Tolerance, Pluralism, and Judaism

By Rabbi Barry Freundel

Recently, I was part of a panel discussion at my local Jewish Community Center. The ostensible subject of the program was the panelís reactions to two films that were part of our annual Jewish film festival. The films focused on various different avenues to Jewish commitment and identity and were, in my opinion, of mixed quality. Nonetheless, there were some important elements and ideas to discuss that emerged from the films and on which I expected our panel would be focusing. Instead, and in my view unfortunately, our conversation rapidly deteriorated into a discussion of Pluralism and the Jewish community, with the usual charges and countercharges. As that famous philosopher Yogi Bera once said, "Deja vu all over again." Our subject here carries the title Diverse Paths: Seeking the Core of Our Judaism. Rather than focus intensely and seriously on that issue, which unarguably needs our attention, we had only a small portion of that discussion and instead found ourselves caught in the far more acrimonious, painful, and ultimately far less productive debate on Pluralism.

I suspect that this occurred for two reasons. First, the latter subject has been on our minds and in our hearts because of its prominence in the public consciousness. Second, and here we need to begin to be honest with ourselves, it is far easier to blame the other as David Klinghoffer and Dr. Teutsch do, or to stand above the fray and blame both sides as Steve Bayme does, than it is to look inside ourselves and ask where our Jewish identity comes from and how it can be universalized to others in the contemporary era. We, therefore, tend to indulge in easy recrimination. A real discussion of the core of our Judaism would, I am sure, engender disagreement, but not of the type that we have here that all too often simply restates the usual denominational and institutional arguments while blaming "those people" on the other side. Instead, we might finally be able to develop a dialogue and debate that would break new ground and produce something valuable to meet the critical problem of sustaining Jewish identity.

I will conclude these introductory comments with, what for me is a stark, frightening image, that I return to all too frequently in our present communal situation. In the original Star Trek series, the crew of the Enterprise encounters a planet suffering from a racial war between people whose faces are black on the left side and white on the right, and those whose faces are white on the left side and black on the right. The encounter with their planet begins when one representative from each side finds his way onto the Enterprise and they continue their battle on board the starship.
As the episode progresses, and despite reminders that they both must descend from a single monochromatic ancestor, the intensity of their dispute increases. Ultimately, the ship is forced to return to these beings’ home planet, where those on the spacecraft discover that the racial battles have destroyed everything and everyone on the planet. There are simply no survivors on either side except the two on the Enterprise.

These two last survivors immediately fall to blaming one another for what has occurred. They, then, return to their planet’s surface where they continue their battle until they too disappear.

With the sole difference that the issues which divide us are more significant in our own terms than which side of our face is which color, I find the situation in the Jewish community today eerily and frighteningly similar. We face a crisis of Jewish continuity with real prospects that the American Jewish community will be marginal at best three or four generations down the road.

As I often say to my own Orthodox community, anyone who thinks there is good news in demographic trends suggesting that we will have approximately one million Orthodox Jews and little else in America in a century or so is deluding him or herself. Should that occur, beyond the tragedy of Jews who are no longer identifiably part of our community, we will lose virtually all political influence, we will be unable to sustain even our most important communal institutions, and people will likely organize tours to visit this interesting but marginal sect of people called Jews just as people now visit the Amish.

If we agree, then, that seeking the core of our Judaism is critical to where we are, and where we are going, then getting into nasty denominational fights is the worst thing we can do. On the one hand, it does nothing to advance the objective of continuity, and on the other hand, it turns marginal and perhaps even mainstream members of the community off to that which Judaism might have to offer. It is, therefore, doubly sad that encounters like this within today’s Jewish community so often deteriorate into intellectual food-fights, and then into blaming each other for who started it.

The truth of course is that both sides share enough of the blame for our present situation, but ultimately, that needs to be unimportant in this context. Instead, we need to discuss these things in a way that ignores denominationalism and focuses us on the issue at hand. This is not a new approach. I would argue that this way of doing business is as old and authentic as any of our traditional texts that deal with denominational and ideological difference. For example, Maimonides called on Rabbinate Jews to make every effort possible toward finding common ground to work with and even to honor the Karaites of his day.
Before preceding down this road, I will digress for a moment to describe the path that I intend to follow. I would have preferred to focus exclusively on the question implicit in the title of our discussion. Unfortunately, the discussion has been colored by the Pluralism debate and I feel compelled to speak directly to that issue. I will try to do so briefly and then move on to what I believe to be the far more important topic of Jewish identity as we examine the state of our Judaism and the Jewish community today.

