Sh'ma שמע

36/629
March 2006/Nisan 5766
A publication of
Jewish Family & Life!
JFLMedia.com

## Inside Pluralism



*Sh'ma* thanks Avoda Arts and the National Foundation for Jewish Culture for their support of this issue and our redesigned *Nish'ma* page.

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THIS ISSUE of *Sh'ma* explores pluralism in its broadest sense — textual, educational, theological, expressive. At the core of the journal's agenda, for more than 30 years, has been a commitment to understanding and stretching pluralism. Following are essays on theological and textual pluralism that highlight the breadth of diversity in our interpretative tradition and a piece on schools where both curriculum and culture support pluralist ideals.

With this issue we launch a new *Nish'ma* page — a visual expression of Jewish explication and practice. Every other month our simulated page of Talmud will be offered as a full-color, poster-sized centerfold with artists engaging each others' work in the fashion of talmudic times. In upcoming months we hope to broaden that invitation to performance artists as well, as they interact with the artistic image through music and video clips on our website. Our new contemporary Talmud page will underline the wide range of ways — visual, as well as textual — that one can study and master Jewish knowledge. Always we'll be a textual people, but opening our texts to interpretive arts gives us new, crucial ways to experience Judaism.

# Pluralist Education

*Susan Shevitz*

PLURALISM IS ONE RESPONSE to the growing diversity of contemporary Jewry. As an approach to Jewish education, pluralism is intertwined with the basic question that has challenged the Jewish community since the Enlightenment: how is Jewish identity maintained in a free and open society? The question is even sharper today as Jews and others are faced with endless choices about every aspect of life. Religion, vocation, avocation, family, and gender are not fixed and stable identities; choices can be made and unmade in sometimes startling ways. Pluralist settings are becoming places to prepare people to affirm and develop their own Jewish identities while respecting different approaches and engaging productively with people unlike themselves. This is a formidable challenge in schools, camps, and other Jewish educational venues where identity development is central to the agenda. In such settings, two fundamental questions must be addressed: what exactly is meant by pluralism, and how will this understanding be enacted?

### Conceptions of Pluralism

The term pluralism — especially in Jewish education — is used widely and imprecisely. There are many ways that it is conceptualized, and schools cluster around three positions. **Demographic pluralism** recognizes that the participants in the school, camp, or other setting are diverse, and this diversity necessitates a sensitivity to the range of needs. Practices and policies are developed to enable the learners to feel comfortable and well served. This is the approach of many community schools that are not affiliated with denominational movements.

A second type of pluralism, based on a philosophy of appreciative tolerance that emerges from both Jewish and western notions of tolerance and respect, can be called **coexistence pluralism**. As a response to its diverse population, the educational institution develops ways to recognize differences in a respectful manner. This approach is rooted in appreciation for both diversity and particularity and posits that people and groups holding different positions can still work toward shared goals.

A third approach can be best described as **generative pluralism**. This also derives its authority from Jewish value concepts that recognize the uniqueness of each individual who, created in God's image, reflects aspects of the multiple dimensions of God's truths. It sees the Jewish interpretive tradition, as well as how Jewish life has been organized and

lived in different eras, as evidence of pluralism of thought and, at times, action. This pluralism asserts that Jews need to encounter people and ideas that are different from their own in settings that support the exploration of "otherness" and generate new approaches that draw from a multiplicity of perspectives. This pluralist encounter — where participants risk reassessing and revising their own ideas by hearing and learning from others — is necessary for Jews and Judaism to thrive in a postdenominational world.

## The Scope of Pluralism

Pluralism in educational settings most often focuses on the spectrum of Jewish religious practice and belief. There are, however, other relevant dimensions of pluralism in practice:

• What is the stance vis-à-vis other religious and ethnic communities? Is pluralism primarily internally focused on Jews, or is it an ideology that informs the ways Jews relate to other individuals and communities? A pluralism that is internally focused on the Jewish people may inadvertently create barriers; alternatively, it may prepare participants with the self-knowledge and the practical tools to engage with people from other backgrounds. This is the approach a twelfth-grader expressed upon his graduation from a pluralist day school: "The lessons that we have learned about compromise, negotiation, and acceptance through dealing with . . . students' conflicting religious beliefs are lessons that we will apply to other instances." Others think this focus on internal pluralism is limiting and might impede full participation in a multicultural society. While there are many opinions about the implications of internal and external pluralism, there are no data about how each affects the student in the long run.

• Is the concept of pluralism extended to diverse learning styles and multiple intelligences? This is particularly relevant since much of the justification for Jewish pluralism derives from our interpretive tradition, which is based on multiple perspectives, even of the most sacred texts. It is cognitive and analytical if pluralism pertains to the content of the education, but should it pertain to the style as well? For example, how might artistically inclined, visual learners become actively engaged as equal partners in a pluralist setting?

• To what extent are pluralist institutions reaching out to less conventional Jewish families and groups? How are these "others" portrayed and encountered? What are the boundaries of a pluralistic setting?

• Is pluralism contained within the Judaic department, or does it pervade the entire curriculum? Does the setting develop a pedagogy of pluralism?

## Challenges in Pluralist Educational Environments

Pluralism, like any guiding philosophy, becomes real through decision making and action. The pluralist organization determines a set of policies and procedures that promotes pluralism, such as policies about admissions, plans for ritual life, and approaches to curriculum and instruction. These decisions become institutionalized and serve as important definitional markers that reveal what pluralism means within that environment. Sometimes new challenges stimulate new approaches. For example, one school, recognizing that its initial policies were failing to engage newer families in the school's pluralist agenda, developed programs to deliberately raise issues and possibly (re)shape policy. At another school, a teenager who was grappling with her lesbian identity and wanted to start a gay-straight alliance in her Jewish school, showed the limits of predetermined policy. As portrayed in the documentary film *Hineini*, the school took the student's challenge seriously and structured ways for students, faculty, and administrators to study relevant material and openly discuss the issues in order to determine how the school community would respond. The film documents how the positions changed as the school crafted a new approach — an example of generative pluralism in action.

Pluralist settings need to revisit and grapple with assumptions and approaches; they need to formulate mechanisms for addressing tough challenges that arise out of their openness to others: what happens, for instance, when an adolescent student wants to bring a non-Jewish date to the prom? Or, how does the school respond to parents who insist that the siddurim used in school-sponsored prayer services have nonsexist language and non-gendered images of God while other families are committed to a traditional siddur? Because the setting is open to a broad range of participants, it needs ways of remaining flexible on important issues without being chaotic.

While learning generally needs a safe space in which to flourish, emotional safety is even

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more critical when participants are deliberately engaged around their differences as well as their commonalities. All groups and individuals need to feel comfortable surfacing their viewpoints and questioning the views of others. This is especially challenging with children and adolescents who are concerned with status within a group.

### Pluralism as Process

Practitioners of pluralism are more likely to talk about the pluralist process than provide overarching philosophical constructs. Much like the dancer who cannot easily describe what he or she does to produce evocative movements, the people engaged in "doing" pluralism in Jewish education often describe pluralism as an ongoing process of inquiry and investigation: pluralism as process. This suggests that it is important to explore the implicit and explicit understandings that guide action and to closely observe and learn from them as they unfold in the variety of Jewish educational settings that identify as pluralist.

# Nurturing Voices, Bridging Boundaries

*Aaron Bisman*

THREE YEARS AGO, if I had told you that the *sh'ma* would be heard on MTV, that thousands would gather to hear Israeli, Arab, Jewish, and Muslim hip hop musicians perform together, and that a six-foot-tall Hasid would sing his way into the hearts, souls, and iPods of unaffiliated young Jews the world over, you would have laughed me out of your office. And yet that was our vision when we created JDub Records.

