Respecting Limits in Pluralism

Eugene B. Borowitz

Il of us need to be reminded from time to time that we can become too institution-bound, too defensive of our comfortable styles, too quick to find fault with other ways of doing things. I am not certain that the rabbis had a term for great-heartedness but I know that it is a central part of my Judaism. By all means, let us warmly reach out to one another and seek new means of enhancing our Jewish family solidarity.

But subscribers to *Sh'ma* are reading the wrong journal if they are not already committed to pluralism and its implementation, despite their occasional backsliding. Two other camps, I believe, need Harold Shulweis' inspired teaching more, but are also unlikely to be swayed by it. The first group consists of that mass of putative Jews who are happy being "a decent human being" and don't see

why they should bother being Jewish. Yes, under Harold's charismatic leadership they may come to his non-denominational school and thus overcome their alleged objections to Jewishness and its parochialisms. But the several decades-long records of such transdenominational adult education institutes around the country indicate a highly limited success with marginal Jews. By all means, let us do what we can to increase Torah, but let us not anticipate messianic results from this or any other newly installed program.

The other camp of resisters comprises those who believe they have a reasonably accurate understanding of what God wants of us. The uncommon but telling case is Hebrew Christians, who know that the Messiah has already come. The more common case is the believing Orthodox. We may cite all the well-worn evidence of pluralism in our tradition or wave the banner of academic respectability over us, but they have Jewish standards —

revelation and tradition — to prove they are right. For sincerely Orthodox Jews, revelation — God's gift of the Written and Oral Torah at Sinai — is the spiritual spine of an upright Jew, and only such pluralism in accordance with its ideals of discipline and limits is acceptable. And with equivalent certainty, Hebrew Christians know that the classic Christian reading of the Bible is true.

We will not have much success encouraging

people whose pluralism is more limited than ours to read their texts in our liberal fashion. But I agree with Harold that the best approach to greater openness among us is to take a pragmatic track. The *de facto* practice of pluralism has made our communities relatively more peaceful than many were in the past. That is a good, practical reason for all of us to be as accommodating as possible. Moreover, as

Rabbi Soloveitchik said thirty years or so ago, while we cannot talk theology with other Jews, we can all discuss the numerous social issues that confront us. Something like that was the premise on which Sh'ma was founded. I have sometimes found it possible to discuss theology across the revelational divides — but only when we do not discuss or press for the equality of all voices. For many Jews, God not only has a vote but a veto and monotheistic pluralism never included both God and idols. Committed pluralist that I am, I will defend my sense of proper limits and deny Hebrew Christians an equal voice in the Jewish conversation.

Eugene B. Borowitz is celebrating his seventy-fifth birthday with the publication of two books, The Jewish Moral Virtues, done in collaboration with Frances W. Schwartz, and Judaism After Modernity, Papers from a Decade of Fruition. Rabbi Borowitz is the founding editor of Sh'ma.

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