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Sh'ma

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Celebrating 25 years of diversity and dialogue

In this issue

What unites America? Sh'ma readers and invited guests offer a potpourri of sometimes distressing, sometimes inspiring answers.

Talking together in public Paula E. Hyman

There is no easy answer to the question of what unites America. In fact, it is tempting to reply, "Nothing, except our common residence within the borders of the same legal entity". As a historian and especially as a Jew, though, I am well aware that America has been different from European nations and remains so even today.

Unlike most societies, we have always seen ourselves as a nation in process of becoming. We have looked forward more than we have looked back. (In fact, that trait of privileging the future over the past has been a source of tension for Jews who cannot imagine a future that is not deeply rooted in the past.) Nor have we linked our identity as Americans to a tribal sense of ethnicity that derives its cohesiveness from the exclusion of the Other.

Where is Our Shared Civic Space

It may seem naive at this moment in history, when we are rightly sensitive to racism, xenophobia, and continued discrimination against various groups, to point to America's toleration, and sometimes celebration, of diversity, but these elements of American culture have been present since our earliest days as a nation.

America's recognition of diversity, however, was accompanied by vigorous attention to the civic space of our society. American culture was built on the presumption that individuals of various origins would meet together in public institutions to address their common social concerns.

What is most disturbing in the contemporary American scene is the evidence that we no longer recognize the existence of shared civic space. We may attribute this to identity politics, where membership in a group overrides a sense of commonality, or to an egotistic individualism that denies social obligation. But it seems to define our cultural malaise.

The Blessing of Multiculturalism

I have focused on political culture because I consider it the central question facing Americans. Multiculturalism *per se* is not the problem; its excesses are. We must not allow a radical fringe and its conservative opponents to define multiculturalism. As Jews we should remember that a multicultural approach that avoids both apologetics and a focus on victimization legitimates the value of all minority cultures, including our own. It has enabled us to uncover the historical experiences and voices of women as well as ethnic minorities, to interpret the world as it is, in all its diversity.

The entry of Jewish Studies into the American university can be seen as the first step toward a multicultural curriculum. We should proclaim that fact while fostering the intellectual and political conversations that are essential to a healthy American cultural tapestry. □

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