

Deep Truths: The Challenge of Religious Pluralism

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Returning to our Religious School last week, I greeted the children as they entered our building. One student gave me a “high five”, then stopped and asked rhetorically, “How come we have to come back to school and our parents don’t have to”? Parents, I responded, study and learn in different ways. But, in order to preserve my credibility with that student, I would like to ask you to take a little test, a true or false test. Consider the following aphorisms and decide for each whether it is true or false?

1. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained”
2. “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread?”
3. “Out of sight out of mind”
4. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder?”
5. “He who hesitates is lost”
6. “Look before you leap?”

This is a good test to take because any of these sayings can be considered true or false, depending on the context. There are times and situations when one or the other might be true. Also, people see things differently, to the point that what is true for one may be false for another. Indeed, human beings are creatures of contradictions. The truth of any statement is filtered through our respective perceptions so that two people may insist on possessing opposing truths and each may be correct since each speaks from a different perspective. This was pointed out masterfully by Oscar Wilde more than a century ago when he noted that: A deep truth is any truth, the opposite of which is also a deep truth. Let me repeat that, because as profound and important as is that statement, it is understood by precious few: A deep truth is anything, the opposite of which is also a deep truth.

This is more than a philosophical notion. It is, I believe, among the most important notions necessary peaceful co-existence. And, the fact that our world is so fractured and dysfunctional reflects, in part, the fact that this notion has been neither understood nor accepted in our world. Consider the great divides which cause the greatest problems in the world today. Focusing today specifically on the Jewish People, at the core of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, is an unwillingness or inability by some to see the truth which resides in the perspective of one’s sworn enemy.

I am not suggesting that this philosophical misunderstanding is the root of all evil in the world, but when religious truths conflict, when one group feels that in order for them to be right, those of a different or opposite opinion must be wrong, the stage is set for conflict. Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews are engaged in an ongoing and deadly battle. But the fact is that there is truth on both sides of the battle. Palestinians have legitimate claims to some of the land in Israel, legitimate concerns about the

treatment of Palestinians by the government of Israel or by the IDF. But the opposite is also true: the Israelis also have legitimate claims, claims on the land, claims regarding the real danger posed by terrorists. I believe that the government of Israel, having endorsed the notion of a two-state/ Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian-Arab solution, has accepted that the Palestinians do have some legitimate claims. One reason, however, that this intractable conflict cannot be resolved is that, even before we find a partner for peace, we must find someone on the other side who will concede that, yes, the Israelis also have a legitimate claim. Before there is peace, the Israeli truth and the Palestinian truth about the land must be acknowledged by both sides. Prior to any discussions about boundaries, populations or land swaps, there must be an acknowledgement that each side has legitimate claims. Each has its truth and, though the truths of Israelis and Palestinians may be opposites, both positions may still be true.

There is a famous Chassidic story of the man who wanted to save the world by bring God's message of love and harmony to every person. He traveled around the world and spoke on street corners. He met with anyone who would listen but, with time, the man realized that his audience might be too wide. He returned to his country and there continued to preach. Again, he realized that his message was not getting through. From there, he returned to his neighborhood, to the block on which he lived and, still, no luck. When he returned home, he arrived to find his children fighting with one another. With tears in his eyes, the man went to see the rabbi.

Rabbi, he said, I tried to change the world, but no one would listen. I returned to our country, again no one would heed my words. In our own city, on my own block, in my own family, my message fell on deaf ears. No one would change. The rabbi, smiled and said, "Then, you must begin with yourself."

The story of conflicting truths is one which permeates all cultures and religions when those cultures or religions collide with each another. Most people in the world cannot accept that if we disagree both of us, each from his/her own perspective, might still be right. For most people, if I am right, you must be wrong. If my religion is true, yours must be false. If mine is the legitimate and authentic truth, yours cannot be legitimate as well.

On this day of introspection and atonement in the Jewish community, I choose this evening to speak about this matter in the context of our community, *Klal Yisrael*, the Jewish People. The issue of pluralism finds few who understand it in general, let alone accept it. The Jewish world is no different from the rest. And nowhere in the Jewish world today, is this issue more obvious and more volatile than at the Western Wall, in the heart of the Old City of Jerusalem.

In 1967, during the Six Day War, a dangerous and costly battle was waged by Israel in order to re-capture from the Jordanians the Old City and the Western Wall. From 1949 – 1967 Jews were denied access to that holy site. Following the attacks upon Israel by the armies of the five Arab countries which border Israel, it became both a strategic as well as religious goal to return the City and the Wall to the Jewish People. After that battle, in which the Israeli soldiers fought their way from the Lions Gate, through the Arab Quarter, the City and the Wall were liberated. In the now-famous picture of the Israeli soldiers, arm in arm, standing for the first time at the Wall, with tears in their eyes, rejoiced as the announcement went out: *Har HaBayit BiYadeinu/* the Temple Mount and the Western Wall are now in

Jewish hands. This was not only a crucial military victory and a moment which represented a new beginning for Israel. This was an opportunity to rebuild Jewish homes and synagogues which had been destroyed by the Jordanians, to return our focus to our ancient homeland and to the geographic point to which 2000 years of prayers-in-exile have been focused. This victory resonated with religious and non-religious Jews alike. But what would follow would be a message of particularism and exclusivity with respect to the Wall.

