

My trip to Israel this summer centered around a Rabbinical Study Seminar. Each morning for about 3 hours we studied Bible, archeology, Talmud, or modern Jewish literature. On the very last day of the program, after spending two days studying the work of the Nobel prize winning Israeli author Shmuel Yosef Agnon, our teacher took us on a walking trip through one of the earliest neighborhoods outside of the walls of the old city of Jerusalem, to which Agnon made references in one of his novels. It is a neighborhood which does not welcome outsiders. Signs to that effect warn groups not to enter; other signs enumerate the sins of the Israeli government, and warn residents not to get entangled in politics by voting.

While walking through, at one point a few young boys up on a balcony taunted the women in the group, calling them prostitutes. Most of the residents, though, either ignored us or asked us for money. Poverty is rife in this neighborhood.

About halfway through the walk, a man came up to us, told us we didn't belong in his neighborhood, and asked us to leave. Somebody in a balcony above threw down some water, which splashed on a few people in our group. Our teacher, not wanting serious trouble, started moving us towards the street leading out of the neighborhood, but a couple of the rabbis in the group decided to stay and argue. One in particular loudly asserted his right to walk wherever he wanted. He claimed the right as an Israeli citizen to enter any part of the land of Israel and do whatever he wanted, without regard to the sensitivities of the local population.

The shouting escalated, as we were compared to Nazis. More people approached, and for the first time during my two weeks in Israel, I began to question my safety. I moved away from my colleague as it appeared that the confrontation was about to turn physical. At that point he had enough, and began walking away. Our group safely returned to the streets outside the neighborhood along with my colleague, puffed with pride that he had defended our honor.

He was proud of the fact that he had provoked the residents of this neighborhood into telling him that they would rather live with Palestinians than Jews. You see, the neighborhood we were touring was called Meah Shearim, and is the bastion of Anti-Zionist Neturei Karka Judaism in Jerusalem. Residents of this neighborhood for the most part fervently believe that the establishment of the State of Israel was a presumptuous act against God's will, and it will not be until the messiah arrives and the third Temple descends from heaven that there should be a Jewish government in Israel.

It happens that I think the residents of Meah Shearim were not being completely unreasonable to ask us to leave and become upset that a few of us would not; and that my colleague was being unreasonable and intolerant by asserting that as an Israeli, he had the right to walk through any street or alleyway he wanted. I suggested to him that we were walking in a neighborhood that for all intents and purposes was not part of our Israel. He scoffed in response, telling me that I couldn't understand because he had chosen to make aliyah and settle in Israel, and I made my home in America.

We know that many of the Jews that we call Haridi do not respect religious pluralism. The point of my telling you this story boils down to the question -- where does pluralism exist in our Jewish tradition, and is it our obligation to respect pluralism of expression, religious and otherwise?

In a just published book entitled The Dignity of Difference, the chief Rabbi of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, Jonathan Sacks writes, "The key narrative is the Tower of Babel. God

splits up humanity into a multiplicity of cultures and a diversity of languages. God's message to Abraham is: 'Be different, so as to teach humanity the dignity of difference.' "

This pluralistic outlook is deeply rooted in Rabbinic thought:

For three years the Academy of Shammai and Hillel argued. Each said that the halakha followed their own [ruling]. A Divine voice came and said: 'The ruling of both are the words of the living God, אלו ואלו דברי א-להים חיים, but the halakha is like [the ruling of] the Academy of Hillel'. [Eruvin 13b]

Clearly, a divine voice stating that both Hillel and Shammai were speaking the words of God, that both of their opinions represented "truth," is a pluralistic outlook. Even though in the end the halakhic tradition chose Hillel's opinion out of a desire to create a measure of uniformity of Jewish practice, the Talmud goes on to suggest that the reason Hillel's opinion was chosen was because Hillel used to teach pluralism by teaching both his own and Shammai's opinion.