As greater numbers of younger Jews find meaning in Eastern religions, foreign spirituality, and popular culture, it is imperative that the established Jewish community take steps to meet them where they are and offer them a point of connection with no strings attached. Nurturing and promoting unique Jewish voices, JDub reclaims music as a valid and vital method of self-expression within Judaism and as a means of bridging religious, ethnic, and cultural boundaries.

JDub was the brainchild of Ben Hesse and myself, two NYU students who believed that just because their friends weren't hanging out at Hillel, it did not mean they had no interest in Judaism. We knew that if we offered our peers high quality, authentic Jewish experiences, they would flock to the opportunities to be actively, proudly, and uniquely Jewish. With the help of a few brave and visionary supporters, including the Joshua Venture, Bikkurim, and the Natan Fund, two young social entrepreneurs were given the chance to put their ideas into action.

JDub Records is a nonprofit record and event production company, whose mission is to create community and foster positive Jewish identity by promoting Jewish voices in popular culture and through cross cultural dialogue. Our artists include So Called, Balkan Beat Box, and Matisyahu.

The Israelites sang *"Az yashir Moshe u'vnei Yisrael"* as they crossed the sea. Artistic expression was — at Judaism's inception — a valued and vital component of Jewish life. But our priorities and interests changed over the course of time. And while we built community, synagogues, and social service networks, we often ignored the very things the arts and culture thrive on and nurture — passion, emotion, and creativity.

Younger Jews, like their counterparts in many cultures, are looking for a positive identity — a way to define and celebrate their multifaceted lives in a global society — and for a community of peers. Culture defines their identity and self-esteem, how they dress, who their friends are and their values. It is at once unique and universal. And that is why for many young people today, culture is how they connect to Judaism as well.

JDub, Storahtelling, Avoda Arts, *Heeb Magazine*, and myriad other organizations strive every day to develop and promote Jewish culture and to find support for their highly successful and influential endeavors. And yet most of them are still considered — and must function as — outsiders from the community. Jewish leaders and institutions should recognize that cultural outlets and experiences can be as valuable, important, and transformational as religious, educational, and social experiences, and to support these programs accordingly. If they are unable or unwilling to do so, they deny the very ethic of pluralism that *klal Yisrael* so desperately needs today.

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# Dynamic Dreams in Israel

*Bambi Sheleg*

YITZCHAK RABIN'S MURDER changed my life. While this may sound overly dramatic, it's true. At that time, I was the editor of a religious-Zionist children's magazine called *Otiot* (*Letters*). The focus of my cultural and social life was primarily within the world of religious Zionism. While I knew people who held different opinions than mine, they didn't serve as an effective counterbalance to the ideas and beliefs governing my life.

*The Torah is not only written in books; it is being written in the cumulative experiences of Jews. It is impossible to assume that everything that has happened to us has already been explained in our ancient legal texts.*

The murder shook my world and the assumptions with which I lived. I suddenly felt a pressing need to turn a critical eye on my educational upbringing, the society I inhabited, and the unassailable belief system that has accompanied me since my adolescent years. I came to the conclusion that I had no real understanding of Israeli society and that, moreover, I didn't understand the value systems, beliefs, and pain of the many different groups comprising that society. I wanted to learn about the Jewish and Israeli reality that the non-Orthodox had created for this new generation.

But venturing forth on such pilgrimages — examining one's education and chosen social world as well as the world in which you raise your children — can prove painful. Often, there is a gap between how you view yourself and the reality of your life; how you have viewed the "other" in society doesn't mesh easily with the reality you uncover.

A few months ago, a young Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) man, 29 years old, from the "Mir" Yeshiva, walked into my office. He told me that he approached all the young men of his age in the yeshiva and asked them the following questions: Where will you be ten years from now? How will you be raising your children? He told me that his questions were greeted with overwhelming silence and despair. I understood that he was standing on the threshold of his own journey, much like the one I had undertaken, attempting to get at the heart and soul of Israeli society, and I told him — I have good news and bad news for you. The bad news is that some of the beliefs and some of the education we received don't withstand the test of reality. The good news is that every sector of Israeli society suffers from this same malady. And the additional good news is that some of our beliefs and some of our educational experiences do withstand this critical examination.

Israeli society embodies the steadfastly held dreams of its citizens; many of these dreams are ancient. Existing alongside them are an equal number of fantasies and broken dreams. What is a nation to do, whose children carry within them these ancient visions? Whoever journeys into the consciousness of Israelis, and Jews, will soon learn that our greatest challenges stem from how we define ourselves while remaining oblivious to the existence, feelings, and needs of all other groups. Orthodox Jewry leads the pack when it comes to ignoring the existence and needs of others. The Orthodox have a powerful argument; they keep halakhah, Jewish law, alive. They are the faithful sons who have neither left the fold nor attempted to alter its reality. Is their claim, that they are the "real deal" and all others are an historical forgery destined to wither and die, true? The answer to that question is yes and no; yes, because within Orthodox Judaism there is a tremendous feeling of unconditional responsibility for the future of the Jewish nation, and no, because Orthodox Judaism believes that it offers the only true expression of Judaism.

By paying attention to a wide spectrum of Jewish voices, both in Israel and abroad, one discovers that there are many who wish to be a part of what constitutes Judaism. Listening to these voices also demonstrates that the attitudes of the Orthodox educational establishment toward important questions concerning, for example, national identity, have not been significantly updated over the last 200 years, significantly impacting the relationships between Jews who choose to be religiously observant and those who do not. This attitude has an alienating influence, at times evoking feelings of hatred and contempt among various groups. Following is a list of some of the

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questions that need to be asked precisely of those who choose to follow halakhah, and who view it as the unequaled heart of the cultural future of the Jewish people.

What is the religious-halakhic significance of the fact that more than a third of the Jewish people perished in the Holocaust? Doesn't this fact, in and of itself, demonstrate the need for an unconditional sense of obligation, as well as a sense of shared responsibility for our destiny, from everyone, including those living at a distance from a halakhic way of life? Doesn't this necessitate cooperation in many wide-ranging areas with people with whom Orthodox Jewry has nothing in common? What about the fact that in the past, all of Russian Jewry lived under a virulently suppressive regime that, for the 70 years of Communist rule, forcibly robbed the Jews in Russia of their Jewish heritage? Does the current halakhic world truly have the ability to address effectively and respectfully these very same immigrants from Russia, wherein the majority of the families in this group arrived in Israel with at least one family member who is not Jewish? What should the official stance of the halakhic establishment be toward the immigrants from Ethiopia, many of whom were peremptorily subjected to a "stringent conversion"? Is it logical to demand that the members of Beta Israel — who underwent the seven circles of hell because they are Jews and who came to Israel with almost unimaginable self-sacrifice — convert? What are the broad halakhic implications of the fact that the Jewish people have become a majority in Israel and currently, in contrast to their long history of exile, now constitute a sovereign nation, ruling over and responsible for non-Jewish minorities in their midst? And as for the modern world: is it possible to continue to relate to women in the Orthodox Jewish world as if they are lesser beings than men? Can we continue to consent to the terrible injustice perpetrated on women in many of the rabbinic courts, women who find themselves denied the freedom of a "g*et*" (a religious divorce issued by the rabbinic courts) year after year?

In short: What does it mean to be a Jewish state? How should its Jewishness be expressed? By means of its Jewish majority? Or perhaps is there something more exigent here, something that touches on the metaphysical underpinning of Jewish existence, which lost its moorings with the arrival of modernity, suffered through the hell of the Holocaust, and stands crestfallen and vital in the face of the historical wonder known as "the Jewish State"?

