
beliefs and values as the evident first principles of Jewish life. As a result, despite the significance of this undertaking for the future of Jewish identity and continuity, I believe that at this point in history pursuing this approach will not be fruitful.

An alternative direction which I believe will enable greater progress is one in which we focus not on what we should all accept, but rather on what we should all reject. Rather than attempting to define the boundaries of our identity by asking "Who belongs?" it would be more fruitful to ask "Who does not belong?"

Two thousand years ago, the Rabbis, in the *Sifre* on Deuteronomy, suggested a definition of Jewish identity along these very lines. They said: "Anyone who accepts idolatry rejects the whole Torah, and anyone who rejects idolatry accepts the whole Torah." While Jewish life clearly includes more than the rejection of idolatry, an individual could not be part of this religious tradition without turning away from idolatry. Although it fell short of a complete and adequate definition of an ideal Jewish way of life, the rejection of idolatry served as a necessary, though not sufficient, definition of how to begin the process of shaping communal identity.

Finding An Ultimate, Essential Belief

Given the monotheistic nature of the Western cultural tradition, I do not believe that the rejection of idolatry is a compelling motive for a new shared Jewish identity today. Nevertheless, I wish to emphasize the creative approach this rabbinic statement suggests. Our challenge today is to identify a contemporary equivalent to idolatry, a "new idolatry" that must be rejected by anyone wishing to belong to the Jewish people.

While I shall not expand on this topic because of the constraints of space, I suggest considering some of the important characteristics of the idolatry model as a *via negativa* approach to re-defining Jewish identity. Like traditional idolatry, the "new idolatry" must be of great importance, something which warrants being categorized *yehareg ve-al ya'avov*, i.e., something worthy of ultimate concern and self-sacrifice. Secondly, it must be something that can provide a person with a distinctive, if not unique, identity.

Adhering to both characteristics—"ultimate significance" and "distinctiveness"—simultaneously is necessary in order to avoid the mistakes that emphasizing either one alone can produce. While choosing a universally accepted and valued principle, e.g., the rejection of murder, may seem a simple way of generating common concern, this would not provide the socially distinguishing binding force necessary for sustaining a vital particular identity.

On the other hand, choosing a belief or practice which is distinct and even important, but which is not of "ultimate significance," *yehareg ve-al ya'avov* is equally doomed to failure. Ultimate significance is essential to prevent the selection of particular denominational principles as suggestions for the basis of our communal identity. While these suggestions may reinforce the commitment of Jews to a particular denomination, they do not serve us in our attempt to find meanings for our communal identity which will be inclusive of all members of our people.

For some Jews, the loss of a shared communal identity is a tragic situation challenging us to change the course of our history, while for others, it is merely an unfortunate historical phenomenon which only confirms their belief that their particular approach to Judaism is the true and objective standard for membership in the Jewish people. The above suggestions presuppose a conversation with those who share the first perspective. I believe it is only a small minority of Jews who do not recognize and appreciate the importance of finding some direction for overcoming the problematic lack of shared communal identity in our times. We must focus our efforts on the needs of the majority, and persevere in the quest for new and creative approaches to building shared foundations for a meaningful identity for all Jews in the modern world. †

Balancing the divine energy

Daniel Siegel

I am grateful that Dr. Kraemer was willing to explore the question of controversy in Judaism. His serious and carefully chosen words should help us come to terms with the disagreements concerning us today, particularly as these disagreements become expressed in an exclusionary language which threatens to separate Jews from each other. Dr. Kraemer is honest in describing how shared history, commitment to God and Torah, and the experiences of defeat and exile, could shape a world view. The bonds created by these experiences and commitments outweighed any separateness brought on by differing opinions on matters of practice. His words call not for further disagreement, but for expansion and strengthening.

RABBI DANIEL SIEGEL, completing 10½ years as Jewish Chaplain at Dartmouth College, recently dedicated the first Center for Jewish Life at Dartmouth College. He now serves as Executive Director of Aleph: Alliance for Jewish Renewal.

Ta sh'ma

We invite you to send us your favorite text and comment. Submissions should not exceed 200 words. Be sure to include proper citation of sources. Hebrew will appear in transliteration.

■ Bernard S. Raskas

One who says, "What's mine is mine and yours is yours"—this is the average person. But there are, those who say this trait is the characteristic of Sodom.

PIRKEI AVOT 5:12

This is the ethic of "I don't want to get involved." Small wonder then that some rabbis would compare this to the sin of Sodom, which was inhospitality, selfishness, and lack of concern for the plight and the feelings of other human beings. Sodom wanted to isolate itself from people, and in the end all were destroyed. It was self-destruction.

There is a remarkable passage repeated in rabbinic literature (*Seder Eliyah Zutah, Midrash Lekah Tov, Ta'anit 11a*) that teaches, "Let not a person see the problems of a community, then go home, eat and drink and think, 'peace be upon my soul.' It is wrong."

This concept is deeply embedded in Jewish thought. The Bible (*Leviticus 19:16*) exhorts, "Do not stand idly by." This is echoed by a saying of modern moralists based on Dante: "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who are neutral." The last word, of course, belongs to Elie Wiesel, who noted, "Indifference is the worst sin."

