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Practical Pluralism

(Continued from Front Page)

– the uniqueness of its truth, and its central focus that Jewish law is binding.

(The above is, admittedly, a simplification when dealing with faiths other than Judaism, as Judaism might see these other monotheistic faiths as valid for gentiles but not for Jews. This detail is beyond the scope of this article.)

Having said that, Orthodoxy recognizes the reality of Jewish life in America, which is that there are, in fact, other denominations within the Jewish community that are sincere in their faith and serve the Jewish community in many ways, and that cooperation with them is sometimes both practically important and religiously valuable.

Cooperation is pragmatically important because a united front can sometimes lead to results that cannot be achieved individually, and religiously rewarding as it emphasizes that the unity of the Jewish people remains unbroken even in the face of vast theological, social, and halachic differences.

Orthodox Judaism is not, however, prepared to sacrifice its basic claim – the binding nature of Jewish law as the touchstone of personal conduct – in order to achieve this value.

Two basic guidelines have always resonated with me as correct.

First, Orthodox individuals and institutions gladly participate in communal events whose purpose is to socially, politically, or economically better the lot of the Jewish community as a whole, even if these events are denominationally centered, and even more so if they are not.

Thus, rallies for Israel, political and social action activities, marches on Washington, and Federation-sponsored hurricane relief are just a few examples of the type of complex, denominationally-based work that Orthodoxy joins. The rationale for joining these types of events is that due to their fundamentally non-religious nature, no theological misimpression is created.

One who attends or reads about an interdenominational rally to prevent genocide in Darfur, or in support of Israel, or a fund-raising event at the Jewish Federation would not assume that all participants recognize one another as theologically correct.

On the other hand, Orthodoxy would not participate in a religious event such as multi-denominational worship in which Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform services are offered in a spirit of ecumenical validation and people choose where and what type of service to attend or even to attend all of them.

This smorgasbord approach to prayer cannot help but convey to its participants that – just as all the food choices are proper and what one consumes is a matter of personal choice – all the prayer options are valid.

Orthodoxy cannot with integrity allow itself to come across, either to the non-Orthodox community or to its own community, as a choice among equals.

The same is true for an educational institution that teaches its students Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform perspectives of Torah and *halacha* with no notion of what is correct and what is not. It is the ultimate perversion of Orthodoxy to require that it validate perspectives that violate its fundamental tenets.

(This stands in sharp contrast with the diversity that one sees within Orthodoxy and its institutions. The Orthodox community recognizes pluralism within the confines of *halacha* and one certainly encounters, for example, Orthodox synagogues with Ashkenazic, Sephardic, and chassidic *minyanim* all in one place. So too, one finds Orthodox educational

institutions of many different flavors sharing teachers, *rebbeim* and staff.)

Let me add one substantive caveat to these two guidelines, which reflects the modern reality of some of American and Jewish life.

Sometimes adults live in Jewish or secular communities that have only “practical pluralism,” with no ideological foundation, where we all agree to do our jobs (or be good neighbors) by not discussing certain matters.

Thus, I am a professor at Emory University, which is a nominally Methodist institution, but which is, in fact, practically pluralistic. Each person who works at Emory maintains his or her own value structures in life and on the job, but works comfortably in an institutional environment that is officially pluralist, or even valueless – where we perform our requisite tasks, declining to share our personal and perhaps contentious beliefs with others who have different devotional commitments and are uninterested in sharing theirs or listening to mine.

The Abrahamic covenant of Jewish history explains why I would refuse to worship in an Orthodox minyan at a Jewish Students Center that had a Jews for Jesus service ... but am glad to be a practical pluralist at a Hillel with a Reform service. The latter is part of the Abrahamic covenant, the former is antithetical to it.

Accordingly, I teach a Jewish law course to students with no requirement that they observe Jewish law, only that they learn the material. Institutionally, Emory would not object if during a break in the work day, ten individuals came into my office for *mincha* services, and I fully understand that if the person in the office next to mine were to take communion on Good Friday in his office, it would reflect no ideological agreement that communion is proper on my part.

