

ISRAEL AND PLURALISM: FRAMING AN IDEOLOGY FOR THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER

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The concept of pluralism is the foundation upon which the North American Jewish Community Center movement is based. Israel, which is a pluralistic society in structure but not in mentality, illustrates several implications of pluralism that can be usefully applied to the Center movement: an emphasis on the ties that bind all Jews together, the encouragement of disagreement and a respect for disagreement, the development of strategies that promote a toleration of differences, and a recognition of the importance of religious expression.

The purpose of this article is to identify perspectives on pluralism as witnessed and studied in a 3-month fellowship in Israel and to suggest the means of strengthening the ethos of pluralism in the Jewish Community Center. In recent years, the term "movement" has been invoked in interpreting Center purposes. As in other social developments, such as the "civil rights movement," the term suggests an ideology. The Center movement's ideology has the concept of pluralism at its foundation. The experience in Israel, which in many ways reflects both paradigmatic and paradoxical dimensions of pluralism, helps focus this concept with its dramatic portrayal and betrayal of its components. Thus, we are able to draw implications from the drama of the Israel experience to ensure fidelity to this principle in our North American Jewish Centers and communities.

PLURALISM AND ZIONISM

Pluralism is defined as a social condition in which disparate religious, ethnic, racial, and political groups are part of a common community and live together harmoniously,

enriched by their differences. It is the ultimate condition of democracy and freedom. Unlike the melting pot theory that sought to deny differences, pluralism defines democracy as the right to be different. How does Israel measure up to this lofty ideal? How did its social and political evolution influence its current circumstance of pluralism?

In an Israel shaped and ruled in its formative years by Socialist-Secularists who were politically animated by the Labor Party, the concept of the collective predominated over individual rights. Unlike the United States, a multiethnic society with a positive ethos of tolerance and individual rights as reflected in its Bill of Rights, Israel has no such document. The ethos of Israel was to foster the will of the collective and to concern itself with the destiny of the Jewish people. The mission of Zionism was to serve a "people" not "individuals" and the state was founded on this principle. In the United States, tolerance is a governing ideal; in Israel, sufferance is the governing ideal. As it has been said, "It is easy to pray for the ingathering of exiles, but it is different to live with them."

To its credit, Israel recognizes this problem. The Army and the schools teach tolerance as part of their curriculum. The Adenauer Foundation is developing a cur-

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riculum on tolerance at Hebrew University, and Savlanut (the Hebrew word for tolerance) is an organization that plans symposia on tolerance for Israeli citizens. As one Israeli put it, "We need to discover brothers we don't even know." Indeed, Israel understands the cumulative impact of its obsession with the collective and is equally conscious of the dizzying multitude of religious, ethnic, and political populations and factions within its midst and of the conflicts that they breed. Given its social history and prevailing heterogeneity, Israel not only survives and overcomes, it moves forward dynamically and tenaciously, and it continues to absorb and integrate without respite.

In the United States, when Jews do not like one another, they form a new synagogue or move to a new community. In Israel, there are no cities of refuge, no gilded ghettos, no new Israels. The country pulsates with the turbulence of diversity and a clashing of cultures unrivaled elsewhere. Israel is a pluralistic society in structure, not yet in mentality. Its problems are so complex and bewildering that they leap out at you and force you to think about how they affect you personally and professionally. Viewed from this backdrop, there are a number of implications for the Jewish Community Center movement in North America.

A JUDAISM THAT UNITES

In Jerusalem on Yom Hashoa, a siren echoed throughout the country, and I found myself standing still in utter silence for one minute with almost every other Jew in Israel. The country was paralyzed as Jews throughout the land stood in awesome, frozen silence in memory of the martyrs of the Holocaust. Hasidim and Mitnagdim, ultra-Orthodox and ultra non-Orthodox, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, right wingers and left wingers, natives and tourists, old and young, rich and poor stood next to each other. During this one-minute period, all differences evaporated.

All Jews stood as one in memory of a painful episode in their common heritage. The imagery of a united, mournful, and motionless Jewry in Israel was almost surrealistic, but there is a lesson to be learned from it.

When Jews confront the issue of survival, particularly in relation to their past, they coalesce. Daniel Elazar observes that when the intifada began, there was a closing of ranks. The quarrels of the ultra-Orthodox and extreme secularists disappeared from the streets. Nobody fought over opening movie theatres on Shabbat. Although hawks and doves continued to express their views openly, the decibel level of Israeli politics was lowered noticeably.

