

A REJOINDER

There is much to be applauded in Bernard Mandelbaum's call for mutual acceptance and increased dialogue among the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform communities. Those who succumbed to their holy zeal and supported denunciatory and obscurantist tactics against "deviationist camps" are today reaping the bitter fruits of their misguided policies. Forces of unreason once sanctioned tend to prove recalcitrant to imposed boundaries and have a penchant for wandering off on careers of their own. From the conduct of sessions at the recent World Zionist Congress to the rash of incidents in the Orthodox community we have been witness to a sickening display of hooliganism and rough-house tactics within what had been considered more or less homogeneous ideological groupings. Opinion changes are sought by pressure rather than by persuasion and the obsession to overwhelm has crowded out any respect for convictions born of intellectual struggle and sincerely held. We can therefore only respond with a resounding *amen* to Rabbi Mandelbaum's observation: "Perhaps never before, as in our time, was there a greater need for *Ahavat Yisroel*."

However, what appears to need further scrutiny is the proposition which Rabbi Mandelbaum suggests is the essential teaching of "genuine pluralism". (1) "You have a right to be different." This is juxtaposed to what is implied to be a sort of inferior pluralism which states: (2) "You have a right to be wrong, but you are wrong." This non-genuine version is alluded to elsewhere as: (3) "Where people think that one way — their way — is the only right way." Although Rabbi Mandelbaum doesn't explicitly say so, I get the impression that he believes Orthodoxy to be more prone to the use of statements of the form (2) and (3). Of course, in this, he is absolutely correct. Yet it is extremely difficult to understand why anyone should think that proposition (1) is any more "genuine" than propositions (2) and (3) or that they are mutually exclusive. Let us again compare (1) and (2) more closely.

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(1) You have a right to be different.

(2) You have a right to be wrong.

It seems perfectly plain that anyone who subscribes to (2) must necessarily subscribe to (1). For to be wrong is to be different. If, therefore, I have acknowledged your right to be wrong, I have already acknowledged your right to be different. And if to do the latter is to make one a genuine pluralist then whoever accords me the right to be wrong is a genuine pluralist. Actually, to be simply told that people believe, "You have a right to be different," is to be left very much in the dark as to what they think of your being different. Surely they have a right to such opinions and it is most natural for people to form such opinions. For example, if we are speaking of manners of dress and I say to you, attired in sweatshirt and jeans at the Dean's reception, "You have a right to be different," it does not preclude the possibility that I may have an opinion about your different way of dressing, namely, that it is atrocious. Surely, Rabbi Mandelbaum would not suggest that having such an opinion renders my pluralism non-genuine! He seems to acknowledge this when he says, "Improved dialogue between the three religious groups must never mean that anyone should relinquish one iota of its program or beliefs."

Let us consider a music class in which the right of every budding musician to be different is granted and respected. Yet this principle is in no way being compromised if one is reminded that the note he is playing is wrong by reference to the score.

Consider further a discussion among scientists as to the origin of the moon where the evidence is not conclusive. Genuine pluralism requires that I respect the right of my fellow scientists to be different and hold different opinions. Does this, however, conflict, with my further reflection that since only one of the proposed theories can be true, and I believe my theory to be true, that all the others are false? If the matter under discussion is an empirical one or if the differences refer to a variety of statements having truth value, then this is all pluralism or the "right to be different" can possibly mean.

The kernel of truth which probably gave birth to the confusion is the sort of situation in which the remark, "You have

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the right to be wrong but you are wrong" strikes us as not quite genuine because "right" and "wrong" in that particular context are inappropriate appraisal terms. We would have to agree, for example, that there is something primitive about the kind of pluralism which sponsors the statement, "You have a right to be different and eat with chop sticks but it is certainly most unnatural." Genuine pluralism seems to require that degree of sophistication which enables one to realize that eating habits merely differ from each other but cannot be said to be better or worse; natural or perverted.

What emerges, therefore, from our analysis is the conclusion that the first principle of genuine pluralism is indeed, "You have the right to be different." There may, however, be a sequel to this affirmation, without jeopardizing its pluralistic purity, in the form of an appraisal or judgment of the difference. Much will depend on the kind of thing under consideration. Aesthetic considerations might evoke the judgment: "You have a right to be different but I consider it ugly." Differences involving cognitive assertions might almost require the addition: "You have the right to your opinion but I consider it false or I believe your policy to be wrong." On the other hand, the situation might just be the sort where no judgment is called for and the only appropriate response is a respectful acceptance of the differences.

The issue before us is not the correctness of the aforementioned analysis but rather the question: What sort of a thing is religion? Liberal spokesmen have long been associated with views which look upon religion essentially as a life-style, a form of worship, a human response to the numinous. Of what moment, therefore, differences of ritual, minutiae of doctrine so long as a man directs his heart towards heaven? Accordingly, genuine pluralism in religion requires a respectful acceptance of differences and then silence. After all, does the true gentleman go round trumpeting that his selection of wines is better than that of his companion's?