Another classical text compares Torah to sacred wine which was drunk out of a special silver basin. The basin itself represented the uniqueness and oneness of Torah, but the wine in the basin, based on the numerical value of the Hebrew word for wine, yayin, is seventy, alluding to the seventy modes of expounding the Torah, "שבעים פנים בחורה", literally seventy faces or facets of the Torah. [Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15-16]

A similar idea is attributed to the school of Rabbi Ishmael, based on a verse in which God says, "Is not my word like fire? ... like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:29). Just as a hammer that strikes a rock causes sparks to fly off in all directions, so each and every word that issued from the mouth of the Holy One divided itself into seventy languages. [Shabbat 88b]

My colleague's insistence in asserting what he saw as his right and privilege of free expression and movement over the objections of others is symptomatic of the larger issue of a move towards more "orthodox" thinking among many in the Conservative Rabbinate, in the sense of the word orthodox as 'ortho' - correct or right, and 'dox' - opinion. It is a McCarthy-like approach that those who don't hold the correct opinions on a given issue should be silenced.

During the course of this past year, a vituperative debate took place on Ravnet, an internet discussion group for Conservative rabbis, about a group called Rabbis for Human Rights. It is a politically left wing organization devoted to exposing human rights abuses, especially by the Israel government towards the Palestinians. They have also come down hard on homicide bombers and other terrorist activities sponsored by the Palestinians; but there are some in the Rabbinic world who think that any sympathy for Palestinians, given the situation today, is misplaced. In a strongly worded statement mailed to all Conservative rabbis, they suggested that any rabbi who supports Rabbis for Human Rights is giving comfort to, aiding, and abetting the enemy during wartime, activities defined as treasonous. They call upon any rabbi who is a member of Rabbis for Human Rights to resign from leadership positions in the Rabbinical Assembly.

Another case -- Rabbi Sacks whom I mentioned earlier is being castigated by some of my colleagues and others for suggesting in an interview related to his new book that the 35 years of Israeli rule over the Palestinians has been and will continue to be damaging to the Israeli soul. He said, "There is no question that this kind of prolonged conflict, together with the absence of hope, generates hatreds and insensitivities that in the long run are corrupting to a culture." In the same interview, he also said that the Israeli peace camp is repeatedly "checkmated" by

Palestinian terror, that every time Israeli liberals preach compromise, Palestinians kill more innocents; and he stressed how Israeli compromise and concessions have not been matched by the Palestinian side. Nevertheless, he is being accused by some of my colleagues of being a traitor to the Israeli cause.

I well understand that we are fighting a dangerous enemy in the Palestinian and Arab world right now -- but it saddens me to see my colleagues using such language against each other. I fear that it reflects a radicalizing of the Conservative community, one which up until now has been truly committed to pluralism. I fail to see how a return to the practices of the McCarthy era of labeling those who disagree with us as traitors will ultimately advance our cause. Our cause, both in the religious and political realm, is to be seekers of truth, seekers of peace, and seekers of God. Demonizing those who disagree with us, religiously or politically, will not help us find common ground to live together.

A parable told by the Hasidic Master Rabbi Hayyim of Zans (19th cent.) suggests a different approach:

A man had been wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing which was the right way out. Suddenly, he saw a man approaching him. His heart was filled with joy. "Now I shall certainly find out which is the right way," he thought to himself. When they neared one another, he asked the man, "Brother, tell me which is the right way. I have been wandering about in this forest for several days."

Said the other to him, "Brother, I do not know the way out either. For I too have been wandering about here for many, many, days. But this I can tell you: do not take the way I have been taking, for that will lead you astray. And now let us look for a new way out together."

Rabbi Hayyim added: "So it is with us. One thing I can tell you: the way we have been following this far we ought follow no further, for that way leads one astray. But now let us look for a new way."

I want to take this parable one step further. I find it useful to imagine that our pursuit of the divine path towards truth or peace leads us through such a deep forest. We are on one side, seeking to get to the other side. However, there are multiple paths through the forest. Each one will lead us to the other side, but each one takes a different way to get there. The religious view that criticizes the Israeli government, and the religious view that supports the Israeli government, the political right and the political left all have insights into a path that will lead to peace and security. As Conservative Jews and rabbis, we should realize that none of us have the exclusive path through the forest leading to the Divine presence.

Our world, in America, in Israel, and around the globe, is facing tremendous evil. We are all at a loss as to how to address it most effectively. Some argue for more contact and negotiation with Palestinians, others argue for separation and punishment; some argue for massive military action against world terrorism, others argue for examining America's role in provoke their anger. We are all wandering in the forest right now. Alone, we will find no way out. But with each other's help, by combining wisdom, we can help each other find a safe way to the other side.

Ken y'hi ratzon, May it be God's will.