The return of Jews to the land of their ancestors has been a traumatic, soul-wrenching process, full of heartbreak and agony, and one that requires an almost matchless tenacity from the surviving nation. We have witnessed a powerful progression, full of incredible energy, and it has been borne aloft not solely on our strengths and hopes, but also on the vigor and dreams of all the people of Israel who for centuries anticipated and prayed for the return to Zion.

*Don't tell the Jews who they are, ask them.*

When I speak with emissaries who work with Jews in the Diaspora and when I speak with Orthodox rabbis, I tell them: don't tell the Jews who they are, ask them. Ask them what they remember from their upbringing, what they remember, if anything, from their grandparents. What in their opinion is at the heart of their Judaism? The Torah is not only written in books; it is being written in the cumulative experiences of Jews. It is a unique human experience, and it is worthwhile to listen. It is impossible to assume that everything that has happened to us has already been explained in our ancient legal texts.

For Israeli society to endure, we need to embrace a profound internal compromise based on the realization that *all* citizens of the state — Jews, non-Jews, Arabs — want to feel at home and respected, with equal rights and responsibilities.

Will the state be able to transform the ancient Jewish dream from one that is static to one that is dynamic? That is to say: the new Israel must close the gap between who we as Jews aspire to be and who in actuality we are. Taking responsibility for who we are — accepting reality, with all its difficulties — will guide us to safe shores.

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# Legitimizing Pluralist Practice in Israel

*Lee Perlman and Jay Shofet*

WHY DID OUR twelve-year-old daughters, Israeli teens, resist inviting friends and classmates to their Reform bat mitzvah ceremonies and regret the decision later? Given the state of non-Orthodox Judaism today in Israel, Inbal and Shani's reactions were understandable: calling a girl to the Torah is outside the "norm." While pluralism is in tune with the liberal values of our society and empowering to its practitioners, it is hard to change the common perception that non-Orthodox Jewish practices are inauthentic and illegitimate — a perception zealously nurtured by the Israeli Orthodox religious-political power structure.

A series of court victories and political precedents are paving the way for public funding, tangible recognition, and ultimately a degree of economic power and influence for non-Orthodox groups in Israel. Further, the concurrent growth of active localized *kehilot,* or communities — along with the sprouting of a plethora of pluralistic educational and spiritual initiatives in recent years — has given even greater resonance to these victories. Is non-Orthodox Judaism beginning to show the potential to move from quaint cultural alternative to the natural, even default, lifestyle choice of the Jewish Israeli mainstream?

And yet, within the hegemony of the Orthodox establishment, almost every whiff of pluralistic practice is deemed *mukseh,* forbidden. Because of this, at the moment, it is of little consequence that, at least according to social commentator Yair Lapid, "80 percent of Israelis are Reform Jews, they just don't know it." One of the challenges for pluralistic Jewish practice among that 80 percent is the reframing of the belief that, if the Judaism I have experienced and observed is Orthodoxy, and I am not Orthodox, then I can't embrace Judaism, in whatever form. We must strive to nurture a more self-assured generation of Israelis who embrace the Judaism they practice, rather than just barely practice a Judaism they don't really embrace.

The psychological constraints of embracing a liberal Jewish practice — Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, or other cultural expressions of Judaism — are deep-rooted, and the political obstacles are still formidable. A sober reading of our situation points to the imperative of a vibrant, publicly legitimate alternative, a *kulturkampf* still rooted in counterculture. This complex situation begs a three-pronged strategy:

• **Grassroots community-building** is our most powerful tool. A community of *"Yehudim hofshi'im,"* Jews empowered to consciously and intentionally choose how to celebrate and embrace Judaism, is the basic building block of success. Local networks of social capital, based on transformative spiritual and education experiences, will provide the fuel for growth in both size and legitimacy. Responsive to the "anonymous intimacy" of our urban and suburban lifestyles, intentional communities are striving to create welcoming and accessible pockets of Jewish culture and networks of mutual support. This ferment also finds an echo within Orthodoxy, where values such as *chesed*, lovingkindness, are an intrinsic part of thriving communities that are pushing egalitarian boundaries.

• **An ever-expanding, increasingly sophisticated campaign in the public sphere** is a critical accompaniment to community building. In Israel's Supreme Court, in government ministries, city councils, the Knesset, and the media, we are waging a battle for civil rights, and the forces of intolerance are perhaps perceptibly in retreat. Land allocations for synagogues, support for educational projects, near-recognition of conversions, and forcing government ministries to revamp discriminatory funding practices are just some of the recent successes.

• **Coordination and leveraging on a national and global level** will galvanize the myriad movements, disparate communities, and assorted initiatives and programs into a broader, high-profile social phenomenon that, unlike today, will be greater than the sum of its parts.

The conditions for success in this battle for legitimacy are falling into place. What's at stake here is not only our daughters' pride in the way they celebrate their Jewish identity. What are still to be forged are nothing less than the Jewish character and soul of the state.

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# The Way Is Always Outside

*Steve Copeland*

Sh'ma שמע

AMONG THE very short passages that seize me to my deepest roots and highest reaches — very short passages in music, visual arts, film, dance, and literature — are these few lines in *Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabbah*: one time Rabbi Akiva was delayed in arriving at the house-of-probing-interpretation. Upon arriving, he sat himself down outside. When a halakhic question arose, Akiva's colleagues said: "The halakhah, the way, is outside." Again it happened that a halakhic question arose. They said: "Akiva is outside!" They cleared a place, and so, entering, he sat himself down at the feet of Rabbi Eliezer.

Now there's no question that Rabbi Akiva's colleagues held him in great esteem. Many of them certainly disagreed with him on one issue, and most of them disagreed with him on another. Critical, extremely repurcussive questions: literal versus figurative understandings of religious language and the Torah's anthropomorphic depictions of the Divine and the imagery adopted to convey miraculous events. Rabbi Yishmael and those sages who joined his school of thought opposed Rabbi Akiva's literalist approach. The other issue that divided Rabbi Akiva from most of his fellow sages involved Shimon Bar Kosiba. Rabbi Akiva supported his armed revolt against the Roman occupation, playing off of his family name in calling him Bar Kochba — Son of a Star. The majority of his colleagues, though, thought his revolt would only be defeated and so forcefully that whatever semblances of Jewish national life could still be conducted would be lost. *They* called the rebel leader Bar Koziba — Son of a Deceiving Lie. Diversity and debate over a most fateful question.

The rabbis did look to Akiva for guidance in matters of halakhah. This is the literal sense of our short passage. But its figurative resonance is what I find especially compelling. The way is always "outside" our present thinking, feeling, and acting. A place must be cleared to invite the other to enter and have a say, a voice. Though it may not be directly accepted, its challenge will expand thought regarding possibility through a process of re-cognition.

An even shorter teaching of the rabbis that commands me is a play on the Hebrew word of the Genesis Creation drama — that the human being is *very* good, *tov mi'od*. The biblical and rabbinic outlooks celebrate an ongoing search that doesn't arrive at a final answer; the biblical Hebrew, actually, is more accurately reflected by the translation, human being-in-becoming. Here, there is a play on the characterization of the human being-in-becoming as *very* good — טוב מאד. The Hebrew letters for very, מאד — *mem, aleph, daled* — are the same letters found in the word *adam*, אדם, human being. The human being-in-becoming is multiple, contains diverse modes of relating to her/himself and all else that she/he meets.

