torah and of halacha — a way of life, formulated in terms of legal norms and discourse — that we accept as authoritative. It is the word of God, transmitted from Sinai down through the ages, and it is the backbone of the Jewish tradition.

This halacha is given over to humans to apply to their daily lives, but they are not authorised to dispose of it according to personal taste or whim. The halacha, like any formal legal system, has rules that govern its change, amendment and application; all the more so because its claim is to divine rather than human origin.

The central point is this: the halacha is heteronomous, it obligates us, it is above us; we are bound by it and must live within its perimeters even if doing so proves personally, politically and even spiritually uncomfortable. It is, after all, the Word of God. Where the halacha has spoken, therefore, we cannot negotiate, trade or barter.

Three categories to consider in the "recognition" or "legitimation/delegitimation" issue are: (a) functional validity, (b) spiritual dignity and (c) Jewish or rabbinic legitimacy.

Because Orthodox rabbis consider those movements not bound by the traditional halacha as heretical, many refuse to accord non-Orthodox rabbis any credibility as leaders of Jewish religious communities.

I consider this an egregious error. Facts cannot be wished away by theories, no matter how cherished. And the facts are that Reform, Conservative and Liberal communities globally are not only more numerous in their official memberships than the Orthodox community, but they are also vital, powerful and dynamic; they are committed to Jewish survival, each according to its own lights; they are a part of *Klal Yisrael*; and they consider their rabbis their leaders.

From a *functional* point of view, therefore, non-Orthodox rabbis are *valid* leaders of Jewish religious communities, and it is both fatuous and self-defeating not to acknowledge this openly and draw the necessary consequences — for example, establishing friendly and harmonious and respectful relationships and working together, all of us, towards those Jewish communal and global goals that we share and that unite us inextricably and indissolubly.

As an Orthodox Jew, I not only have no trouble in acknowledging the functional validity of non-Orthodox rabbinic leadership, but also in granting that non-Orthodox rabbis and lay people may possess *spiritual dignity*. If they are sincere, if they believe in God, if they are motivated by principle and not by convenience or trendiness, if they endeavour to carry out the consequences of their faith in a consistent manner — then they are *religious* people.

In this sense, they are no different from Orthodox Jews who may attain such spiritual dignity — or may not, if their faith is not genuinely felt and if they do not struggle to have their conduct conform with their principles. Phonies abound in all camps, and should be respected by no one, no matter what their labels. And sincerely devout people exist everywhere, and deserve the admiration of all.

But neither functional *validity* nor spiritual *dignity* is identical with Jewish *legitimacy*. "Validity" derives from the Latin *validus*, strong. It is a factual, descriptive term. "Legitimacy" derives from the Latin *lex*, law. It is a normative and evaluative term.

Validity describes the *fact* of one's



"Functionally, non-Orthodox rabbis are valid leaders of Jewish religious communities"

Rabbi Dr Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University, New York, calls for a dialogue between Orthodox and Progressives



religious existence. *Dignity* refers to the quality of one's religious posture, not its content. It is the latter which, to my eyes, determines what we are terming *legitimacy*.

Here I have no choice but to judge such legitimacy by my own understanding of what constitutes Judaism and what does not. The criterion of such legitimacy is the Jewish *lex* — the halacha: not a specific interpretation of an individual halacha; not a general tendency to be strict or lenient; but the fundamental acceptance of halacha's divine origin, of *Torah min basbamayim*.

And if we become bogged down in definitions of these terms, then let us extricate ourselves from the theological morass by saying that the criterion is acceptance of halacha as transcendently obligatory, as the holy and normative "way" for Jews, as decisive law and not just something to "consult" in the process of developing policy.

Hence, I consider myself a brother to all Jews, in love and respect, and together with them I seek the unity of all our people. But I cannot, in the name of such unity, assent to a legitimization of what every fibre of my being tells me is in violation of the most sacred precepts of the Torah.

At bottom, any vision of the truth excludes certain competing visions. So it is with the Torah commitment. Under no circumstances can an Orthodox Jew, for instance, consider as Jewishly authentic a view of Judaism that excludes faith in God — such as "humanistic Judaism," or one that condones marriage of Jew with non-Jew; or one that rejects the halachic structure of Sabbath observance or the laws of divorce or the institution of kashrut.

To ask that, in the name of pluralism, Orthodox Jews accept such interpretations as Jewishly legitimate is to ask that we stop being Orthodox. If that is what pluralism and mutual legitimization mean, the price is too high.

Harold Schulweis, a distinguished Conservative/Reconstructionist rabbi, has written the following:

"In the name of the unity and continuity of my people, I acknowledge the right and privilege of Jews of diverse schools of thought to build their own institutions of learning, to support the rabbis they elect to follow, to entrust their children to these rabbis for instruction."