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interact with each other in the field of this world, called the kingdom (*malchut*) which is also the *shechinah*, the divine indwelling, and which, according to Mendel Vitebsker, is also the human being. Thus, each of us is a part of the divine. The way in which we make our behavioral decisions depends on which of the spheres we believe best channels the transcendent divine energy needing to manifest in the world at a particular moment. That decision-making process, the weighing of whether to be inclusive or exclusive, lenient or strict, is a dispute for the sake of heaven.

The specific issue Dr. Kraemer uses to illustrate just how much is really at stake in talmudic disputes also manifests another aspect of how controversy is treated by the rabbis. We have here not just two disputants, Rabbi Akiba and Yosi, but also "the Talmud." It is "the Talmud" which reports that the difference of opinion is in fact about something of substance and not just apparent. "It" then goes on to demonstrate anecdotally that what it believes is the true nature of the dispute is, in fact, manifested in real life: Rabbi Yosi's followers actually ate fowl with dairy. Thus, before any effort is made to decide which of the two rabbis is correct, a third party to the conversation, "the Talmud," plays its own role by "helping" the disputants clarify their disagreement and better understand each other.

As a person trained in the skills of conflict resolution, I recognize this as very similar to the role I play when I mediate. The purpose of this activity is to help the parties arrive at a mutually agreeable resolution of their problem by helping them to understand each other, appreciate the consequences of not finding a solution, and by emphasizing the valuable relationship they share.

Reframing Disputes

Another look at the passage in *Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers)*, to which Dr. Kraemer alludes in his second paragraph, can help to make this more clear. In that *mishnah*, the rabbis say that the destiny of a dispute for the sake of heaven is that it will endure, while a dispute which is not for the sake of heaven will not endure. At first glance this might seem strange, for why would one want any controversy to endure? Yet, in mediation, that is exactly what happens. If the parties focus on what will happen "from now on," appreciate and understand each other's positions, and acknowledge the importance of their relationship, then they can agree to disagree over the facts of what happened (*e.g.*, who is responsible for the breakdown in the Jewish community over the correct way to prepare and then initiate people into Judaism) while still coming to an agreement over what the *halakhah* needs to be from now on. My own experience demonstrates that such outcomes are possible even when the stakes are very high.

I have learned the following from R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk about "disputes for the sake of heaven": Each of us is a world in miniature. Thus, we are the site of the interplay of the six spheres representing the major forces whose dynamic interrelationship and balance is this universe. These include expansive love (*hesed*), power and focus (*gevurah*), mercy and grace (*tiferet*), perseverance (*netzach*), beauty (*hod*), and physical/sexual energy (*yesod*). All these

Meetings between us become meetings of one divine energy with another, and the awareness of the divine transcendence is the unifying force. When we externalize this process and see the other not as a part of the divine and thus of ourselves, but rather as the embodiment of falsehood as we become the embodiment of truth, then this is a dispute which is not for the sake of heaven and it should be discontinued immediately. In the language of conflict resolution, it needs to be "reframed" into one which is for the sake of heaven.

Seeing The Blessings Within Disputes

Dr. Kraemer wrote of our need to reconnect to our shared experiences, that we are "all fellow survivors of the massacres of Hadrian and Hitler." Let me add that these experiences we have shared over the past decades, not only the Holocaust but the powerful effects of modernity itself, the changes in social and economic structure, the failure of material plenty to result in true happiness, and the end of the fixed and solid universe in the relativism of Einstein, have been profoundly unsettling for us all. And if Job could question the justice of God based on his personal experience, why not any and all of us? If Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev could "sue" God over the treatment the Jews were receiving in his day, is it not obvious that any survivor of the camps could also do so? Our certainties over the correctness of our positions, be they on the traditional or the liberal side, only mask the deep insecurity and confusion we are really feeling within.

A dispute for the sake of heaven is not defined by the subject matter of the dispute. Rather, and this is what makes controversy sacred, it is defined by the way in which we conduct that dispute. What endures is this process of determining the correct balances of divine energy appropriate to each moment within the context of the covenantal relationship with God and in which we all share. My prayer is that we can learn to approach each other again acknowledging how much we need each other, how troubled we all feel, and how much we would gain from engaging in disputes for the sake of Heaven. †

But others say about...

Gen X Jews

While I share some of Mik Moore's frustration with day school education (I'm a product of both a Conservative elementary school and a traditional "community" high school), I'd like to remind *Sh'ma's* readers that for the most part, the conservative and/or racist/sexist/homophobic/classist attitudes of today's generation of Jewish communal leadership were not shaped by an intensive Jewish day school education. Had contemporary Jewish leaders attended Jewish day schools, they would have been exposed to at least some of Judaism's rich heritage, complete with its diversity, disagreements and range of opinions.

Diversifying communal leadership and welcoming previously silenced perspectives is critical for the future health of Jewish communities and North American Jewish life. However, to exclude people from taking a role in Jewish leadership simply because they are Jewishly well-educated smacks of the same exclusivity which Mik Moore abhors.

Susan Sapiro
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Notes to our readers

Dr. Rela Mintz Geffen's correct title should read, "Professor of Sociology and Coordinator of the Programs in Jewish Communal Studies at Gratz College (*Sh'ma* 28/542).



Happy Hanukkah

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