*Creation requires us to be in relation with multiple, diverse conversations — modes of knowing, exploring, and expressing.*

Sigmund Freud appears as a character in the Israeli playwright Yehoshua Sobol's play, *The Soul of the Jew.* Freud has just one stage appearance in order to deliver just one line — that whenever, wherever we come upon the truth, that's when we need to move on in search of it elsewhere. And in *My Destination,* Kafka's hero announces: "Away from here, always away-from-here is my destination." Reality, the human condition, and human possibility are too complex, too rich, for any one life perspective — be it philosophic or religious, rational or romantic, ethical or aesthetic, individual-centered or collective-oriented. As Paul Celan wrote, the "polarities that are in us" are too complex, too rich, too vast…"

I see all traditions — also all religious traditions, even those of Israel — all life orientations, and all positions within traditions as sections of an orchestra. No one part finds its value in being superior to another. Indeed, none can represent music in a genuinely reaching way by itself. There would be no Bible without, for instance, Gilgamesh, and there would be no Jewish mysticism without Sufism and Gnosticism. No Talmud without Greek schools of intellectual discourse. No medieval Jewish philosophy without Greek and Islamic philosophy. No medieval Hebrew poetry without Arabic modes of poetry and poetic experience. We have a word so divine that it repeats itself often in the rabbinic discourse: *ela*, אלא. It means: I thought it was like this, but I must push my thought, feeling, and

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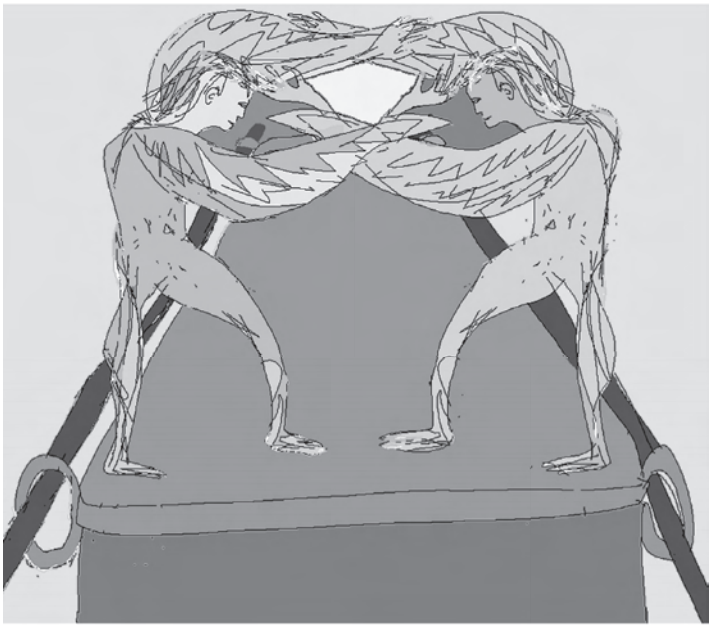
acting to consider that it might be something *rather* than what I assumed. The other way of achieving a sense of self value is to know ourselves — along with each and every part of the orchestra — as unique, as different.

Creation requires us to be in relation with multiple, diverse conversations — modes of knowing, exploring, and expressing. The Jewish emphasis is most often verbal and very often intellectual. But we are challenged to make room for the compelling forces and subtle nuances also of other means: music, dance, the visual arts, film, emotion, intuition — silence beyond words. And yet the Jewish section of the orchestra does not simply give in to the temptation of a harmonizing aesthetics, does not simply become one with the mesmerizing world as object so that we lose the world as subject with its demanding calls of response-ability. We celebrate being-in-relation-*with* that is all about *enduring* the realms of the between, the heroic honoring of difference; even incommensurate, irresolvable difference, not given to the synthesis of any complete redemption.



*Steve Copeland*
Cherubim on the Ark's Cover
*Digital Image 2005*

*The Jewish artist, pluralist, collagist who seeks out diverse ways of knowing, expressing, and exploring recognizes the tensions between the Jewish love affair with the mind and the aesthetics of feeling and serendipity.*

The Jewish artist, pluralist, collagist who seeks out diverse ways of knowing, expressing, and exploring recognizes the tensions between the Jewish love affair with mind and law, and refusing cultures of redemption in their various manifestations on the one hand, and the aesthetics of feeling and serendipity, on the other hand. Engaging conversation with these potentially creative tensions achieves great dialectic moments of Jewish-human-creature departing to greet the outside while also staying put in drawing the outside in; into the clearings we make within our interiors and back outward again. Both facing in and out, like the cherubim hovering their beating wings over the ark of the covenant that is suspended over the faces of the rushing endless formless many interrupting waters of the darkly shining abyss. Testify to all this via different modes of exploration, leaving nothing out.

## Discussion Guide

*Bringing together myriad voices and experiences in a sacred conversation provides* Sh'ma *readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of the ideas, we offer the following questions:*

1. Are there boundaries for a Jewish pluralist stance? What are they?
2. How can we stretch to include a wider variety of modalities within which to express one's Judaism?
3. Why is Judaism sectored into denominations, and what are the obstacles to collaboration among the various movements?
4. How does the idea, that we are all made in the image of God, influence pluralism?

# *Elu Ve-elu Divrei Elohim Hayyim:* A Biblical View

Sh'ma שמע

*Marc Zvi Brettler*

THE WELL-KNOWN Hebrew expression, *elu ve-ulu divrei Elohim hayyim*, "both this and that are the words of the all-powerful God," the embodiment of a multi-perspectival or pluralistic position, is, of course, a rabbinic expression. Yet the pluralist idea that it expresses has very strong biblical roots; this is even reflected in the fact that the expression uses the biblical term *Elohim hayyim*, "the all-powerful God" (literally: the living God), which first occurs in Deuteronomy 5:23, after the giving of the Decalogue (what others call the Ten Commandments), where the Israelites say: "For what mortal ever heard the voice of the living God (*Elohim hayyim*) speak out of the fire, as we did, and lived?"

The Decalogue appears twice in the Bible: in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Both accounts present themselves as the single authoritative recalling of the divine words; immediately before the Exodus Decalogue, we read: "God spoke all these words, saying," while the Deuteronomy Decalogue is followed by: "The LORD spoke those words — those and no more — to your whole congregation at the mountain. . . . " Yet, the "words" of Exodus and Deuteronomy are not identical. For example, in Exodus, the Israelites are commanded to "remember the Sabbath day" in commemoration of the creation of the world, while in Deuteronomy, they are commanded to "observe the Sabbath day" in commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt. A monolithic text would not offer two fundamentally different reasons why the Sabbath should be commemorated.

There are also significant differences in the Torah between different sources or passages concerning specific legal practices. For example, Exodus 22:30 legislates that no Israelite may eat carrion, or *terefah*: "You shall be holy people to Me: you must not eat flesh torn by beasts (*terefah*) in the field; you shall cast it to the dogs," while Leviticus 22:8 legislates that only priests (*kohanim*) must avoid this *terefah*. In fact, Leviticus 17:15 legislates in reference to non-Priests: "Any person, whether citizen or stranger, who eats what has died or has been torn by beasts shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening; then he shall be clean." In other words, they may eat *terefah*, but must then ritually cleanse themselves. The striking juxtaposition is likely connected to a fundamental philosophical difference found in Torah texts concerning whether all Israel or just the priests need to be holy.

Is Israel holy, or is Israel *supposed to be* holy? The text from Exodus 22:30, "You shall be holy people," suggests the latter; the same viewpoint is found in the famous verse from *Kedoshim*, from Leviticus 19:2: "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." Yet, Deuteronomy 7:6 presents Israel's holiness as an established fact: "For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God: of all the peoples on earth the Lord your God chose you to be His treasured people" (see similarly 14:2, 21). Which is it: is Israel intrinsically holy (and thus, e.g., it may never eat *terefah*), or must it aspire to holiness?

