

Bernard Mandelbaum

It has often been charged that Orthodoxy's failure to "recognize" non-Orthodox groups reflects a lack of awareness of the religious need of others that is required in a pluralistic society. *TRADITION* is privileged to open its pages to a leading spokesman of the conservative movement.

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THE RIGHT TO BE DIFFERENT

Amongst Religions

Ideas have a tremendous power. They are at work even when people are asleep. (Emerson) What is it then, that has prevented the powerful idea of the Ecumenical Council in Rome from reaching the masses of its constituents? The greatest respect is due the progress achieved in Rome, with its sincere struggle to find a way of living peacefully with other religions. However, unfortunately, it has filtered down to the common man, and in some instances even to the parish priest, in the following spirit: "You have a right to be *wrong*, but you are *wrong*. There is still only the one truth of the Church."

Genuine pluralism teaches: "You have a right to be *different*." Each group is free to live up to its own historic pattern seeking the way to God. The common denominator for all men, regardless of their religious commitment, is a basic code of binding, ethical principles — the seven commandments of Noah. Beyond that, diversity of religious expression is the only pattern possible in a world with such varied traditions as Christianity,

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Mohammedism, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Bahai.

In Nature

Such group differences are rooted in the very nature of man and the world. Apparently, it was part of the plan of Creation. From the stars to snowflakes, even to identical twins — no two are exactly alike. Rather than being a source of conflict, the rich uniqueness in the parts of nature and the makeup of society is viewed as a blessing which makes life more interesting and beautiful. When differences between traditions and nations are accepted, we will be well on the way to a world of greater unity and peace.

In America and the World

Acceptance of such authentic pluralism has implications for living with diverse cultural patterns and economic systems. The present Communist line about the threat of American imperialism is an anachronism; imperialism no longer exists as the quest for taking over the lands of other nations. The more subtle form of imperialism is the assumption that one economic system or one cultural configuration is the best for all men.

The existence of diverse groups does not mean that they are accepted for what they are. There is no more variegated structure of diverse cultures than in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. However, there is every indication that freedom of expression has its serious limitations, especially for the religious traditions, in a nation with Russia's central authoritarian government and law. Lacking a tradition of local rights, the individual republics cannot withstand the national totalitarian force.

In 1840, the French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville viewed the diversity of religious and cultural patterns in America as a model for the world: "The sects that exist in the United States are innumerable. They all differ in respect to the worship which is due to the Creator, but they all agree in respect to the duties which are due from man to man . . . The question here dis-

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cussed is interesting not only to the United States, but to the whole world, it concerns not a nation, but mankind . . . If it were true that laws and customs are not sufficient to maintain democratic institutions, what refuge would remain open to the nations except the despotism of one man?" The laws and customs of the United States are often as diverse as the fifty states of the union. And within each state there is a variety of traditions which make for many different loyalties.

This difference between Russia and America has implications for an approach to the diversity which characterizes mankind. In a world which has been reduced in size by instant communication and mass travel, we are all part of the neighborhood of man. We are all alike in that each of us is different, yet all of us are neighbors. Wherever we go, near or far, we find people whose basic needs and hopes are no different from ours. However, their ways of expressing them may be very different.

In the diversity within unity of One World, genuine brotherhood between distinct groups and religions is more than a pious wish for a one day annual good-will program. It is indispensable for the survival of humanity. It is basic to what Archibald MacLeish calls "the idea of America" — authentic pluralism can, indeed, be our most vital export to wherever people think that one way — their way — is the only right way.

In the Jewish Community

. . . There is a method to this seeming "madness" of writing in such general terms for a periodical such as *TRADITION*: it is easier to see the truth and its implications when experience is viewed in a more detached fashion. As soon as it comes closer to home — touching upon one's own commitments and beliefs — emotion predominates over reason. It becomes more difficult to arrive at the precise implications of right behavior. While most readers will agree with what was stated above, the matter becomes more complicated when considering "the right to be different" within the Jewish community.

Taking to heart the Rabbinic injunction *k'shot atzmecha v'acher kach k'shot acherim*, do we not have the responsibility

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within Jewish life to accept the kind of pluralism — within a framework — which we frequently propound as right for America and the world? What then are the elements of this framework within which the various groups in Jewish life — Orthodox, Conservative, Reform — must live together and accept one another. There are at least three: (1) *ahavat yisrael*, (2) *ahavat hashem*, (3) *ahavat hatorah*.

