

Adventures in Pluralism, Part 1: The Other Israeli Conversion Crisis

Posted At : August 2, 2010 7:40 PM | Posted By : Seth Chalmer

Related Categories: belief, denominations, peoplehood, theology, identity, pluralism, diaspora relations, conversion, values

With the recent Israeli conversion bill **generating controversy** related to pluralism in Jewish denominational context, and with the Cordoba House / “Ground Zero Mosque” plan **generating controversy** related to pluralism in interreligious context, pluralism is very much in public debate right now, whether or not the word is used explicitly in discussing these issues.

But what *is* pluralism? Let us consult the Oxford English Dictionary:

pluralism

noun

1. a condition or system in which two or more states, groups, principles, etc. coexist; a political theory or system of power-sharing among a number of political parties.
2. a theory or system that recognizes more than one ultimate principle.

Within these two definitions I count three basic ideas: coexistence (1), power-sharing (2), and recognition of multiple principles as legitimate(3).

Of course, these three concepts only scratch the surface of potential meanings.

Wikipedia’s disambiguation page for pluralism, for its part, lists fifteen definitions or applications of the concept. Clearly, then, pluralism isn’t one thing; it is itself (appropriately enough) plural.

How, then, can we discuss it? Perhaps we ought to begin by examining pluralism in the wild, as it were – in application, or attempted application, to real situations. The BJPA features **many documents on the topic of pluralism**, some related to intra-Jewish matters, and some to interreligious or intercultural relations. **Over the course of a few posts I intend to examine a handful of these documents in an attempt to answer these questions: what do pluralistic solutions entail; and when do they, or don't they, work?**

Let us begin with a timely look back to the 1990s. In **“Orthodox and Non-Orthodox: How to Square the Circle”**, the prolific **Daniel J. Elazar** notes that the divide between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews constitutes not merely a situation of different approaches, but “two contrary understandings of Judaism”:

The Chief Rabbinate and the Israeli religious establishment, and, for that matter, probably an overwhelming majority of Israelis as well, regardless of their own religious practices, understand Judaism to be an overarching structure, an edifice erected over thousands of years, ...a complex but standing structure that technically never changes but is only reinterpreted in a limited way to function within changing realities. For those who believe and observe, this edifice gives them their daily, even hourly, marching orders. For those who observe less or do not observe at all except perhaps at the very margins of the edifice, the edifice still stands and they expect Jewish individuals, when they do act in religious ways, to do so within it. To

steal an example from another religion, Judaism is like a great cathedral. It stands there and delivers its religious message whether worshippers enter or not, and while there can be discussions about what are the contents of that message, the character of the edifice is unmistakable.

American non-Orthodox Jews, who are the vast majority in the United States... see Judaism from an American religious perspective that has been shaped by the Protestant experience, as a matter of personal spirituality and belief first and foremost; which means that Jews must begin by personally accepting the fundamental beliefs and traditions of Judaism in some way but then are free to apply them operationally in ways that they find meaningful and satisfying. True, Conservative Judaism accepts the existence of the edifice of Torah and halakhah, but understands Torah more as a constitution than as a detailed code, a constitution which can and must be reinterpreted in every age according to its spirit and not merely according to the plain meaning of the text or something close to it.

Reform Judaism formally does not even accept that. For it, halakhah is not binding but is merely one of the sources of Jewish religious tradition to which attention should be paid...

Addressing **an earlier “conversion crisis”** (which mirrors the present crisis on certain ways), Elazar endorses the solution of the Neeman Committee, which proposed in 1997 that the Israeli government

create "conversion institutes," to prepare potential converts for conversion. The institutes would be sponsored by the Jewish Agency, and operated jointly by the three denominations. Aspiring converts would attend classes at the institutes but the actual conversion would be performed under the auspices of the Chief Rabbinate, according to Orthodox guidelines. With the establishment of these institutes, the Reform and Conservative movements would agree not to perform conversions [in Israel] outside the framework of the institutes.