*To the extent that the Bible is the central Jewish text and it embodies pluralism, pluralism is a fundamental Jewish value.*

Other major philosophical differences emerge when comparing the narrative framework of the Decalogue in Exodus to Deuteronomy. The most significant of these differences concerns whether or not God was visible at Sinai. Most readers recall Deuteronomy 4:12: "the Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape — nothing but a voice." Yet, Exodus 24:10-11, concerning Moses, Aaron, two of Aaron's children, and 70 elders, reads: "and they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of lapis lazuli, like the very sky for purity. Yet He did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank." Which is it — was or was not God visible at revelation?

There are many, many more examples of diversity within the Torah, beginning already from its first chapters, which narrate two fundamentally different stories of the creation of the world. This diversity is not limited to the Torah: texts from the rest of the Bible, from the Prophets and Writings, are highly diverse

*continued on page 17*

*Marc Zvi Brettler is Dora Golding Professor of Biblical Studies and Chair of the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University. His most recent book is* How to Read the Bible, *published by the Jewish Publication Society.*

Sh'ma שמע

# נשמע
# NiSh'ma
## *Let us hear*

*Ruth Weisberg is Dean of Fine Arts at the University of Southern California. Her work is included in 60 major Museum and University collections, including The Art Institute of Chicago, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.*

*Judith Margolis, MFA, is an Israel-based American painter and book artist, creative director of Bright Idea Books/Jerusalem, and the art editor of* Nashim, Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues. *She is currently working on an illustrated book for counting the Omer with text by Sarah Yehudit Schneider, titled* Countdown to Perfection/ Meditations on the Sefirot. *A longer version of this response appears on www.shma.com.*

Our new bimonthly artistic *Nish'ma* provides a graphic, multimedia venue to explore contemporary Jewish issues. This month, the central commentary is an artistic image, *Threshold*, addressing transition, change, passage. This month's *Sh'ma* focuses on pluralism and suggests more porous ways to interpret texts, to open conversations, and to acknowledge others — explorers and newcomers. Thank you to our artist-respondents, whose interpretive works create new layers of commentary much like our sage Mishnaic commentators. We invite you, our readers, to continue the conversation and respond to the visual and word responses on www.shma.com.

*Ruth Weisberg,* **Threshold**
*mixed media drawing, 75"x60" 2004*

The woman in Ruth Weisberg's painting seems to be emerging from a cabinet or "lift," the large containers in which immigrants brought their belongings to Israel and which they sometimes converted into temporary dwelling places. The woman is opening the door of a "lift" into a new life.

This image reminded me of a photo, below, taken in 1987 on Mt. Carmel in Israel, with my two daughters Yael (then eleven) and Naomi (then six). We were standing in front of a hut in the Carmel Forests where I had lived as a two-year-old with my parents in 1948 and 1949. I took my girls to see the place where my love of Israel was first implanted in my soul. I don't actually remember the time or place of these initial experiences, but my unconscious does.

My family left the hut to come to the U.S., but the hut has not left us, so to speak. My parents are now 85 years old, and they still remember those years as two of the best years of their lives. The little cabin on the top of a mountain covered with trees and flowers was like the Garden of Eden for them. It was a place of new beginnings and fresh air after their Holocaust experience. It was a place of idealism, living close to the land, and creating new life – literally. My sister was born there in 1949. Although I grew up in the United States, part of me has always lived in that hut, and part of me continues to harbor those romantic attitudes, even today.

*— Shulamit Reinharz*

*Shulamit Reinharz is Jacob Potofsky Professor of Sociology at Brandeis University where she founded the Women's Studies Research Center and the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute.*

*Dinah Zeltser graduated from the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service at Brandeis University in 2000. Born in the Soviet Union before it gained an adverb, she is currently working as the Community Services Officer for the UNHCR Mission in the North Caucasus covering North Ossetia, Ingushetia, and Chechnya.*

*Beth Ames Swartz enjoys a career that includes a 40-year retrospective at Phoenix Art Museum, a solo exhibition at The Jewish Museum in New York, over 70 other one-person museum and gallery shows, two books on her work, and numerous awards including the (Arizona) Governor's Arts Award.*

March 2006
Nisan 5766
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*Beth Ames Swartz,* While the Moon is Rounding Towards the Full, *acrylic and paste on canvas 60"x48" 2005 Jada Pinkett Smith and Will Smith Collection*

*Threshold* by Ruth Weisberg depicts a woman (and a symbolic multitude behind her) walking over a threshold, opening a double door. The doors have a lock on the exterior, and they are rendered to be somewhat reminiscent of a prison. Ruth employs a restrained color palette of blue, black, and brown. While the act depicted – crossing the threshold to a better place – is one of hope, the work of art "works" by implying a darker past.

For over 40 years, my work has been concerned with the continuous cycle of life, death, and rebirth. I believe the traditional duality of life-and-death needs a positive, regenerative aspect. The series that I am working on now, on the eve of my 70th birthday, speaks about my own connection to the earth and my own crossing over a threshold into a new decade with a renewed appreciation for the temporality of life.

The painted border tells viewers they are looking into a symbolic landscape; this border contains words from a W. B. Yeats poem, *The Phases of the Moon*. My color palette of dark grays, maroon, and white creates a somber, contemplative space.

I respond emotionally to *Threshold*. In my painting, the reborn moon (a maternal symbol of hope) reflects brightly upon a desolate landscape; in Ruth's drawing, figures are moving toward their own rebirth and new life.

*— Beth Ames Swartz*


*Judith Margolis,* Learning to Live Alone with Only the Moon for Company, *pen on cardboard 6.5"x7" 2005*

Ruth Weisberg's enigmatic painting, *Threshold*, seems "suggestive of reincarnation." A woman moves between doors, as if between worlds. She is illuminated by rays of light. Reiterations of her face surround her like a soul returning.

Since my husband, David Margolis, *z"l*, died last July, I am especially vulnerable to the question of what awaits us after this life. My drawing *Living Alone*, offered as a response to Ruth's *Threshold*, explores this question. This is how it came about.

Last Pesach, my husband and I decided to make our seder alone, just the two of us. We enjoyed that seder together immensely. After, we walked in the brightness of the full moon. I gratefully thought that, forevermore, a full moon would remind me that everything could be perfect.

David became acutely ill at Shavuot, and by the full moon of Tammuz he was gone.

After, I experienced such obliterative grief that it was painful to even breathe. One night, remembering our seder, I drew the moon and stars and curtains fluttering as if stirred by a breeze or spirit. Beneath the window a solitary figure sleeps alone.

Since then, like the Passover story that is told over and over, I have drawn and redrawn that image. It is the only thing I feel like drawing.

My darling husband has been gone only six months. I am desolate to be apart from him. But, still, an amazing full moon returns each month to remind me of how perfect things can be.

*— Judith Margolis*

Hope is not an unequivocal emotion – at least for immigrants. It is laden, weighed down, or uplifted with the expectations, the unfulfilled dreams of others who could not stand in my place. An immigrant enters a state of permanent liminality – forever open to transformation and transfiguration for others, a *tabula rasa* for their aspirations. An immigrant's *raison d'etre* becomes corrupted – no longer beholden unto myself, I become the projection of my ancestors' collective desires. The challenge of owning my own destiny is doubly hard and yet doubly rewarding. The act of hoping frees me from the constraints of traditions; the paperweights of the past are tossed aside when the previous blueprints are no longer of use. With the agility of a tightrope walker, I learn to balance communal needs with the desire to live free and fully and to the utmost of my abilities. Like an audience waiting with baited breath for the tightrope walker to make it to the other side, the hopes of others drive the ultimate performance of the act of living performed by an immigrant.

*In the shedding of accents I gain selves.*

FRAG-MEN-TATION.

