

The Jewish view of tolerance and its limits

Tish'a B'Av

Saddest day on Jewish calendar. History full of catastrophic events that befell Jews on Tish'a B'Av (accidentally or intentionally):

-From Mishnah [Ta'anit 4:6]:

- The spies Moses sent to scout the Promised Land brought back a largely negative report which demoralized the Israelites,
- Both Temples destroyed (586 BCE and 70 CE),
- The Bar Kochba revolt against Rome failed in 135 CE when he was killed and the city of Betar was destroyed, and
- Jerusalem was razed a year later, and the Exile began.

-Since then...

- In 1095, the Pope began the Crusades. On the way to the Land of Israel, the Crusaders slaughtered 30-50% of the Jews of Europe.
- In 1242, 24 cartloads of handwritten Talmuds burned in Paris
- In 1290, Jews expelled from England
- In 1306, Jews expelled from France
- In 1492, Jews expelled from Spain, including my own ancestors
- In 1626, the false messiah Shabtai Tzvi was born. His apostasy he dashed the hopes of millions of Jews (one-third of the total) and severely disrupted their lives.
- In 1914, World War I began:
 - It led to World War II and the death of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust.
 - It facilitated the Communist Revolution, spelling 70 years of darkness for Soviet Jews.
- In 1941, Nazis ordered the Final Solution: The Holocaust.

Why persecute the Jews?

These catastrophes happened to us because of intolerance. (Primarily intolerance of those who are more successful than you are.)

What is tolerance?

Dictionary: sympathy, permissiveness or indulgence for beliefs or practices that differ from one's own or conflict with them.

Degrees of tolerance:

- No tolerance: I will try to harm you (Ex.: Nazis)
- I will try to stop you (Ex.: Communists)
- I will not associate with you (Ex.: Converts out of Judaism)
- I will associate with you with some restrictions (Ex.: Less observant Jews)
- Full tolerance: I will associate with you with no restrictions (Ex.: Jews with different views)

Jewish view of tolerance

Must observe the commandments and rebuke those who do not. Torah:
You will not hate your brother in your heart. You will rebuke your neighbor, even repeatedly, and not bear sin because of him. [Leviticus 19:17]

-Not hate him, not avoid him, not harm him, not kill him, only rebuke him.
Talmud:

[Rava] said: [You must rebuke another] even 100 times... [Even] a student [must rebuke] a teacher [if necessary]. [Bava Metzia 31a]

-Some self-interest: If you do not correct him, you might be punished on his account.

-Rashi: Rebuke is done in private. [Rashi on Leviticus 19:17:1]

-In particular, no tolerance for big three: Idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder. *Pikuach nefesh*: Can break all commandments to save a life, save the ones against these three. Talmud emphatic on idolatry in particular.

-Is aim that the whole world be Jewish?

No. Jews don't proselytize. >2000 years ago they did because the rest of the world was idolatrous. Needed to wean them out of it. Not so much now where Jews live. Also, Islam and Christianity made it illegal (penalty: death).

Beyond that, Judaism may be the only religion that teaches that there is nothing wrong with not being a member. Judaism is not an "upgrade".

The Mishna says:

Do not disparage any man, and do not shun any thing, for there is no man that does not have his hour, and there is no thing that does not have its place. [Pirkei Avot 4:3]

The Tosefta, a supplement to the Mishnah, says:

The righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come. [Tosefta Sanhedrin 13:1; Sanhedrin 105a; Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4]

The Talmud says:

God does not withhold reward from gentiles who perform His commandments. [Talmud Y, Peah 1:1]

The Midrash says:

Why does the Holy One, blessed be He, love the righteous? Because righteousness is not due to inheritance or family connections ... If a man wants to become a Kohen or a Levite, he cannot. Why? Because his father was neither a Kohen nor a Levite. However, if someone wants to become righteous, even if he is a gentile, he can, because righteousness is not inherited. [Num. R 8:2]

A later Midrash says:

I call heaven and earth as witnesses: Any individual, whether gentile or Jew, man or woman, servant or maid, can bring the Divine Presence upon himself in accordance with his deeds. [Tanna Devei Eliyahu Rabbah 9]

What "deeds"? What makes a gentile righteous? Following the seven Noahide laws. These laws are derived from the Torah and apply to all mankind. Talmud:

Our Rabbis taught: Seven precepts were the sons of Noah commanded: To establish courts of justice; and refrain from blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, murder, stealing, and eating the flesh of live animals... [Sanhedrin 56a-b]

Jews have even been more tolerant than God wanted! The Torah commanded:

You shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you... You shall clear out the Land and settle in it, for I have given you the Land to occupy it. If you do not drive out the inhabitants of the Land, then those whom you allow to remain will be as spikes in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they will harass you in the land in which you settle. [Numbers 33:52-33:55]

But the Israelites did not do that. The Book of Judges says that, one by one, they allowed them to stay, and concludes:

And the children of Israel dwelt among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. [Judges 3:5]

Some insights on tolerance

1-Tolerance and respect are granted only item-by-item, not wholesale.