We labor, it seems to me, under a myth of Pluralism that has always been impossible to achieve - deservedly so. Philosophically, Pluralism (or "Hard Pluralism," as I have come to call it) is a belief that different views are equally and equivalently true. To be Reform is to be no less in possession of truth than to be Orthodox, to be politically conservative is to be no more correct than to be politically liberal. The problem is that to accept that myth is to ask oneself to turn off a powerful and most positively human quality - the ability to make judgments. It is intrinsic to human intellect and existence to decide that some things are right and some things are wrong and we cease to function appropriately when we do not make such judgments.

While it is true that judgment can easily become judgmentalism - meaning a quick, facile negative labeling of ideological opponents on the basis of a small set of facts or supposed facts - nonetheless, the danger of these types of determinations does not mitigate in any way the need to make appropriate judgments.

To put this in concrete terms, I have never met a true Pluralist on any issues that matter. For example, if I meet someone who is truly pro-choice on abortion, who truly believes in the philosophy and political outlooks of that movement, such a person will not believe that pro-lifers possess an equal and opposite truth. So too people who are pro-life, completely and totally, do not believe that pro-choice is an equal and opposite worldview. Similarly those who see affirmative action as an important curative to our racial problems do not see equal truth in the position of opponents of that policy, while those opponents, who often see affirmative action as racism do not grant its proponents an equal share of being in the right.

This is perhaps even more true of religious debate. Revelation from G-d and non-revelation are mutually exclusive and cannot both be true. Full ritual egalitarianism, for women, is either a moral imperative or a Halachik deviation, not both. And the pursuit of a Pluralism that accepts both as equally true is simply absurd.

Taking this yet a step further, Pluralism often means a social or societal Pluralism. We are to grant an equal place at the table to all groups. But, this too doesnít and canít work. The Jewish community cannot and will not grant Jews for Jesus an equal place
at the table. In the same way, secular society will not grant the Ku Klux Klan or the Communist Party the same space it grants to others.

However, because we have accepted the myth of Pluralism, it has become increasingly difficult to keep out the groups we judge to be wrong. In our inability to say of others "you are wrong," because to do so is to be accused of judgmentalism and antipluralism, we are constantly forced to accept groups and attitudes that we judge to be incorrect but are unable to say so.

We are left with one recourse. Hard Pluralism, even for its advocates, does have a limit. Evil cannot sustain a claim of equal truth or a demand for equal access. On this basis we can keep the "bad guys" out. Instead of declaring them wrong intellectually, we declare them wrong morally.

This approach may work for Jews for Jesus or the KKK, but it has terrible consequences for the mainstream polity. I no longer say or can say that liberalism is wrong as an idea - I must say that it is an evil undermining the foundations of our moral society. I no longer can disagree with conservativism; instead, I characterize it as a reactionary, anti-individual rights movement out to hurt the most vulnerable members of society. It is no wonder that our political discourse is so mean-spirited and our civil discourse so unseemly.

This dynamic is also taking place in the Jewish community. We no longer disagree on womenís issues or on who is a Jew. Instead, we label Reform as phony assimilationists, Conservative as unprincipled accomodationalists, and Orthodox as fundamentalist despots. Perhaps such comments make us feel good about our prejudices, but it is not surprising that the community is in the state that it finds itself.

One final point before getting to the question of solutions. Labeling your opponent as evil rather than incorrect means making a judgment of totality rather than a judgment on individual issues. If Reform is evil, Reform Jews have nothing say to me. If Orthodoxy is fanatic, I can write Orthodox folks off. If the Conservative movement is without principles, then Conservative Jews donít count. If, however, I disagree with one or even a series of Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox positions, there may yet be some valid points elsewhere in the position or in those other denominations that I can learn from.