Along which faults does allegiance fall?

With the mother tongue that knows my heart

Or the acquired language, so clear in my mouth and mind,

producing thoughts and sentences starched to crispness.

*— Dinah Zeltser*

Sh'ma שמע

# The Gifts and Limits of Pluralism:
## Reflecting on the Thought of Eugene Borowitz

*Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi*

ADDRESSING THE SITUATION of liberal (non-Orthodox) Jews in North America in the second half of the 20th century, the theologian Eugene Borowitz understood well even in his initial writings the importance of religious pluralism both in the wider society and within the Jewish community. Indeed, much of his work to create a theology for a postmodern American Judaism relies on, affirms, and works to build pluralism. Borowitz argues that we owe the very possibility of a vibrant Jewish life in America to the gift of pluralism modeled so consciously, if imperfectly, in American life. (*Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew,* p. 216) This very journal, *Sh'ma,* which he founded and edited for more than 20 years, is but one, albeit perhaps the best known, application of Borowitz's belief that pluralism must stand behind — if not at the center of — any worthwhile or productive conversation about American Judaism or modern Jewish theology.

*While he is conscious of how pluralism may fail or lead to new difficulties, Borowitz cannot imagine a liberal Judaism without it. Pluralism, he argues, is inherent to a postmodern liberal theology because of our awareness that our understanding of God is limited.*

In his forceful (yet, by his own admission, apologetic) theology which is fully stated in his crowning cumulative work, *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew* (1990), Borowitz writes that he "avidly espouse[s] Jewish pluralism in thought and action." (298) In *Renewing the Covenant,* as well as in many earlier works, he cites "democratic pluralism," along with equality, as one of "modernity's central benefits" to which we remain overwhelmingly committed; they have enabled us "to live in human decency as rarely before in our history." (5-6)

### Reflecting on Covenantal Pluralism Fifteen Years Later

Now, fifteen years after the publication of *Renewing the Covenant,* we ought to re-evaluate pluralism, its gifts as well as its limitations. Should we still understand pluralism as a gift of modernity? Or is it a gift whose limitations are felt in the imprecise, constantly shifting, and debated nature of Jewish identity today? For Borowitz, it appears that its benefits are so essential to our existence and its premises so foundational to our theology that he not only reaffirms it, but he also argues that it must be carried over into any postmodern thought. He notes that across the spectrum — from liberal to modern Orthodox — leaders recognize "the genuine merit of the liberals' religio-moral passion for pluralism." (242)

At the same time, in describing the ways in which "modernity has betrayed" us, he writes: "Even pluralism, which we embraced as giving our society an appreciation of human diversity, now pains us by its even-handed legitimation of vice along with what we had long thought virtue." (20) While he is conscious of how pluralism may fail or lead to new difficulties, Borowitz cannot imagine a liberal Judaism without it. Pluralism, he argues, is inherent to a postmodern liberal theology because of our awareness that our understanding of God is limited.

Today, the often uncertain nature of Jewish identity is a product of what one scholar calls the "post-ethnic" and post-pluralist multicultural reality of American Jewish life. While some of the specific contours of the challenges are new, Borowitz seems to have been aware of the potential problems in the 1980s, and by the 1990s he was clear that the insistence on pluralism had, at times, already become painful. He suggested that perhaps tolerance would lead to an "abhorrence of limits" or to a different understanding of the balance of the universal and particular. He knew that in such times of "radical ethical pluralism and doubt" (95) notions of Jewish moral obligation, primary commitment to the survival of an ethnic group, and arguments against intermarriage are extremely problematic, and thus "caring Jews everywhere cannot fail to feel the dangers that accompany its [pluralism's] triumphs." (216-7)

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## Application of Pluralism and its Limits

Regarding colleagues who officiate at intermarriages because of their (however faulty) sense that it will bind more people to Judaism, Borowitz writes: "Because I may well be wrong, and because I respect their reading of their Covenant-responsibility, my pluralism makes itself felt here and I associate myself with them in full collegiality." (298) However, Borowitz does not have the same respect for rabbis who officiate at intermarriages with non-Jewish clergy, because it "exceeds my liberally capacious pluralism… My Jewish self may not be able to state just where the boundaries of its openness lie, but in this instance it has no difficulty in identifying their transgressors." (298)

Borowitz has given us a theological method by which we can determine critical Jewish boundaries. And, aware of the risks involved in a path that "makes democracy a spiritual principle of our Judaism," Borowitz has taught us that we can affirm our commitment to pluralism while defining its boundaries; embrace modernity while being skeptical of it; celebrate freedom with covenantal duty; and finally commit to Jewish peoplehood (past, present, and future) with a constant vigilance that whatever we do or say in the name of Judaism remains ethical.

The "uncensored rants of Yossi Abramowitz," publisher of *Sh'ma*, on his blog: www.peoplehood.org.

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ISSN: 0049-0385 March 2006

**A discussion guide for each issue of *Sh'ma* can be downloaded from www.shma.com**

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*Sh'ma* sponsored a panel at the December Association of Jewish Studies Conference, "Pressing the Boundaries of Pluralism: Honoring Eugene Borowitz." The session included papers by **Abraham Socher, Simone Schweber, Shaul Magid,** a response by **Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi** (adapted for this issue), and reflections by **Eugene Borowitz**. The session addressed pluralism and its possible limits.

Listen (via audiostream) to the panel at www.shma.com.

## Remaining Timely From the *Sh'ma* Archive:

In the April 1999 *Sh'ma*, **Harold Schulweis, Eugene Borowitz, Yitz Greenberg, Devora Steinmetz,** and **Deborah Lipstadt** discussed pluralism — specifically the pragmatics of pluralism as it affects synagogues and informal Jewish education. Their insightful essays and suggestions are posted on www.shma.com.

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# Assigning New Meaning to Yiddish Culture

*Amelia Glaser*

*Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language & Culture*. Jeffrey Shandler, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of CA Press, 2006. 271 pp., $39.95

LATE ONE NIGHT during the summer of 2002, I found myself in a dorm room with four fellow graduate students listing the serious Yiddish scholars under the age of 40. We estimated that between us we knew about half of our small field. We were all in New York for a three-week research seminar in Yiddish language, literature, and culture. The sampling of students that evening came from the U.S., South America, Israel, Switzerland, and Eastern Europe. Yiddish, while none of our first language, was our best common language.

Jeffrey Shandler, in his new book, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture*, has produced a study of Yiddish as a subcultural phenomenon since World War II. This includes the continued use of Yiddish among insular Jewish communities worldwide, the performance of Yiddish as an act of nostalgia, reclamation or humor, popular translation into and out of the language, and a persistent interest in collecting Yiddish language objects of folk value.

*Adventures in Yiddishland* is, itself, an object worth collecting. The book jacket, designed by Jessica Grunwald, features a colorful illustration by Ben Katchor, portraying an autonomous Yiddish-speaking world. A young woman greets a young man with "*Redst Yidish*?" People queue up to hear the singer Sidor Belarski, a ship labeled "*Bobe Mayse*" arrives through the sunset, and Hassidim wander past a statue of the Modernist Yiddish writer Y. L. Peretz. Shandler's excellent study is illustrated by a plethora of similar gems inside — photographs, cartoons, event posters, and *tshatshkes*. The book, which joins such excellent works in cultural studies as Susan Stewart's *On Longing*, opens a new genre within the fields of Yiddish and pop culture. Without devaluing concerns about the fate of Ashkenazic Jewish culture following World War II, Shandler calls attention to a new trend, which, far from declaring Yiddish culture dead, has assigned it unexpected meaning.