Every religion or philosophy (example: Islam) makes 3 kinds of statements:

- Some I agree with and therefore respect. Example: there is only one God.
- Some I disagree with but can still respect. Example: Praying 5 (vs 3) times a day; fasting during daytime for a whole month (vs fasting on 2 specific days for the full day and on 4 specific days during daytime).
- Some I disagree with and do not respect. Example: Negative descriptions of Jews in Koran or by its commentators.

2-The paradox of tolerance

Described by Karl Popper [Jewish philosopher of science] in 1945:

If a society is tolerant without limit, its tolerance will be destroyed by the intolerant: Unlimited tolerance leads to no tolerance.

For a society to remain tolerant, it must be intolerant of intolerance:

Less well known is the paradox of tolerance: Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.—In this formulation, I do not imply, for instance, that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies; as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, suppression would certainly be unwise. But we should claim the right to suppress them if necessary even by force; for it may easily turn out that they are not prepared to meet us on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all argument; they may forbid their followers to listen to rational argument, because it is deceptive, and teach them to answer arguments by the use of their fists or pistols. We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant. [Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. 1, note 4 to Chapter 7]

So giving unlimited free speech to the intolerant is a mistake.

Europe prohibits hate speech, the US does not. But Europe has more of a problem of free speech being abused. Example: France vs the US:

-In France (but not in the US), the following are prohibited by law: Incitement to hatred, discrimination, slander and racial insults; racist, antisemitic, or xenophobic activities, including Holocaust denial; hatred against people because of their sex, sexual orientation, or disability; presentation of drugs in a positive light and incitement to their consumption; insult to the national flag or anthem.
-What is prohibited in the US: Public obscenity, defamation, incitement to riot or to illegal actions, terrorist threats, false advertising, perjury, disclosing privileged information such as trade secrets or classified information, and others. States may have other restrictions.

3-The relationship between tolerance and caring

Can one feel strongly about something yet still be tolerant of those who feel the opposite? Or is being tolerant a sign one does not really care? Is tolerance a virtue or a mask for indifference?

Some will say: "So what? Either is OK." But it is not. The most tolerant Jews are frequently the least observant. They assimilate the fastest. Their branch on the Jewish tree dies out. A sign of *not caring* rather than being tolerant?

The other side: The most intolerant Jews are frequently the most religious. Do they care *too much*? Talmud:

Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder prevailed ... But why was the Second Temple destroyed, given that in its time [the people] WERE occupying themselves with Torah, observance of mitzvot, and the practice of deeds of kindness? Because senseless hatred [*sin'at chinam*] prevailed.

That teaches you that senseless hatred is considered as serious as the three sins of idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder combined. [Yoma 9b]

Does Talmud imply that too much observance can lead to "senseless hatred"? Can one care too much – so much so that the slightest disagreement causes hatred?

History: Divisions in 70 CE

Religious: Very intense religious fervor

- Pharisees (Oral law / World-to-Come, rabbis)
- Sadducees (no Oral law, no World-to-Come, aristocracy)
- Essenes (monastic sect)
- Christians and followers of other Messiah candidates
- Hellenized and Romanized secular people

Political:

- Those against an uprising (includes spies and collaborators)

-Those for an uprising (3 factions of Zealots [*kana-im*])

Clearly it's not enough to be technically observant:

-Prayer of little girl in Religious School: Dear God, please make the bad people good and the good people nice.

-Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students died of disease because they "because they did not treat each other with respect" in their religious disputes. [Yevamot 62b]

-Hillel prevailed against Shammai JUST because his disciples were kind and humble, and always quoted the other side's opinions before their own. [Eruvin 13b]

-Bitter disputes even among very observant Jews on what appear to be minor points. However, Talmud says not all disputes are bad:

A controversy for the sake of heaven [*machloket l'shem shamayim*] will result in something that endures. One that is not for the sake of heaven will not result in something that endures. Which is a controversy for the sake of heaven? The controversy between Hillel and Shammai. And which is not for the sake of heaven? The controversy of Korach and all his faction." [Pirkei Avot 5:17]

How know which is which: Is the motivation a genuine desire to understand Torah; or is it envy, greed, hatred, lust, or desire for power?

This is usually used as an argument against religion. Steven Weinberg, Jewish, Nobel Prize in Physics 1979, famously said:

With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion. [Address at Conference on Cosmic Design, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington, D.C., April 1999]

He is wrong:

-Can also say: "For evil people to do good things, that takes religion."

-Can also say: "Good people can be led to do evil things even without religion."

-Can at least say: "For evil people to do less evil things, that takes religion."

(Religion-inspired Inquisition killed far fewer people than secular-inspired Naziism or Communism.)

Conclusion

Judaism is very tolerant compared to other systems. But it places limits on that tolerance. These limits are necessary.