This brings me to the old model that used to work and that must be resurrected if we are ever to be a community again. That is the model of "Soft Pluralism." By this I mean the ability to look at another, even an ideological opponent, and say, "this part I disagree with, and this part I agree with and, perhaps, even validate."
I need to be able to look at Reform Judaism and say, I disagree fundamentally and profoundly on who is a Jew and on the question of Revelation at Sinai, but I agree, appreciate, and learn from Reform teachings on Tikkun Olam and morality. I must challenge what I see as Conservative deviations in Halachah, but I must applaud the interest in learning and in spirituality that one finds in many parts of that movement. Further, we need to meet in a space where, perhaps, we will occasionally debate the former and tell the truth as David Klinghoffer describes it, but more often, focus on the latter, on what unites us.

What I am really talking about is, of course, tolerance, a value in short supply on all sides these days. In fact, I would argue that Hard Pluralism is the enemy of tolerance. I do not tolerate what I believe to be true. Truth is automatically acceptable unless I am irrational. I tolerate what I believe not to be true for the sake of something larger. In that way, in combining Soft Pluralism with tolerance, I will meet and work with all Jews of any ideological stripe to debate, discuss, or work together as long as I am not asked to personally compromise what I believe to be correct.

This is, in my view, the only way to create community out of diversity and disagreement. It is the model that once held sway. It is the model we need again if we are not to continue the recriminations and acrimony that increasingly mark our communal life and our present discussion. It is the only model that will allow us to debate individual issues, even with a great degree of forcefulness, without such debates destroying any semblance of communal unity, and it is with that model in mind that I move forward.

Turning now to our central and ultimately more essential issue: "The Core of Our Judaism;" here I believe that David Klinghoffer did not go far enough to address the question. While I agree that revelation and the binding nature of Halachah are important to the Jewish identity of many people, this fact needs explanation especially for those who do not accept these traditional positions.

Seeking such an explanation opens the door to Dr. Teutsch and his description of people searching for increased meaning. From his perspective, finding meaning in Halachah or in Chavurah or in any other expression of Judaism would appear to be equal.

I would argue, however, that such an equation is not correct because of what I believe people mean when they say they are searching for meaning in life. It seems to me that they are asking for two things that have always been part of the fundamental human economy. First, there is a search for something larger than myself for me to be part of. I recognize that my existence is extremely finite and limited, both in time and in space, when measured against the infinity that is the universe. Second, people are
looking for guidance in a very confusing world. We all need a patch of ground to stand on that does not move and shift with every passing fad and fancy, from which to make sense of the very complex and difficult world that we inhabit.

These two needs are well served by Halachah and the system of Jewish law that originates in Revelation. They are not nearly as well served by finding new and creative mechanisms for meaning. Though the first need, to find a place in something larger than oneself, may seem to be fulfilled, in creative communities of meaning, the second need, for guidance and permanence, will not be found here. These temporary meaning structures give little sense of permanence to the ground on which I stand. Instead, as sources of meaning shift from year to year or even from minute to minute, the foundation on which I stand moves as well. Though perhaps temporarily satisfying, perhaps even providing momentary peak experiences of spirituality, such structures must ultimately fail the long term test of providing continuous guidance, and a sense of continuity and steadfastness.

This is not to say that the search for meaning should not go on in traditional settings. It should and must if Halachah is to remain meaningful. In fact, the search for ritual perfection rather than "meaning" understanding within Halachah is one important reason why many abandoned Halachah as an answer, particularly in our parentís and grandparentís generations. The appropriate response, however, is not to give up on Halachah, but rather to search for contemporary meaning within that structure. In that way, I stand on a secure and unchanging solid patch of ground while coming to grips with the contemporary meaning of my existence. Without the structure of Halachah, this search for meaning can end up in "New Age-ism" and in the development of what Germans would call "Luftmenschen" (roughly, "airheads") who, though truly sincere, project a pop-spirituality that can be very superficial and ultimately extremely unsatisfying and not able to provide Jewish continuity.

Even in regard to the former need, that of seeing oneself as part of something larger, the unaided, unstructured search for meaning may well fail. If the searcher, the judge of what is found and the decisor of how to proceed with what one has found, is ultimately and exclusively me, then I have not found something larger than myself, I have only found the "me," which I was not fully satisfied with when I began my quest. One would seem to need something beyond oneself for the process to succeed.