I submit that this is at the heart of liberal Judaism's almost congenital difficulty in understanding Orthodoxy's insistence in adding to its affirmation, "You have the right to be different"

the upsetting and seemingly gratuitous postscript, "but you are wrong!" What our liberal brethren apparently fail to take into consideration is the implication of the fact that doctrinal differences involving truth value between religions and between denominations within a single religion may render them mutually exclusive. It cannot be true that God both did and did not beget an only son. With the best ecumenical intentions in the world and although a fervent upholder of genuine pluralism, what can I, as a professing Jew say to a Catholic (or he to me) other than, "You have a right to be different but your belief is false." What else can an Orthodox Jew say to a believer in the classic Reform position that Jews neither await nor desire a Messiah and that a return to Zion is not expected, other than, "You have a right to your opinion but (in terms of what I take to be Jewish destiny and the requirements of Jewish survival) you are wrong."

The issue has nothing whatsoever to do with degrees of tolerance or the genuineness of our pluralism. Our Conservative and Reform colleagues sometimes seem to forget that certain logical and syntactical liberties open to those who only "believe in" are not always available to those who also "believe that."

Let us move on to the larger question of what would be involved in mutual acceptance by Orthodox, Conservative and Reform communities. Rabbi Mandelbaum speaks of the pluralism or acceptance as taking place within a "framework" consisting of three elements: *Ahavat Yisrael*, *ahavat hashem* and *ahavat hatorah*. I cannot share his optimism that these components can be viewed as constituting a "framework" in the sense that they can serve as a common basis or unifying factors which we all somehow share. I do not mean to deny that there is a sense in which Conservative and Reform Jews may be said to be imbued with *ahavat hashem* and *ahavat hatorah*. But I suspect with deep foreboding that we may have reached the point where what some of our colleagues understand by the terms *hashem* and *torah* may have undergone such radical changes from the original concepts as to render them the same in name only.

Of course, a Rambam and a Rashi may have differed in their

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interpretations even of these basic concepts. Certainly, neither Orthodox beliefs nor Orthodox practice are monolithic. There have always existed and there exist today areas and margins for differences, all *within* the framework of Orthodox theology and Halakhah. However, as Rabbi Walter Wurzburger pointed out in a recent article in reference to Halakhah, disagreement is possible only within a framework which shares certain basic assumptions and follows prescribed norms and procedures.¹ An analogous limitation holds with equal validity in the area of theological concepts. There is a point beyond which these concepts cannot be stretched and still remain the same. Perhaps not even Orthodox Rabbis will agree precisely where this point is located. But I believe it can be shown that in principle there must be such a point and that some of our colleagues have long ago passed beyond it.²

Rather than speak of a "framework" with its implication of shared beliefs which may not exist and invite the barbs of skeptics, I would concentrate simply on the value of *ahavat Yisrael*. Rabbi Mandelbaum's citations are moving and to the point. As Golda Meir, echoing the teachings of Rabbi Kook, told the Rabbinical Council of America conference in Jerusalem in early January: we must all display an *ahavat Yisrael, bli t'nai*, unconditional! This then, must serve as the grounds for mutual acceptance; not a grudging acceptance but an outreaching, enthusiastic acceptance in love and compassion. Rabbi Mandelbaum has already indicated to us the way in which acceptance of our Reform and Conservative brethren can be accompanied by respect even when we might judge their views to be wrong. He says, "Despite my own rejection of the basic anti-Halakhah position of Reform, I find it un-Jewish to reject their genuine quest." Yes, to the extent that our liberal colleagues and their congregations are involved in a sincere and genuine quest to seek out God and to hear His word for us in our concrete hour, as indeed so many of them are, to that extent must we reach out towards them in respect and in humility. We must seek to open new forums for conversation and to learn from each other by precept and example. I have argued elsewhere that the fear of some of our Orthodox leaders to engage in dia-

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logue because of its supposed implied "recognition" of deviant theologies, is an empty one.³ The time is indeed long overdue for increased dialogue among the leaders of our Rabbinic organizations and Seminaries, the banishment of hatred and name-calling and the curse of publicity-seeking.

I would conclude with a question and something of a plea to our liberal colleagues. It certainly would be preferable if there was some ideological or Halakhic framework within which all three religious groups in Jewish life could be said to find themselves. If, indeed, *ahavat Yisrael* and the unity of *klal Yisrael* are to be the guiding principles of our policies and behavior towards each other, then could not Conservative and Reform leaders find it possible to stay within the traditional framework in certain key areas. What great advantages have a changed *Ketuba* and abbreviated conversion procedures brought the Conservative movement? What new strength and glory for the Jewish people have those Reform Rabbis who officiate at mixed marriages brought about? Do the aesthetic and religious values generated by liberal Judaism's innovations really outweigh the loss of the common framework which has resulted? In suggesting that liberal Judaism revert to common and agreed halakhic norms in matters of *Gerushin*, *Kiddushin* and *Gerut* for the sake of *achdut Yisrael*, are we asking too high a price?

NOTES

1. Walter S. Wurzburger, "Plural Models And The Authority Of The Halakhah," *Judaism*, Vol. 20, No. 4, Fall 1971.

2. See my article, "Is There An Indigenous Jewish Theology?" *TRADITION*, Vol. 9, Nos. 1-2, Spring-Summer 1967.

3. Shubert Spero, "Does Participation Imply Recognition?" *TRADITION*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Winter 1966.