

We must make room for one another in the world of Judaism

THE RABBI'S TURN

ARTHUR GREEN

When I first began reading Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*, long before, I knew that I was going to spend much of my life as a student of Chasidism, there were lines from two tales that impressed me above all others.

One was a statement by Rabbi Zusya of Anipol, who is supposed to have said: "When I get to the World of Truth, they won't ask me why I wasn't Moses. They'll ask me why I wasn't Zusya."

The other comes from a tale about Rabbi Raphael of Bershad. Embarking on a journey by coach, he asked his disciples to join him. When they protested that there was not enough room in the small coach, he said: "So we'll love each other more!"

Within these two tales are embodied the essential principles of living in a community. Each of us has to know who he or she is and not try to be anyone else. At the same time, we all have to be willing to move over, to make room for one another, to love each other more.

We must learn to love others for their differences from us, not for being just like us. God is praised in our tradition as being *Meshaneh haberiyot*, One who makes for variety in Creation. The great wonder of human existence, the Talmud tells us, is that God stamps each human being in the imprint of Adam, and yet each of us comes out different.

Loving the other for who he or she is also means exercising a degree of restraint in attempting to change others, even where we think their opinions are wrongheaded. It means that we vigorously reject missionary attitudes within the Jewish community, even if they are well-meant. The missionary by definition cannot respect the other's right to differ. The notion that "I love you as one who is a potential convert to my viewpoint" is something less than love.

Since it is often we who accuse the Orthodox of such attitudes, let me make it clear that I am fully aware that liberals, too, can be self-righteous and overbearing. While seeking to encourage others to be more pluralistic and open in their relations with us, we should not be caught in the act of telling fellow Jews that their versions of Judaism are oppressive or inferior.

We are now in a period marked by increasing mutual alienation and a growth of acrimony within the Jewish community, primarily but not exclusively along the Orthodox/non-Orthodox divide. The issues that divide us are not simple or easily resolved. It is time to try that which we have not yet tried: to love each other more.

To do this, we first have to get to know one another better. We need contact, we need experience of one another in a non-combative environment. This is a time when we need to preserve and build upon those contacts — familial, social, intellectual and others — that do cross party lines. It is time to seek out new contacts and ways of working together as a single Jewish people.

When I go back to my tale of the Chasidim trying to get into their rebbe's coach, however, the fact is that they do move over. Do we have any room to actually move, to make room for the other? Is there anything that we could change, give up, negotiate, for the sake of Jewish unity?

"A question out of place!" many will say. "It is they, not we, who have been exclusive, rejecting, rigid! They, not we, should be asked this question."

But anyone who has been involved in negotiations will know, of course, that life is never so simple. Orthodoxy claims that it is we liberals who have destroyed the one-time Jewish unity, the supposedly idyllic time when all Jews shared a commitment to the world of halacha.

We reply, of course, that it was modernity and the new reality of life in the open society that brought about this change, not the malicious deeds of wayward rabbis and their followers. And so the argument goes.

A long and painstaking process of intra-Jewish dialogue is needed. We should be willing to commit ourselves to such dialogue, even to serve as hosts and facilitators for it. But, as in any true dialogue, all participants have to recognize that they may to some degree be influenced or changed by the dialogic process: Getting to know and care about the other makes each of us a different person.

Before embarking on such dialogue, it is appropriate to ask

ourselves what the areas are in which we are most reluctant to change. What are our bedrock principles that should not be compromised in any such dialogue? On what points might we have room to move over, in order to live in harmony with other Jews?

The first point on which we must take a firm stand is that there be no test of theological belief or religious practice in defining "Who is a Jew?" — excepting the clear case of one who professes loyalty to a system of religious symbols other than that of Judaism.

Reconstructionism is a movement of Jews for whom conventional answers to the basic questions of Jewish theology have not proven adequate. We are Jews in search of more sophisticated, contemporary and still evolving ways of thinking about our Judaism.

As Jews who define ourselves as questioners, we cannot insist that a particular set of answers be imposed upon anyone as a token of Jewish legitimacy. This refers in the first instance to the would-be convert to Judaism.

We reject the notion that anyone's decision to join the Jewish people is inadequate because he or she has not fully taken on "the yoke of the commandments," or because his/her theological beliefs are not in sufficient conformity to tradition. Becoming a Jew means a willingness to join with us in our struggle with the tradition, nothing more and nothing less.