Jews in Israel can debate endlessly their political future. Yet, when they commemorate Yom Hashoa, Yom Hazikaron, Yom Ha'atzmaut, and Yom Yerushalayim, they weep as brothers, pray in solemn oneness, and rejoice in frenzied unity. The past, the shared memories, history, and heroes bind one to another even as they know that their opinions about the future divide them. The past can be reconciling and harmonizing, not in terms of one's interpretation of the meaning of history, but in the collective memory of a shared heritage that recalls our people's struggle for survival.

In North America, the Jewish Community Center movement, committed to peoplehood and pluralism, may gain some insights from the Israel experience. In the Talmud, there is a principle of logic known as *Kal Vachomer*: if it is true for the extreme case, it would surely be even more so for the case that is less extreme. Israel, with all its notorious conflict, even hatred, is able to find and plan moments of peace and coherence through its commitment to memories of the past and its obsession with survival. Surely an agency that is a powerful agent for Jewish continuity can maximize its commitment to pluralism by underscoring these same common threads that unite us. Remember that the condition of pluralism can be achieved by means

that may appear to be dramatically opposite; namely, by accentuating and accepting difference (to be discussed later) and by fostering harmony and commonalities through an understanding of the ties that bind us. These ties are not difficult to identify for they are guideposts for the Center's ideology. They include a strong emphasis on shared Jewish values, such as community responsibility, faith, tzedekah, religious expression, social justice, family stability, Jewish learning, and Shalom Bayit. The teaching and programming of these values should permeate our services. Creative programmatic expressions of our collective memory that are designed to illuminate our common heritage, with particular emphasis on the sobering and healing impact of our struggle for survival, would contribute immeasurably to fostering a sense of unity and commonality for a people that has in fact survived because of its rich and magnificent mosaic of diversity.

DISSENT AND DISAGREEMENT

Pluralism encourages disagreement, but discourages dissent, which involves a rejection of the system. One can express disagreement at any time, and sometimes crises are the most appropriate times to do so. Disagreement over policies is an essential part of the democratic process. Unfortunately, in Israel, dissent is widespread, and its corollaries are adversity and hatred. Thus, Israel is pluralistic in composition and structure, but not in mentality and spirit. The fundamentalist reaction to expressions of modernity within religious life animates this problem, and the consequences are both foreboding and frightening. Our tradition teaches us that the Second Temple was destroyed not because of idol worship or heresy but because Jews treated one another with *Sinat Chinom* — hatred. God apparently viewed this deficiency as worthy of capital punishment. In Israel, there is too much *Sinat Chinom* growing out of an inability to differentiate

disagreement from dissent and anger for the opinion from the opinion giver. The Haredim react violently to women seeking a sense of participation at the Western Wall, and the secularists and others react hatefully to their violent reactions. The vicious cycle spirals, and the spirit of pluralism is thwarted.

Our consciousness of this phenomenon should sensitize us to the nuances of pluralism in Centers. In our agencies, we should encourage disputation and provoke controversy, not for the sake of controversy, but from our conviction about the importance of a free exchange of ideas and respect for difference. We must remember that Halachah grew out of disputation within the spirit of love for Torah. During the time of the oral Torah, there was much disagreement, but there was no corollary of hatred because there was respect for difference and for the framework in which that difference was expressed. It was somewhat akin to the Hegelian construct of synthesis and antithesis. One posits a theory, out of which grows an antithesis, which in turn generates a conflict, out of which grows a deeper level of knowledge, which in turn creates a thesis and antithesis, and the process builds on itself. Similarly in social work education, we learn that the highest level of decision making comes not from domination or even compromise but from integration, a process of conflict that is resolved not from one alternative or the other, but from a new and creative synthesis, a resolution that is better than both alternatives.

Our Center programs of education should be designed to help people understand and struggle with all dimensions of a given issue, to raise their level of consciousness and knowledge, to help them form convictions on critical issues, and to be comfortable in expressing these convictions so that they are able to enter the arena of disagreement with confidence. Every Jewish issue that is important to the Jewish people should be part of our curriculum of Jewish education. Too many of our members suf-

fer not from the quality of their opinions, but from the fact that they have no opinions. Jewish education means that we help people with two dimensions of Jewish education as we satisfy our mission of pluralism. First, we help them enter the arena of disagreement, and second, we design the environment of education in a way that teaches respect for disagreement. All too often, our strategy and objectives in education are not planfully formulated to convey our own conviction of the importance of separating opinion from opinion giver, of civility, and perhaps most important, of the possibility of adjusting one's point of view. Our tradition teaches us about the classic conflicts between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. What we do not always learn, however, is a particularly relevant quality of the school of Hillel. Its students were required to learn the arguments of the Shammai school for two reasons: to understand fully the other point of view and to leave themselves open to modifying their point of view. In our planning for Jewish education programs, we would do well to follow in the spirit of Bet Hillel.