Despite the fact that the Wall was taken by the forces of the IDF, and given as a gift to the entire Jewish People, shortly after that war, the responsibility for the administration, supervision and etiquette which would be established at the Wall would be bequeathed to a very right-wing Orthodox community. In the elation of the '67 victory, the general consensus was that the issue of who would control the Wall could wait and that, in the meantime, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel would be given the authority to oversee the activities at the Wall. And part of their supervision was to assure that men and women would pray separately and only in the way that reflected standards and etiquettes followed in right-wing Orthodox synagogues.

Fast forward 40 years. As Judaism has grown, changed and blossomed in all of its variegated ways, the insistence over the nature of the supervision at the Wall has not changed. In response to unanswered requests for meetings, for parity, for change, a group of women decided to hold women's services at the Wall each *Rosh Hodesh*, once each month. The Women of the Wall, as their group is called, was not a group of Conservative or Reform women. It was a group of women of all different backgrounds, including Orthodox women, who shared a desire to pray together, with their own prayer leader and their own torah scroll. There was no attempt to breach the *mechitza*. There was no attempt to create a mixed-gender service. And yet, the services were broken up, women were arrested by the security guards, at times, garbage and other refuse was thrown at these women. Why? The Women of the Wall believed something different about Judaism and prayer from the Wall's rabbinic authorities.

When questioned about the rough treatment and the aggressive stance taken by the guards, rabbis and others at the Wall, the answer given was that the women themselves were to blame because their behavior did not conform to *Minhag HaMakom* / local custom. "Custom" not "Law". These women were denied access because they had a different custom. Their actions were not referred to "forbidden by Jewish Law". Their actions were forbidden as a matter of style. But, you may ask, what of all the other groups which pray according to different customs: Ashkenazic Jews, Sephardic Jews, Moroccan or Yemenite or Greek or Chasidic Jews who have different customs? Good question. Why are these women being singled out.

But, the fact is, divergent customs are not the reason that the Women of the Wall were banned. The reason they were banned is that the rabbi of the Wall will not accept the possibility that a practice with which he disagrees, an idea which does not reflect his truth, might be legitimate even though he disagrees with it. And it is this sort of reasoning which characterizes the struggle for religious pluralism in Israel, in the US and in countries around the world. For me to be correct, you must be mistaken. Why? Because, if I allow for the possibility that you may be right, I must consider the possibility that I may be wrong. And I cannot be wrong.

This need to be right is, perhaps, the single most common reason why Jews have been such outcasts from and so threatening to the world. It is why we are the most hated people in the world and it is the justification given for the murder of millions upon millions of Jews through the ages. "If I am right, you must be wrong" is one of the oldest and most deeply entrenched notions of Christianity, which for centuries labeled those who disagreed with Church doctrine as heretics. In Islam, they were called infidels.

There is a story in the Talmud (BT Shabbat 33b) about Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, known for his devotion for study and his piety. When the Roman authorities banned the study and teaching of Torah, Bar Yochai hid with his son in a cave so that they could study Torah even during the Roman persecutions. They remained in the cave, according to the Talmud, for twelve years, until the Emperor had died and the persecution ended. But, when they emerged from the cave, the world was not what they had hoped it would be.

So deeply steeped in study, Bar Yochai had become detached from the world, unable or unwilling to accept that one could live a worthy life differently than the life of study and seclusion which he had chosen. And so, as the Talmud relates, when he emerged from the cave, he saw a man plowing and sowing his field. "How could someone spend their life" he asked, "on such mundane matters as food and physical labor while forsaking the study of Torah, the way to assure life eternal?!" And, says the Talmud, whatever Bar Yochai cast his eyes upon, was immediately burned up. At that point, a Heavenly Voice is heard saying, "Have you emerged to destroy my world? Return to your cave!" And Bar Yochai and his son were punished by being sent back into the cave for another twelve months.

Bar Yochai lived in a cave. He saw life only from the perspective of one who studies night and day, removed from the world and focused only on Torah. But more importantly, he saw his life as the only meaningful way to live. And if one chose a different path, if one plowed rather than studied, Bar Yochai wanted to destroy them. They were simply wrong and, in Bar Yochai's world, the two ways of life, the two perspectives, could not co-exist. And, for that, the pious Bar Yochai was punished by God. For God knows that there is more than one way to live. There are an infinite number of perspectives on life which may be legitimate, though contradictory. A life of study may be noble, but it is not the only way to live. A life of study need not be only legitimate lifestyle, to the exclusion of all other lifestyles. Physical labor is also important. But Bar Yochai couldn't see it.