In his first chapter, "Imagining Yiddishland," Shandler reminds us that the search for the elusive land to match the transnational language is not new. "In a letter written in 1888 from Y. L. Peretz to Sholem Aleichem, the former describes the latter as an author whose 'aim is to write for the public, which speaks *zhargon* [jargon, i.e., Yiddish] *fun zhargonen-land*.'" (33) Shandler eloquently argues that a similar spirit has since moved Yiddish-speakers to create a fantasy world out of the Yiddish language at summer camps, celebratory events, and even in the recreation of pre-World War II East European maps. "As is true of modern Yiddish culture generally, the notion of Yiddishland emerged — and perhaps could only emerge — once Jews had begun to move out of *shtetlekh*, geographically as well as ideologically." (50)

He moves on to address methods of teaching Yiddish as a foreign language, from the early nineteenth century through the present day. Yiddish studies in the post-vernacular world are interesting, he argues, precisely because they are often self-motivated. "While learning Hebrew is typically a fixture of an American Jewish childhood (and not infrequently ends with Jewish rites of passage into adolescence), taking a class in Yiddish now marks for some a voluntary step in the formation of one's Jewish adult self [.]" (87)

Shandler is not uncritical in his study. "In this new semiotic mode for the language, every utterance is enveloped in a performative aura, freighted with significance as a *Yiddish* speech act quite apart from the meaning of whatever words are spoken." (127) Yet rather than writing off the performativity, and even fetishization, of the language as something artificial, he has offered an elegant framework for integrating contemporary trends in Yiddish culture into a system for better understanding culture, community, and scholarship today.

After an hour of brainstorming in the our dorm, my colleagues and I had a list of nearly 200 names. We knew we had grossly underestimated. Still, three years ago, the idea of

*continued on page 17*

Sh'ma

Koret Book Review

The Koret Foundation-*Sh'ma* literary pages include literary essays and reviews of books, films, and other cultural arts. These pages feature an array of talented writers who bring our readers new expressions of Jewish thought, imagination, and spirit.

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*Amelia Glaser, a visiting lecturer of Yiddish language and literature and Slavic Studies at Stanford University, recently received her PhD in Comparative Literature at Stanford.*

Sh'ma שמע

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New Visions is an opportunity to think imaginatively about issues of relevance to the Jewish community. It is generously funded by the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture.

# Is Pluralism a Jewish Value?

*Sharon Cohen Anisfeld*

PLURALISM IS one of those words. You never know what kind of a reaction it will inspire. From some people, it evokes hostility and discomfort, from others, a yawn.

Why the hostility? Because the divisions within the Jewish world today are deep and painful. Our philosophical and religious disagreements are significant, and we do not want to gloss over them with platitudes about mutual tolerance and respect. Furthermore, the questions generated by those differences have profoundly personal implications.

- Do you consider me a Jew?
- Do you have any concern for the safety of my family living on the West Bank?
- Are my non-Jewish spouse and I welcome in your community?

*Awareness of our own uncertainty demands that we relate to other human beings with a large measure of humility.*

- Will you respect and accommodate my need for kosher food?
- Will you affirm the sanctity of my same-sex relationship?
- Do you truly care about the texts and traditions that I hold dear?

Why the yawn? Because in many circles pluralism has become cliché. Feel-good pluralism is indeed a bore. "I'm okay, you're okay" is not an interesting or sufficient response to serious questions about the future of the Jewish people; nor is it a compelling response to the threat of rising fundamentalism in this country and around the world.

Those of us who are committed to pluralist Jewish education must honestly respond to these important questions and challenges. We must begin to articulate a response to the most basic question of all: Why is pluralism an important Jewish value? What is the religious and moral foundation of our pluralist vision?

## *Mi Yodea:* Who Knows?

At the heart of my own commitment to pluralism lies the conviction that uncertainty is a fact of human existence. We do not have access to absolute knowledge of God's nature or God's will. We do not and cannot know with certainty what the past means, what the future holds, or what the present demands of us. Those who claim to know with absolute certainty what God wants of us betray our shared humanity and deny the infinite mystery of the divine. Awareness of our own uncertainty demands that we relate to other human beings with a large measure of humility.

And yet uncertainty is not an excuse for inaction. On the contrary, we are obligated to act from this place of "not knowing." In the Book of Esther, Mordechai tells his niece to go before King Ahashverosh and plead on behalf of the Jewish people. He sends her on her mission with these words: *"Mi yodea im la'et kazot higa'at la'malchut?"* "Who knows if it was not for just this moment that you became queen?" Esther risks her life on the strength of this "who knows?" She acts without any assurance of divine protection and without any revelation of a divine plan. She is a model of moral courage in the face of theological uncertainty.

## *Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh Lazeh:* Jewish Peoplehood

Jewish pluralism must also be grounded in a deep sense of *ahavat Yisrael*, love for the Jewish people. I am a pluralist, in part, because I experience the Jewish people as my family. This means that I feel an inescapable sense of connection and mutual responsibility with all Jews.

As anyone who has read Genesis (or lived in a family!) knows, this does not mean that my relationship with the Jewish people is free from anger or disappointment. On the contrary, the link between the Hebrew words *karov*, close, and *k'rav*, battle, reminds us that our most painful battles are often with those closest to us. But it is also those relationships where reconciliation is most pressing, where a severed connection means that we are cut off from a part of ourselves.

## Divine Unity and Human Diversity

Our deepest theological intuition as Jews is the affirmation that the Oneness of God is reflected in the diversity of creation.

Consider the contrast between the building of the Tower of Babel in Genesis and the building of the *mishkan* in Exodus. The Tower

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March 2006
Nisan 5766
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of Babel is a monument to human "unity." The builders work together to create a structure that reaches the heavens. But in the process, they ignore the dignity and uniqueness of each individual human being. They mistake oneness for sameness, and for this they are punished with a grand lesson in human diversity.

The *mishkan*, in contrast, is a monument to divine unity. Significantly, this building process is one that honors the unique contribution that each member of the community has to offer. "Take from among you gifts to the Lord; everyone whose heart so moves him shall bring them . . . gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns."

It is as if we are instructed to make our own rainbow, a rich tapestry of colors reflecting the Oneness of the God who created them all, who created us all. This is what is required if we are to create dwelling places for God on earth.


## Passionate About an Issue?

*Sh'ma* puts issues on the table. Each issue serves as a mini-forum for the idea makers and creators. If you want to discuss putting an issue forward as a "communal conversation," contact Susan Berrin (SBerrin@JFLMedia.com, or call 617 581-6810). Sponsorship opportunities available.


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## Book Review, *from page 15*

counting the number of graduate students working in Yiddish was not entirely out of the question. Since then, the number of people creating their own Yiddishland has probably increased exponentially. Evenings like those occupy a space worthy of a thousand postcards and souvenirs. While few of us live permanently in Yiddishland, thanks to Jeffrey Shandler, we do have the beginnings of a map.

## *Elu Ve-elu*, *from page 9*

as well. For example, 2 Samuel 11-12 narrates David's affair with Bathsheba, his murder of Uriah, and his condemnation by Nathan the prophet. The book of Chronicles, a retelling of history from Genesis through Kings, omits this entire episode, creating a much more righteous David. Psalm 8:6 says that humanity is "little less than divine, and adorned . . . with glory and majesty," while Job 25:6 insists that man is "a worm . . . a maggot." In each of these cases, which perspective is right? Was David perfect or right? Is humanity a bit lower than God or a bit more than a maggot?