Of course, a prospective Jew should experience aspects of traditional living, having the same open mind and willingness to experiment that we hope to find in those who are born as Jews. But the Jew by choice, like all the rest of us, retains the freedom to choose those aspects of Judaism that seem most likely to be life-enhancing and helpful in his or her fulfillment as a Jew and as a person.

A second bedrock principle for which we Reconstructionists must stand in such discussions is that of gender equality. This hardly needs to be said in our own circles, but the firmness of our commitment to it must be made clear to others.

In no move toward Jewish unity or interdenominational rapprochement will we compromise the following: the full participation of women in all levels of Jewish leadership, including the rabbinic; the welcome offered to women to participate and be counted as full equals in all areas of Jewish ritual life; the acceptance of women as partners with men in legal decision-making, witnessing and participation in a Beth Din; or the right of a woman, in the absence of other good alternatives, to end a marriage with a Jewish divorce obtained in a non-degrading manner.

The third principle for which we stand in this generation is that of full participation in the life of a Jewish community by all its members and the denial of legitimacy to any sort of Judaism by vicarious atonement.

American Jews have a debilitating penchant for vicariousness. We want somebody else, anybody else, to do it for us. This stems from a basic insecurity about our own Jewish seriousness, about the depth or authenticity of our own Jewish commitment.

Before the Holocaust, it was East European Jewry that served as our *kapparah*. The day of that old Judaism was passing, even in Eastern Europe. Those of us who understood that great historical transformation — especially those who were not entirely regretful about it — had already begun to shift our allegiances from Poland to Palestine, later Israel.

Indeed we American Jews might hope to strike roots and "make it" in this new land of opportunity — where the cost of success in assimilation was always quite entirely clear — but a Jewish future could be built *there*, in Israel, and we could participate by paying for it. After the war Israel was depicted as our *only* hope for the Jewish future, in the very decades when we were making our own future plans quite clear by the move to suburbia rather than to Zion.

In more recent times, the only causes that have been able seriously to mobilize American Jewry are those that involve threats to Jews elsewhere — Israel, the Soviet Union

and, to a lesser degree, the Arab world and Ethiopia.

Our concern for Jews elsewhere must lead us to greater commitment and growth in our own lives as Jews. We should not let our noble concern for other Jews stand as a surrogate for our own Jewish living and learning. I am happy to say that in recent years, this message has become increasingly clear to the younger generation of Jewish leadership.

Another sort of vicarious Judaism current in America uses the rabbi to plug into someone else's authenticity. Its usual form is the well-known: "I may not be an observant Jew, but my rabbi sure has to be."

In taking a firm stand against Jewish vicariousness, we are asserting the right, the obligation, and the ability of every individual and each family to lead a full and rich Jewish life.

In an age when university education, often including advanced degrees, is becoming nearly universal among Jews in North America, our community is disgraced by the low level of Jewish learning that has become the norm. We as a community all have a part in the terrible embarrassment felt by intelligent and highly educated Jews, successful in the world of professions or business, who get up in the synagogue and blunder in frustration when they try to read a simple blessing in Hebrew. It is time for us to fully commit ourselves to a campaign to wipe out Jewish illiteracy in our lifetime.

There no longer is an established norm against which we are all to be measured. There is no rabbinic authority that can tell us how to live our lives. We Reconstructionists are thankful rather than regretful that we live in such times.

Yet our decisions must be serious ones if we ourselves are to respect them. This takes us from the realm of *right* to that of *obligation*. Each of us stands confronted by our heritage in its entirety, with no pre-selection made of what it is we are to reject. Standing before that tradition, but bearing with us the commitments we also have as late 20th-century Western humanists, we must *reconstruct*,

brick by brick, a Jewish life for ourselves.

The ability to live the life of such Jewish seriousness depends on education. Our communities should be, first and foremost, communities of Jewish learning, tailored to the many needs and interests of our people.

The North American Jewish community has the ability to bring forth a great age of spiritual growth for the Jewish people as a whole. We Reconstructionists should be a beacon of this vision — a liberal Judaism that demands the full participation of its membership and, in doing so, offers the best of their energies and potentials to the entire Jewish community.

The enunciation of these principles is meant to set forth a positive vision of the Jewish future for which we as a movement stand. We offer them to our fellow Jews as a firm statement of our own self-definition. We have no desire to force them upon others, but neither can we compromise them without compromising our own integrity.

At the same time, we remain fully committed to the entire house of Israel. We are all riding in the same coach. Anything we can do, without compromising these principles, to make room for one another and "love each other more," we should stand ready to consider. ■