Particularly in a university setting, practical pluralism becomes a way for people to function, teach, and learn. Practical pluralism can be wonderful, but institutions that claim a serious Jewish identity rarely seek that mantle and even less frequently don it comfortably, precisely because a person who is serious about his Jewish identity must draw lines grounded in religious values.

Thus, for example, at Emory, where practical pluralism is the highest value, I have almost no business asking my students why they wish to learn Jewish law.

This stands in contrast to Jewish institutions nationwide which (I suspect) would exclude a member of Jews for Jesus (even if born a Jew) from almost any program under their auspices. Jewish institutions, quite rightly, seek to share values and examine motives.

Of course, within all bifurcated intellectual frameworks there are shades of gray and disagreement over the facts or applications. For example, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *zt”l*, was of the view that interdenominational boards of rabbis were permissible so long as they did not meet to discuss matters of *halacha* or theology, but were limited to matters of social, political, or economic concern.

Others disagreed with him, asserting that a “board of rabbis” inherently validates all its members as legitimate expositors of Judaism.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *zt”l*, wrote half a cen-

tury ago that an Orthodox *minyan* may not rent space or run religious programming in Reform or Conservative synagogues, as participants will grow confused as to whether the Orthodox view all services in the non-Orthodox synagogues as valid forms of worship.

Many rabbis of the last two decades have disagreed, and think that ordinary people can distinguish between the location of an event and its sponsors.

Likewise, over the last many years, Orthodox rabbis have seen the wisdom of participating in the public teaching of Jewish values at places like a Jewish community center – the basic rationale being that each instructor teaches his own material and everyone knows that. The appearance under a single roof, the claim is made, does not create endorsement.

Reality plays a strong role in these determinations. Therefore, I do think that Orthodox students can pray in the Orthodox minyan at Hillel even though that same institution hosts Reform and Conservative services precisely because the students in such a minyan do not perceive Hillel as compelling the Orthodox students to validate the Conservative service.

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Let us return to our starting point. Orthodoxy is far from monolithic and has quite a bit of diversity within its own walls. However, it is not ever-pliable, and Orthodoxy has limits of both deed and creed.

One of the most central ideas of Orthodox creed is the view that *halacha* is binding as a matter of covenantal theology, whether or not people actually observe it.

When dealing with the denominations that theologically inhabit the space outside those bounds in acts and beliefs, Orthodox individuals and institutions must conduct themselves with both integrity and respect. Respect must motivate us to treat fellow Jews with honor, love, and dignity. Integrity compels us to treat our own ideology with seriousness and not allow us to compromise our identity as Orthodox Jews or our adherence to Orthodox ideology.

Rav Soloveitchik expresses this dichotomy theologically in his classic work *Kol Dodi Dofek*. The Rav states that as members of the Jewish people we feel linked to other Jews by the covenant of Abraham (*brit hagoral*) and seek to help and support them, even while we must acknowledge that they do not all share fully in the covenant of Moses (*brit h-ye’ud*) that we regard as mandatory and binding.

The common Abrahamic covenant of Jewish history explains why I would refuse to worship in an Orthodox minyan at a Jewish Students Center that had a Jews for Jesus service, too, but am glad to be a practical pluralist at a Hillel with a Reform service. The latter is part of the Abrahamic covenant, the former is antithetical to it.

We must succeed in expressing both values if we are to accomplish our mission. I have always understood these two obligations as directing us to participate as much as possible in the general Jewish community while avoiding participation in religious and educational events whose message is that whatever religious choices a person makes are legitimate, or that all models of Judaism role-modeled in America are valid, as both of these ideas deny a central creed of Orthodox Judaism, which is that Jewish law really is binding.

In sum, Orthodoxy must insist on the uniquely binding nature of *halacha* for Jews, and cannot be perceived as validating expressions of Judaism that violate this tenet, even if these expressions have other positive qualities and even if we seek to work together with them in mutual dignity on a variety of issues.

Orthodox Jews, therefore, need to think carefully about our participation in non-Orthodox events and institutions within the Jewish community, to make sure that we remain true to ourselves and to Jewish law.

May we be blessed to live in a society where our diversity does not lead to divisiveness, and our unity is not contingent on our uniformity.

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