This essay does not purport to explain why the Bible contains diversity; it is sufficient to note that the Bible is a complex anthology, a collection of collections, representing a millennium of texts from different places, eras, and classes. (For more details, see my book *How to Read the Bible*.) The Bible is not at all a monolithic text, but is multi-perspectival and pluralistic, already from its first stories. This type of pluralism, so often associated with rabbinic culture, thus has strong biblical roots. To the extent that the Bible is *the* central Jewish text, and it embodies pluralism, pluralism is a fundamental Jewish value, which can only be ignored at great peril to ourselves and our community.

שמע
Sh'ma

With this issue, ***Sh'ma*** would like to publicly acknowledge the generosity of the following donors. Your contributions significantly help defer the mounting costs of publishing this journal. Thank you for making the mitzvah of giving, the commandment of tzedakah, a ***Sh'ma*** mitzvah, and for your continued support and encouragement. For information about sponsorship opportunities — funding a special issue of ***Sh'ma*** addressing an issue on which you are passionate — see box on page 17.

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# To Rabbi Meir Soloveichik,

In your essay in *Sh'ma* (December 2005), you remind us of a basic commitment of Orthodox Jewry to "familial love for all Jews and indeed respect for all humanity." You suggest what I would consider a heretical conflation: that of "truth" and Orthodoxy. Even if one grants the inevitability of a standardized authoritative practice in which the never-certain share of truth in Judaism must be valued for the practical necessity of action in the face of a potentially paralyzing intellectual freedom, it does not legitimize reading an inherent ambiguity of meaning and a concomitant discourse of pluralism out of Judaism. I want to suggest, rather, a Jewish theology of pluralism that addresses both the meaning of the term pluralism as the revealed truth among the recipients of that truth (i.e. Jews) as well as the competing truths between Jews and the nations of the world.

The central claim of contemporary Orthodoxy, as represented by your essay, is found in the dogma of literal revelation. That is, the Torah we possess is the directly dictated word of God, and its adumbration by the sages is equally determined by Divine Will and, as such, it is irrefutably authoritative. But even within the narrow confines of Orthodoxy, the disputatious tradition regarding both halakhic and philosophic questions is obvious. Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox Jews can all claim to believe in *Torah mi-Sinai* and then spend the rest of time arguing over what that precisely means. Not everyone in the classical rabbinic tradition insists on literal correspondence between the Torah we posses and the Torah God revealed. What is at stake in a pluralistic theology is not truth, but the share of truth expressed in any human formulation of the Divine Word. Pluralism certainly does not require agreement, and in some cases it does encourage vociferous argumentation. But it requires as well a modicum of intellectual humility.

The problem of pluralism between Israel and the nations unfolds on a different and more problematic scaffold. Here, I agree with you. There is only one God, and that God is manifest to the people of Israel as their God. Israel is charged to witness this manifestation and to serve as a light unto the nations so that one day the entire world will be gathered in Jerusalem unified in worship. However, this is where things really get complicated, and the true meaning of pluralism emerges. This very designation of Israel is transformed by the prophet's own words into an eschatological moment. But before the days of the Messiah, both Israel and the nations are striving toward fulfilling this mission of witness. Neither Israel nor the nations of the world have learned to fully witness the God of Israel in so far as they have not learned to fully care for the poor, the widow, and the orphan; in so far as they have not enacted justice. From the perspective of God, which the prophet alone can supply, Israel most especially is distant from achieving this mission, and both Israel, who has been given Torah, and the nations of the world, who have been given the Noahide laws, are aware of their shortcomings. The vision of the Messiah, implicit in the prophets and made into a cardinal belief by rabbinic Judaism, preeminently serves the purpose of not only justifying but also necessitating pluralism.

Faced with the general popularity of more universalistic worldviews, the rabbis — basing their teachings on the genuinely universalistic implications of biblical sources — affirmed messianic principles precisely to enact spiritual humility. We are all on the same road and no one is getting there all too soon, as it were. Not unexpectedly, we are in the same place today as the rabbis were. On the one hand we are desirous of proclaiming a particular vision of a universal truth. On the other hand we need to account for equally valid, equally particular, visions on the path toward universal truth. We want and need to do this for philosophic reasons, for social and political reasons, for communal reasons, and because we understand this intellectually humble position to have profound ethical implications. But most importantly, because we believe that learning to view our human struggles as partial and incomplete allows, in fact requires, that we strive more earnestly to hear the voice of God unencumbered by our own voice trumpeting our infallibility.

*Sincerely,*
*Ira F. Stone*
*Rabbi of Temple Beth Zion–Beth Israel, a Conservative Congregation in Philadelphia*
*Founding Director of the Mussar Institute in Philadelphia*



## Response Letters

*Sh'ma* welcomes your letters and responses. Each month we attempt to open conversation and dialogue. We hope you'll continue that conversation. Address correspondence to SBerrin@JFLmedia.com.

Sh'ma שמע

# Talk and Gossip

*Laura Geller*

## Sigi Ziering Ethics

This year, the practical ethics column will focus on personal and social ethics. Each month a guest columnist wrestles on paper with situations where ethical considerations tug on the heart and demand deeply thoughtful consideration. The column is co-sponsored by Shelley and Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. The series of columns, with responses, is available on www.shma.com.

*Rabbi Laura Geller is Senior Rabbi of Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, California. Before becoming a pulpit rabbi in 1994, she served as the Executive Director of the American Jewish Congress, Pacific Southwest Region, and Director of Hillel at the University of Southern California.*

At Temple Emanuel in Los Angeles, we try to organize our High Holy Day sermons around a theme; this year's topic was "the Jewish conversation." The subtext of these sermons was that the richer the Jewish conversation, the more meaningful the Jewish identity. We spoke about different types of conversation: engagement and dialogue with sacred texts that cross generations; conversation with God; and the conversations that ought to take place between people, within families and communities. And we also talked about how we should talk with each other.

The conversation began on Rosh Hashanah in the family service. After sharing the well-known image of words being like an arrow shot from its bow, the children shared how words had hurt them — when other children teased or threatened them or made them feel stupid. Adults in the sanctuary were aware of a recent situation where a Jewish teenager had withdrawn from a Jewish school because of the humiliation she suffered as the result of malicious gossip initiated by a jealous girl. Everyone present knew this conversation about the nature of gossip was serious. And then I told the feather pillow story in a more current idiom: a story of a middle school child who accidentally hit "Reply All" on his email, sending a negative but true description of another student to many classmates. We talked about how impossible it would be to retrieve all those emails once they had been sent into cyberspace — just as it would have been impossible to retrieve all the feathers from the pillow in the days of the Hafetz Hayim. The children responded to the story because it was real to them; it was real to the adults as well.

It is impossible to belong to a community without understanding the power of words to hurt and heal. One of the problems is that oftentimes we describe "community" as "a group of people who talk to each other about each other or about the institution that they have in common." While some would categorize that kind of talk as *lashon hara,* forbidden speech, it is in fact how information is shared and relationships are built.

The best public relations for synagogues and schools is positive talk. And the most damaging public relations is the negative talk that happens in the carpool or over kiddush on Shabbat — talk about a teacher or event or another congregant. In a healthy community, people pay attention to what they say, how they speak, and why they are sharing information. A couple of questions might guide our conversations: Is the goal of the conversation the enriching of the community? What is the best way to have this kind of conversation? Synagogues and schools need to provide appropriate venues for issues to be discussed, in private and in public, so damaging conversations don't usurp healthy airings and reflections. But this requires restraint on the part of members of a community as well as wisdom and openness on the part of its leaders. It also requires that members (and rabbis) be courageous enough to say to a friend or acquaintance, "I really don't want to hear this. There must be a better way to process this information."

The Rosh Hashanah sermon culminated in children and their parents promising to "guard their tongue" for the next ten days and wear a sticker with the words "*lashon hara*" crossed out with an arrow. If only it could be that easy!

March 2006 / Nisan 5766

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