Ahavat Yisrael

The well-known statement in *Yoma* 9b, lurks as a frightening threat in our day — both for American Judaism and our people in Israel. “Why was the Second Temple destroyed when when we studied Torah, observed *mitzvot* and performed acts of kindness? It was the result of causeless hatred (amongst Jews). This teaches us that such hatred is a worse offense than any of the three major sins of idolatry, illicit sex and murder.”

And yet in the relations between Jews today — especially among the major religious divisions — we continue to “murder:” “Hurting one’s neighbor is comparable to killing him” (*Derech Eretz Rabah* 11). Suspicion, mistrust, censure are too often the attitudes of the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform towards one another. This is a common accusation levelled against the Orthodox. But whether it is in reaction to this, or rooted in historic origins, the Conservative and Reform indulge in frequent reading out of court, each of the other, as well as the Orthodox.

Perhaps never before, as in our time, was there a greater need for *ahavat yisrael*. The precedent for it is in the very first chapter of Genesis and the Rabbinic injunction that man imitate God’s way. Is there anything more compelling than this: “(Says the Almighty), there are two things in the world which I love with all my heart — the Torah and Israel. However, I do not know which one takes precedence. *People generally think the Torah comes first. But I say, Israel comes first, as it is written: ‘Israel is the Lord’s hallowed portion’*” (*Tana de be Eliahu Rabah* 11).

Without gainsaying the centrality of *Halakhah*, and the pri-

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ority of Torah, can anything justify the ill-will, if not actual hatred, of Jew against Jew in the light of such statements in the tradition? Moses certainly had more problems with the children of Israel than the combined frustrations of all Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Rabbis and yet: "Moses our teacher loved the children of Israel" (*Menachot* 65a). He cajoled them, scolded them, punished them. However, before doing that he had to meet with them, speak to them, try to understand their actions.

And we — Orthodox, Conservative and Reform — do not meet or try to understand one another. We reprimand — from a distance. We condemn — without understanding. Name calling and hatred is clearly condemned in the ancient language of the people — in the Aramaic of the *Zohar* (Exodus 122): "Israel is a holy fortress and because they are holy, it is prohibited for anyone to call his neighbor by a shameful name and one must not disgrace his neighbor. In modern times it is put poignantly by Samson Raphael Hirsch in his *Horeb*:*

Remember the teachings of our wise men who list as prohibited according to the prohibition of *ona'ah* (vexation): teasing, deceiving, embarrassing, needling, ridiculing, mocking, jesting with and calling names, and then add: graver even injury by action is vexation by words. The former only affects only property; the latter the human being as a whole; the former can be repaired, the latter cannot. The tears of the offended find easy access to the Throne of the Almighty: fear Him for His eyes see (Ch. M 228).

The elimination of such venom from Jewish life is possible only with genuine *ahavat yisrael*, so sorely lacking in our day. It is indispensable for the survival of the Jewish people — here and in Israel — : "The Holy One Blessed be He finds no greater blessing for Israel than peace." (*Ukatzin* 3). Without it: "You will find that Israel will never be redeemed until there is greater unity" (*Tanchuma* — *Nitzavim* 1).

Ahavat Hashem

On the basis of tradition, *ahavat yisrael* is indispensable in

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any pattern of greater Jewish unity within a framework of the right to be different. However, one must never confuse the indispensable with the adequate. A minimum of *ahavat hashem* is needed for religious groups to groups to communicate meaningfully. The sources which stress the importance of *ahavat hashem* need not be detailed here.

Is there any denying the reality of the common Orthodox, Conservative, Reform commitment to God and His Reality? Sure there are differences among the three groups. However, there is also a wide diversity of interpretation of the meaning of God within each of the three groups, and yet they accept one another within their own organizational commitment. Here again, there is good historic precedent for this diversity, within the unifying concept of God and Torah. In the words of Solomon Schechter:

If I were asked what connection is there, say in order to except present company, between Rabbis Moses ben Maimon, of Cordova (known as Maimonides), and Solomon ben Isaac, of Troyes (known as Rashi), I would say, "None, save in God and his Torah." The one lived under a Mohammedan government; the other under a Christian government. The one spoke Arabic, the other French. The one had all the advantage of an Eastern civilization, the other lived in the barbaric west. The one was a merchant, afterwards a famous physician in the great capitals of Cordova and Cairo; the other was a Rabbi, without salary, in an unimportant provincial city. The one was a persona grata for many years of his life at the court of Saladin, "the most enlightened despot who ever sat on a throne"; the other probably never had the good or rather the bad fortune, of ever speaking even to the chief constable of his place. The one was a thorough Aristotelian and possessed of all the culture of his day; the other was an exclusively Rabbinic scholar and hardly knew the name of Aristotle. The one was all system and method, writing everything in a smooth, elegant style; the other belonged to the great inarticulates, and wrote very little beyond commentaries and "occasional notes." But as they both observed the same fasts and feasts; as they both revered the same sacred symbols, though they put different interpretations on them; as they both prayer in the same language — Hebrew; as they both were devoted students of the same Torah, though they put different interpretations on them; as they both looked back to Israel's past with admiration and reverence, though Maimonides' conception of the Revelation, for instance, largely varied from that of Rashi; as their ultimate hopes centered in the same redemption — in one word,

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as they studied the Torah and lived in accordance with its laws, and both made the hopes of the Jewish nation their own, the bonds of unity were strong enough even to survive the misunderstanding between their respective followers. And they both became rocks and pillars of Judaism; and a Leopold Zunz, or an Isaac Hirsch Weiss, of Vienna, were able to appreciate both Rashi and to fall in love with both of them.*

Ahavat Hatorah

It is in this area where we find the real rub. Schechter makes it clear that the observance of the Torah — feasts and fasts and sacred symbols — is what unites a Rashi and a Rambam. Yet he also includes amongst the people he respects, a Leopold Zunz, and an Isaac Hirsch Weiss. In his examples of such *gedolim* we are a far cry from the leadership or the people in our present community. What made these *gedolim* great was their ability to accept differences in others, provided there was a sincere quest to come to God and the Torah. Despite my own rejection of the basic anti-*halakhah* position of Reform, I find it un-Jewish to *reject their genuine quest*. In the spirit of a statement by the sainted Rabbi Israel Salanter, any Reform Jew is potentially more traditional if the traditional Jew is given the opportunity to live with them and influence them. There are times when the standards of education and other *mitzvot* in Conservative Judaism are more traditional than the Orthodox.** Yet I have the highest regard for the deep dependence of all of Judaism on the intensity of the Orthodox commitment. The same principles of respect must govern the acceptance of differences by the Orthodox in relation to both Conservative and Reform, and Reform's acceptance of Orthodox and Conservative. Again, in the words of Schechter, the real impediment to better understanding is usually an external, selfish consideration.

Everyone is building an altar for himself, as the old expression is, and bitterly resents every attempt towards unity. Whatever happens,

**Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* by SOLOMON SCHECHTER (Burning Bush Press), p. 50-52.

**See *Conservative Judaism, A Direction* by BERNARD MANDELBAUM in *Conservative Judaism*, Fall, 1959, Vol. 14, p. 36-46.

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his light must not be put under a bushel, even though this light may obscure Judaism itself. He is not the servant of the law, but is constantly endeavoring to be the Lord of the law. He must always be in evidence, whether by his strange actions, or by his peculiar theories. It is almost pathetic to look upon the craving after publicity which has become so prevalent amongst us. Some ancient sage said that every day in which he had not performed a righteous action, he considered as a lost day. I am afraid that the sickly craving after publicity has become such a passion with us that some consider that every week in their lives which their names had not appeared before the public as dead.*

The curse of publicity and notoriety infects groups as it does individuals. One often wonders how many of the impediments in the way of better group relations within the Jewish community result from real issues *le'shem shamayim*. More often the vested, political construct of groups in the American Jewish Community parallel the internecine strife of political parties in the State of Israel.

Maturity demands that *ahavat yisrael* bring all Jews together to battle the real enemies of *ahavat hashem*, *v'ahavat hatorah* — secularism and assimilation. Improved dialogue between the three religious groups must never mean that any one should relinquish an iota of its program or beliefs. Yet what a blessing to all of us, if the combined religious forces were to discuss their differences respectfully and unite on those issues which they have in common. Despite the existence of a Synagogue Council or a New York Board of Rabbis, the average congregant has not been sufficiently influenced by the spirit of mutual respect implicit in these organizations. Every possible effort is necessary to create the atmosphere of accepting the right to be different. It is quite unbelievable, for example, that the heads of the three major Seminaries, who also lead major institutions of higher learning, never meet to consider common problems. Such understanding and mutual acceptance can flow down to *amcha* and to improve the relations between all in the community. *Im tirtzu ayn zu agadah.*

**Seminary Addresses and other Papers* (see above), p. 225.