Agreed. I, too, acknowledge such right and privilege, and I have no argument with that statement in praise of unity. But the rest of the paragraph is one with which, unfortunately, I simply cannot go along. It reads as follows:

"For the sake of Zion, I may criticise their methods of conversion or their interpretations of the law, but I am pledged to recognise their authority, to accept their marriages, their divorces, their conversions..."

No, I am afraid that one cannot remain a halachic Jew and make such a blanket statement. Nor, indeed, do I see how a

Conservative rabbi can make such a statement. Neither can some Reform rabbis.

Are traditional Reform rabbis ready to accept the authority of fellow Progressive rabbis when and if they marry Jews and unconverted gentiles? Are Conservative rabbis ready to accept the authority of, and legitimate, a Reform remarriage when there was no divorce other than a civil document?

Are they ready to accept those Progressive conversions, which I take to be a majority, in which there was no circumcision, no immersion in a mikva (ritual bath), no *kabbalat hamitzva* (formal acceptance of the commandments)? If Conservative rabbis are not ready to accept such acts, Orthodox rabbis certainly should not be asked to do so.

Coherent and co-ordinated action to secure a decent Jewish future for our children and grandchildren requires that we do away with slogans and buzz-

words and reject vain hopes for the kind of "mutual legitimization" that cannot happen without doing violence to integrity.

In a positive vein, it calls upon us to accord to each other what I have called "functional validity" and, where deserved, "spiritual dignity."

Orthodox Jews have not always been as forthcoming in this respect as one might have hoped. We have not always been models of tolerance and openness. For too long we have substituted invective for argument, and have often evoked an equal and opposite reaction. In recent months the counter-invective has been very opposite and even more than equal.

But Orthodox Jews will have to learn to be more civil in their rhetoric, more respectful in their approach, more conscious of their responsibility towards the mitzva of "thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," and of Kohélet's admonition that "words spoken softly by wise men are heeded more readily than the foolish shouting by an official."

Conservative, Liberal and Reform Jewish leaders, too, must learn the same lesson and not adopt the stridency that they have learned from some Orthodox extremists. Neither abusive rhetoric nor blackmail nor financial pressure is the proper way to conduct Jewish fraternal discourse.

Moreover, Orthodox Jewish leaders should not have to be dragged kicking and screaming to meetings with their non-Orthodox confreres in order to develop common policy where possible, or mutual understanding where not. In addition to whatever formal communal structures now exist, there is a need for all major religious leadership to consult personally and unofficially, so that we know what we are about without the need to vote, lobby or issue public statements.

A further point: In facing the future together we must reduce the *Kulturkampf* taking place in Israel and,

to a somewhat lesser degree, taking place in the West as well. We should adopt a hands-off policy on all issues that do not constitute an immediate danger to the wholeness of *Klal Yisrael*, as defined by the ability of any one segment of Jewish life to accept as Jewish or as marriageable members of any other segment.

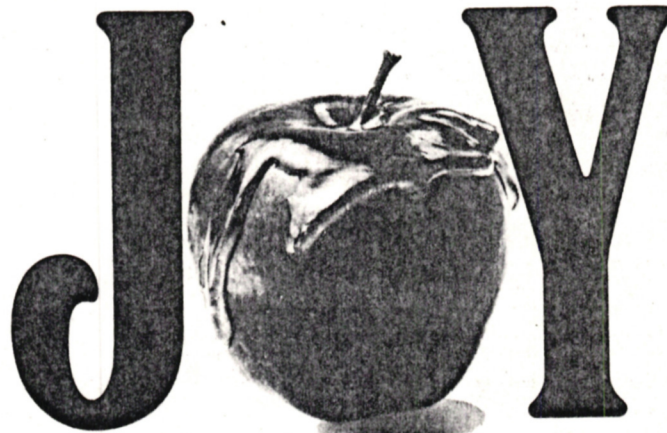
Hence, I may, as I do, disapprove of non-Orthodox sanction of woman rabbis or abortion-on-demand or general permissiveness on a hundred other issues. And Conservative and Reform Jews may look askance at what they regard as Orthodox sexism or our rigidity on this or that matter. But even while being critical of each other, we must not interfere or allow such differences to break us apart.

Let us argue with each other — but not fight. Let us be critical — but never obstructive. Each side needs to give the other the space to "do its own thing."

Factually, this is the situation that, to a large extent, now prevails. Except for certain pockets of population, there is *de facto* communication in most areas. There may not be sufficient inter-denominational relationship, but neither is there sufficient *intra*denominational communication — at least not in Orthodoxy.

A proper forum — a private one, shielded from publicity and posturing — must be found soon, in order to stop the unravelling of the fabric of Jewish unity. It would be best to call a halt, insofar as it is within our power to do so, to the cycle of mutual recriminations and, even more, to any "new directions" or actions by rabbinic bodies that might aggravate the situation and add oil to the flames. This is not the time for further "innovations" that will bedevil our efforts and strike further blows at what is left of Jewish unity.

NEXT WEEK: ELIE WIESEL ON COMMUNAL UNITY



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