From the second Temple, all that remains is that Western Wall. That place is our physical link to the time when Jewish Life flourished in the land of Israel 2000 years ago. The Temple which once stood there, was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 CE. But, according to the rabbis, God allowed the Romans to destroy our Temple as God's punishment of the Jewish People. That punishment was not carried out because we lacked faith or piety. Rather, the Temple was destroyed because we did not know how to get along with one another. The Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred, *Sinat Chinam* in Hebrew. And what is baseless hatred? It means hating someone who believes something different than you. It means hating someone because, if you don't hate them, you grant them the possibility that their view may have merit. If you do not hate them, it means that, when it comes to deep truths, both it and its opposite may also be true.

On Yom Kippur, we spend our day confessing, judging ourselves, considering how we can improve. But at its core, this day is about humility. Humility is the basis for an individual's spiritual life. And humility, simply put, is based on the idea that we may be wrong. It is based on the premise that there may be multiple sources of truth. Wisdom can come from more than one place. For if we allow ourselves to think that we alone have the truth, we risk a spiritually fatal arrogance.

Yom Kippur is the day to reconsider our views, our positions and our approaches to life. Today, in our humility, we must consider that we may have been wrong, whether with respect to the way we have treated others or with respect to the way we have formulated our opinions. And so, that said, as we began with a test, I would like to end with an assignment.

Consider a part of the Jewish Community which you most resent. Think about how angry they make you. Consider how much better your life would be if they would just disappear, along with their obnoxious and annoying ways. Now, with that group in mind, contemplate the Jewish value embodied by that community.

*Think of the Jewish political right in this country. Consider not how their intransigence over their positions with respect to Israel upsets you, but consider their love of the land. Consider how their great love and concern for Israel outweighs everything else. That is the value of *ahavat yisrael*, the love one has for all Jews. Can you admire them for that?

*Consider the Jewish left, whose care for all people, justifies their criticisms of Israel. You may not like their views, but their views also embody a Jewish value: *ahavat habriot* / the love of all of God's creations. Can you respect them for their commitment to that Jewish value? You don't need to agree with them, but can you see that their view has some legitimacy?

*Consider the Reform Movement and their struggle to keep Jews Jewish in an open society. One may not approve of their methods, their views regarding various matters of Jewish tradition. But in the Reform Movement there is a deep and pervasive commitment to outreach to non-Jews in intermarried families, to social justice and to the notion of *tikkun olam*. Are there not some principles here we can acknowledge?

*Consider the Orthodox Community, with its unyielding love of Torah and its observance of *mitzvot*. One need not agree with the lifestyle they have chosen, the rigid boundaries which they erect, both physically in their synagogues and philosophically in their views. But how can one not respect and admire their commitment to *halacha* and to Torah study?

Returning to the situation in Israel, there has been a partial resolution to the situation at the Western Wall. After victories in the Supreme Court in Israel, for the first time, the Government of Israel has recognized its responsibility in meeting the legitimate needs of the non-Orthodox part of the Jewish Community. To the right of the Western Wall, in the area known as Robinson's Arch, a raised plaza of 4800 square feet has been erected in order to provide unfettered access to the Wall for non-Orthodox Jews. There will be no *mechitza* there. Mixed-gender services will be conducted. There will be Torah scrolls available for use. But since the new plaza is located away from the part of the Wall already in

use, some critics are upset by a “separate but equal” solution. The more permanent solution, known as the Scharansky Plan, would involve reconfiguring the existing plaza space of the *Kotel* or creating different hours during which Orthodox and non-Orthodox services would be given specific times when each would have access to the main *Kotel* area. It is likely that that plan may take years, if ever, to be enacted.

But, it seems to me that the partial solution, in the area of Robinson’s Arch, has one advantage over the Scharansky Plan. The newly installed plaza is a physical reminder to all that there is more than one truth in Judaism and in life. As much as some of our pious co-religionists object, perhaps, every time they pass by and see the fervor and passion of non-Orthodox Jews, they may come to understand that different does not necessarily mean wrong. And for us, when one stands back looking at the Orthodox area on the left and the non-Orthodox area on the right, one can see the progress we have made. From that vantage, one can see Jewish life in action, with many different styles, some which I cannot stand and some that I love, all fervent and strong. I suspect that each group occupying its own bit of turf believes in their respective truths. But standing back, we should be able to feel pride in the ability of Israel, and even in the ability of some Jews, to appreciate the deep truths to which each is committed. And if this can happen among Jews (who happen to be among my best friends), if we can lead the way, maybe it can happen elsewhere in this world as well.