PLURALISM BREEDS CONFLICT

Zionism strove to integrate two conflicting premises: the collective particularism of Jewish aspirations to an independent national state and the universalism of modern Western civilization (Cohen, 1983). The Jewish state was to be an enlightened state, one in which the secular values of freedom, justice, and equality for all citizens without difference of race, nationality, or religion would be realized fully. It was to be a fully democratic state in which universalistic principles would govern the relations between all citizens. According to the high expectations of Zionist idealists, it was to be a "light unto the nations." The Zionist dream called for an ingathering of all the exiles, but it did not envision the nature nor the extent of the problems resulting

from the conflicting principles of particularism and universalism.

The absorption of immigrants, particularly Sephardic Jews during the 1950s-1970s, is a salient illustration of the consequence of these conflicting components (Cohen, 1983). During that time, the government conceived of absorption in broad ideological terms as a complete re-education or re-socialization of the newcomer who would become a new person, switch worlds, and internalize a new scale of secular and nationalistic values. The Orientals were required to relinquish most of their traditional values. Too, they did not enjoy the protection and assistance of powerful patrons. Orientals became second-class citizens and for a long time were considered incompletely absorbed and judged incompetent to perform central roles in the emergent society.

The first significant protest movement of Oriental Jewish youth began in the early 1970s in the form of the Black Panthers who were the precursors of the distinctly ethnic Tami Party. In time, the realization of the consequences of deculturation of the Oriental community led to an emerging consciousness of ethnic ideology or civil religion, with efforts to establish Oriental Jewry as an equal but distinct partner with the Ashkenazim within the common framework of the Jewish nation. Israel seemed to have learned its lesson from the early 1970s so that the resettlement of Soviet emigres during the late 1970s was far more humane and sensitive than its earlier absorption of the Sephardim. In fact, this superior treatment was recognized by the Sephardim and contributed to the Black Panther uprising.

The Oriental absorption experience suggests two important insights that have relevance to our agencies. Pluralism is a double-edged sword. When societies adopt the principle of cultural pluralism, either in the formation of a state based on a messianic dream, or as an expression of democracy that welcomes all who wish to

experience the sweet taste of freedom, they must recognize the challenges of diversity and expressions of ethnic distinctiveness. When people are encouraged to express their individuality under the liberating banner of democracy and freedom, there is inevitably a reactive backlash to these expressions, which results in conflict, intolerance, and a mentality of antipluralism. In other words, a policy of pluralism that does not take into account the sensitive management of pluralism leads to antipluralism. When Theodore Herzl accommodated the religious elements within the Zionist movement after the Basel conference of 1897, encouraging Orthodox elements to organize themselves into a political party within the World Zionist Organization, and Mizrachi did in fact join, he could not anticipate the Haredi-Secularist conflict of 80 years later. In fact, he was heralded as a statesman for his pluralistic and inclusionary policy. Similarly, when Ben Gurion and the Mapai Party granted concessions to the Orthodox community to achieve unity in an agreement known as the "status quo," he assumed that Orthodoxy would eventually dissolve while he was buying time for a front of unity and pluralism. But a policy of pluralism does not ensure a state of pluralism, just as the policy of Glasnost has boomeranged in recent days. The freedom of expression inspired by Glasnost has also "liberated" the virulent anti-Semitic group, the Palmyat, to demonstrate openly and wantonly their hatred for Jews. Without planning, forethought, and education, a policy of pluralism can lead to antipluralism.

In our agencies, therefore, it is not sufficient to embrace the concept of pluralism. We must also anticipate its impact and potential consequences. It is not sufficient to welcome minority groups into the Center, such as Hasidim, Israelis, and Soviet emigres, without preparing educationally and politically for their integration and for the acceptance of their unique differences.

The Soviet emigres are a case in point. Our agencies are an important instrument in the resettlement of Soviet emigres. As humanists and pluralists, we welcome them and seek ways to integrate them into our agencies and to connect them to Jewish communal life. Yet, we must also anticipate problems that could result from this pluralistic ethos.