To Elazar, this solution

is so ingenious and important, precisely because it does appear to square the circle to everyone's advantage in some ways and to everyone's disadvantage in others. The Israeli rabbinical establishment will have to give up its exclusiveness by accepting Reform and Conservative involvement in common operational matters such as training for conversion, performance of marriages, and handling the provision of religious services to the Israeli Jewish population. At the same time, by having a majority in every body making decisions in those areas, they will keep control and be able to honestly claim that the decisions are halakhic from their standpoint and based on their standards. The Reform and Conservative movements and their rabbis will win a measure of recognition as partners in the Jewish religious enterprise, something that has been totally denied to them as movements in Israel in the past, but they will in turn have to accept the ultimate Orthodox power in determining what is halakhah in these matters. Orthodox Jews should be very pleased with this because it will bring Reform

Judaism back to the recognition of the binding character of halakhah, at least in Israel, an achievement of no small proportions if their interest is honestly religious and not merely a question of who has political power...

In fact, I would argue that the compromise should not only be agreed to for Israel but for the rest of the world as well, thereby creating a basic and halachic uniformity for issues such as conversion and marriage. That would be a great achievement, especially if in doing so we also recognize that we do live in a world of plural expression.

Personally, I share Elazar's enthusiasm for the Neeman Committee's solution, and the wish that such a system could be established for the entire Jewish world. I also believe, however, that the chances of such a system being established, inside or outside Israel, are virtually nil.

First, the non-Orthodox movements do not, by and large, see their decisions about lenient requirements for conversion to Judaism as purely practical measures; they believe they are acting in accordance with important principles related to the deepest meanings of Judaism, and they point to nothing younger than the Book of Ruth as precedent and proof-text for their interpretations. While some non-Orthodox Jews might accept a compromise for the sake of unity, others will stand ready to do battle over these principles. To acquiesce to Orthodox standards of conversion would represent, for many Jews, not merely an inconvenience, but a cowardly surrender to an extremist, unwelcoming and immoral approach to conversion.

As for the Orthodox world, while certain Modern Orthodox Jews might embrace the Neeman model, many Orthodox Jews would reject it as an explicit recognition of the legitimacy of the non-Orthodox rabbinate. For these Jews, rabbinic authority is not merely a tool of logistical power; it is a sacred trust deriving from an unbroken chain of leadership which began with Moses, a mantle which has always been fiercely guarded against heterodoxy in order to ensure that the great Tradition which began at Sinai will be neither diluted nor abandoned. To cooperate with non-Orthodox rabbis in any way, for these Jews, would be an unconscionable breach in a wall at which no lesser authority than God explicitly commanded the Jewish people to stand guard.

The Neeman Committee model of cooperation, then, asks two significant positions on the Jewish denominational spectrum – one of which dominates the Israeli religious establishment, and the other of which dominates the American religious establishment – simply to abandon their core principles. This solution may be desirable to those of us “in the middle,” but is it really pluralism?

Returning to my three-pronged interpretation of the OED's definition of pluralism above – coexistence (1), power-sharing (2), and recognition of multiple principles as legitimate (3) – it seems so; **the Neeman Committee solution fits all three of these concepts.** The proposal envisions an Israel in which Jews of all denominations continue to practice (#1); in which rabbis of three of these denominations share power in the conversion process (#2); and in which, since the Israeli government grants all three denominations an official role, all three denominations are given government recognition as being legitimate to some degree (#3).

The reasons that this solution is unlikely to work can also be expressed in terms of the three-pronged definition: both #1 and #3 are unacceptable to the extreme left and the extreme right of the Jewish denominational spectrum, both of which consider one

another to be immoral and illegitimate, and each of which wishes that the other would disappear. #2 might be acceptable to the extreme left out of a reluctant pragmatism, but is unacceptable to the extreme right, which sees sharing power with non-Orthodox rabbis as being inherently against God's explicit command. All three elements, then, face considerable opposition.

Can a framework so problematic for so much of the relevant population ever be workable? Is pluralism itself inherently impossible in this context? If not, then (to borrow Elazar's phrase) how can the circle be squared?