To put it another way, I have long viewed the central debate of our time to be that of autonomy vs. authority, meaning the belief that right and wrong are determined inside myself as opposed to the view that they reside outside myself in a G-d, a Torah, or a Halachik system.
For me, autonomy for all its attractive talk about individual choice and decision-making, has always seemed an ultimately unsatisfying philosophical and theological approach by which to live oneís life. The classic philosophical/mathematical treatise Flatland describes contact between beings of different dimensional configurations. In one scene, two dimensional and three dimensional astronomers visit a one-dimensional being. This being is, by mathematical definition, an infinitesimal dot, which because it is a dot cannot see outside itself. The dot, therefore, fills its own entire universe and spends its time congratulating itself on how magnificent it is. The visiting astronomers call out to the dot and remind it of how small and truly insignificant it truly is and invite it to give up its inappropriate hubris about its situation. The dot hears the voices, but rejects them while touting its ability to raise doubts and overcome them as a sign as its own true greatness.

In much the same way people who live their lives only from within themselves and who believe in complete personal autonomy occupy the totality of their own individual universes. All decisions, all actions come from them and are owned entirely by them. The problem is, of course, that on a universal scale, a person is an infinitesimal dot. The result is that meaning structures that are entirely autonomously derived may not ultimately meet the need to be part of something larger. Further, voices that suggest a different worldview are often heard from outside and they are then responded to by developing alternate meaning structures such as Communitarianism.

The suggestion that community can provide a sense of belonging to something larger is, of course, a good one. But without an outside imperative requiring me to be part of community, joining a community remains just as much an individual, autonomous act anything else that I do and therefore ultimately fails as an answer to the search for being part of something permanently valuable. Autonomous individuals can make up a community, but it is a community of individual needs, desires, and decisions that can be disbanded as easily as it was formed and that can never, even while it exists, have the same strength or interconnectedness that an independently commanded community achieves. It is not surprising, therefore, that even non-Orthodox Jews will envy the strength and interconnectedness of most if not all Orthodox communities. Non-traditional communities, in their own assessment of themselves, are communities of autonomous individuals willingly joining together. On the other hand, the traditional community is a community that sees itself drawn together by law and imperatives.

One last point; the non-traditional community for many years saw Jewish meaning and found Jewish identity in three things - the Holocaust (anti-Semitism), Israel, and social action. These three have either failed or are failing as sources of meaning. Anti-
Semitism in its worst forms, which may G-d forbid occur again, is thankfully not a contemporary American reality. As such it cannot serve to build Jewish identity.

Second, social action is practiced by many people from many faith perspectives or from no faith perspective. At most, then, this can give us some nostalgic pride that our system may have been the earliest to advocate such things, but this will hardly keep us Jewish today.

Finally, even Israel has diminished as a source of identity. I grew up with images of the Six Day War and the recapture of Jerusalem as my formative impressions of the Jewish state. This generation, on the other hand, is growing up with the Intefada, the invasion of Lebanon, and the very messy peace process as its defining media moments.

Further, in their zeal to defend their denominational interests, many Conservative and Reform leaders regularly denigrate Israel before their congregations and organizations. My sense is that Israel as a prop for Jewish identity is being significantly undermined thereby. In that regard, the frequent calls from some circles for separation of church and state in Israel finishes the job. Make Israel a secular state with an extremely large Orthodox majority in its religious community and it will be no more effective in serving as a prop for Jewish identity for non-Orthodox Jews than Williamsburg or Boro Park or similar communities in the United States.

It is no accident, then, that Eric Joffe at the Reform movementís recent bicentennial convention called in dramatic and specific terms for a return to Torah study, while others in the Reform and Conservative movements have called for this type of return to root sources along with a return to ritual. Torah and ritual are, of course, the sources and most visible manifestations of the authority of Jewish law in our lives. Involvement in Torah and ritual makes one part of something larger, gives one a sense of a community by sharing with others in study and ritual and begins the process of creating that stable patch of ground, defined by Torah and ritual, from which to make sense of our very confusing world. When autonomy and the search for meaning through autonomy fails, it is encouraging to see that some people will once again dip a toe into the waters of authority.

I, of course, would call for much more immersion. It is only on the field of Torah and ritual that we can fully meet as Jews, fully find meaning as Jews, fully develop and share a language as Jews, and fully survive as Jews. As the twentieth century comes to an end and we look to the question of the sources of our identity, that truth has never been more obvious, and it has never been more necessary for it to become a living reality.