One Center has been so responsive to Soviet Jews that the rest of its membership no longer uses the Center pool on Sundays because it is so heavily populated by Soviet Jews during that time. Other agencies report that there is hostility in the community because Soviet Jews are using scholarship funds for camp and nursery school that would normally be granted to local indigent families. Still others report that there is arrant discrimination among Center members toward Soviet Jews whom they feel to be socially and culturally Philistine. Other agencies report similar if not identical problems with regard to ultra-Orthodox or Israeli subgroups in their communities. To embrace these groups as members or, even more problematic, for leadership positions, because we are accepting of all Jews under a policy of pluralism, does not automatically ensure them a pluralistic environment. We need to understand the limitations of tolerance and the sociological and political dynamics in the integration of diverse populations within our agencies; from this understanding can be derived environmental and educational strategies that will help facilitate successful absorption. We may never be able to eliminate intolerance, but surely we can blunt its force with a proactive response: an anticipation of what happens to people sociologically and psychologically when they are faced with the reality of cultural pluralism and the development of appropriate policy responses.

The second insight evident in the Oriental absorption experience in Israel relates to the power of particularity and a caution against the distortion of pluralism. In time

the Sephardic community has made great strides, although true equality has yet to be achieved. The contribution of Oriental Jews to the Zionist enterprise is now recognized as the history of Oriental Jewry and its suffering at the hands of the Arabs are taught in schools. More attention is paid to the literary, artistic, and musical heritage of Oriental Jewry. They have achieved greater political strength and in fact were a major factor in dislodging the Labor Party from power in the 1977 Likud victory. There is now a 25% intermarriage rate between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. The power of their particularity could not be suppressed, and the policy to deculturize them was doomed to fail.

The authentic definition of pluralism allows for the expression of difference within the common. To suggest that pluralism means that one must blend into a universal community is a distortion of pluralism, and, in fact, is the antithesis of pluralism because it is exclusionary. As an illustration, a group of Orthodox parents request a separate unit in the Center day camp. They want their children to have an experience that would reflect their commitment to traditional mitzvot and at the same time be part of a common community and be integrated into many of the camp activities. We should view this request as totally legitimate within the framework of authentic pluralism. To argue that the Center is a unifying instrument that stresses integrative, communal activity and where people who are different can share their differences is to miss the point of pluralism. Separation does not mean parochialism or rejection. It is the means by which people say, "We want to foster the perpetuation of our unique traditions, our particularity, even as we remain part of the common community." To answer this group by saying that you can only express your difference as you blend in with the majority is to pervert pluralism because it in fact limits and excludes the expression of difference within the common.

The acceptance of difference within the

common, as compared to blending or even worse to deculturation through integration, would apply equally to other Jewish ideological groups. A group of Conservative Jewish children who attend Ramah Camp whose sense of "*ruach*" is different from that of the majority, or a group of Reform Jewish children who want to be together to express their unique perspective should also be encouraged to "separate" if they desire to do so. Every form of positive Jewish behavior that conveys a passion for unique expression should be welcome into the common. We humanists must learn that separate is not a dirty word and that our community orientation is not subverted by experiences of separatism that are in fact consistent with authentic pluralism. Unfortunately, the Orthodox community is frequently in the center of such controversy, and the reaction is often to that specific population and not the issue. When a colleague recently reported how his Center had scheduled the athletic and swim facilities in order to accommodate the large Hasidic population in his community with separate usage periods, it was evident that he understood how pluralism can truly be translated within our agencies.

PLURALISM AND RELIGION

Perhaps the most critical problem of pluralism in Israel is the religious conflict that is primarily seen in the opposition of Orthodox to secular and Orthodox to Orthodox. It is often expressed in vitriol and violence, particularly as it relates to concepts of Zionism, Messianism, and fundamental Jewish beliefs. For example, the Haredi believe that Israel remains in Galut (exile) because it is governed by secular Jews, whereas the Mercaz Harav (followers of Rav Cook including the Gush Emunim) believe that the Land of Israel is sacrosanct, even if it is controlled by secularists, and represents a beginning step toward Geula (redemption). Clearly, there is no monolithic definition of religious life in Israel or even within the separate religious sub-

groups. The divisions are deep and wide and, in recent years, have become more pronounced and politicized. Pluralism, in its ideal form, recognizes the authenticity of each group as part of the rich texture of society and encourages diverse religious expression. When one group imposes and impinges on the rights of others, pluralism breaks down and a schism develops.

The issue of pluralism and religion as it relates to Jewish Community Centers lies in the traditional response of Centers to religion, which is one of avoidance and neutrality. What Israel teaches us is that religion, however divisive, is a force that must be reckoned with, particularly in an environment that strives to be pluralistic. The religious community cannot be underestimated for it has a powerful influence on the country and contributes profoundly to its biblical and historical character. As one enlightened secularist stated, "There can be no Israel without the Orthodox religious community because it serves as a reminder that there is a relationship between Israel and Torah." In our own communities, we must also acknowledge the significant role played by religious institutions in the formation and expression of Jewish identity. In Centers, we have never really come to terms with our feelings toward religion and religious institutions other than to proclaim our universality and neutrality and to deny any theological orientation. Our credo is that religion belongs in the synagogue, whereas Jewish culture, education, and identity belong in the Center. We no longer need to tread carefully in our expressions about religion. Now especially, as Centers have committed themselves to becoming significant agents of Jewish continuity and Jewish education, we should be sufficiently secure to embrace religious expression as an important component of our pluralistic ideology.

The nineteenth-century philosopher, William James, was so struck by the diversity of the world around him that he found it difficult to retain a belief in God's oneness. In the end, he maintained God's

unity to his satisfaction by conceiving of the universe as a great federal republic; one infinitely pluralistic and diverse but constitutionally ordered under God. How else do we find order in this world of diversity, except through God's oneness, which prevents us from lapsing into the vulgar relativism of "anything that exists goes" and requires us to find a universal constitutional order that recognizes both the reality and legitimacy of diversity, yet keeps it within bounds (Elazar, 1988). Diverse religious expression is one way by which we exercise free will, make moral choices, and express ourselves Jewishly. Religious expression seen in this light must be embraced uninhibitedly by Centers as a primary value in discharging our commitment to pluralism. If we can at least bring ourselves to feel that the belief in the oneness of God does not undermine our universalism or offend the secularists or atheists among us, we need not be guarded in expressing ourselves about religion because the support of religious expression is germane to our own purposes. In fact, the principle of "oneness of God" simply offers us boundaries so that we can express our free will and beliefs pluralistically.

We need to be more proactive in encouraging our membership to affiliate with synagogues and attend day schools, to explore avenues of religious expression, to increase observance of mitzvot, to adopt a Jewish philosophy of life, and to be able to articulate it. We must recognize our own limitations and not gloat over the fact that many members now exclusively define their "Jewish affiliation" by referring to their membership in the Center. For some, it may very well be a convenient alternative that serves to protect them from a more serious commitment to Judaism. The Center can, in fact, be used as the last bastion of the secularist when we make no Jewish religious or philosophical demands on our members. This is not to deny the heroic work done by Centers in inspiring Jewish identity through activity and education. Neither is the point being made to suggest

that we ought to adopt a single religious orientation. Certainly, this would be anti-theoretical to our communal and pluralistic approach. Yet, pluralism does not mean the denial of religious expression. Rather, it means we do not practice one form of religion or the other because we are accepting of all forms of Jewish religious expression. It would be a measure of our maturity to recognize all that we do that is so positive, but also to recognize that we can take our members only so far and that we should encourage them to move further and deeper into Judaism in order to find meaning and purpose in the exercise of their free will and in the belief in the oneness of God.

PLURALISM AS AN IDEOLOGY

Many years ago, Centers were subject to harsh criticism by skeptics who questioned the depth of their Jewish commitment and program. They argued that, although Centers did sponsor some benign Jewish activities, in truth, they were superficial and too universal, and in reality, the only way to reach people meaningfully was through a more Jewishly religious orientation. How ironic it is that today, precisely because there is such religious strife and bitterness, almost a schism, that pluralism in counterpoint emerges as a kind of profound ideology itself. In contrast to the destructiveness and divisiveness of religious conflict, pluralism represents a calming and nurturing credo that accepts, embraces, and unites all Jews. Religious fervency, which was purported to give us depth,

now brings us heartache and intolerance, whereas pluralism, which was purported to be superficial, now brings us depth and understanding. We take pride in our commitment to pluralism because our Centers embody this principle in both faith and action, creed and deed. We believe in the integrity of every Jew whom we recognize is created in the image of God. We proclaim unequivocally that all Jews, regardless of their beliefs or orientation, will find acceptance and validation in our family of Centers. Even more so, we are committed to help them find opportunities for personal and spiritual growth within a Jewish environment that unites and binds through memory and tradition, that differentiates between disagreement and dissent, that invites inclusiveness even as it accepts difference and separation, that supports freely religious expression as part of pluralism, and that recognizes Israel as a fount of knowledge, inspiration, introspection, and, perhaps one day, the transcendental world of truth.

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