



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

ONE NATION, UNDER GOD: THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

On a designated Spring morning, each and every year, the members of the United States Congress, the President and his Administration, and prominent religious leaders gather for the annual Day of National Prayer, beginning with a National Prayer Breakfast. In the course of the morning, clergy of different faiths read from their sacred scriptures, a public figure offers a keynote speech, and the assembled dignitaries pray for the welfare of the Government and the Nation. That gathering is replicated in State Capitals throughout the United States, and in innumerable cities and counties as well.

In Mission Viejo, the Rotary Club has sponsored the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast for the past six years. It is held in the city's country club, and a few hundred of the local citizenry gather for the occasion. The morning begins with the Boy Scouts presenting the colors, the Mayor says a few words, there is a reading from Hebrew Scriptures, one from the Gospels, a Keynote Speech, and a prayer on behalf of the City Government. For the past six years, I have been invited to attend that event, representing the Jewish community by reading from the Hebrew Bible.

This year, however, I was asked to give the Keynote Address. And no one mentioned that asking a rabbi to preside at a Prayer Breakfast is quite extraordinary. There aren't many countries in which Christians (or Muslims or Buddhists or Hindus) would gather in prayer to hear the words of a Rabbi, in which citizens of different faith traditions would come together in harmony and fellowship. Praying Christians were often a source of danger and fear for Jews during the past two millennia. We have been trained, through long and bitter experience, to see ourselves as outsiders—occasionally tolerated, sometimes even welcomed—but at best as invited guests at someone else's table. The fact that I was attending this Prayer Breakfast as communal religious leader, as someone that everyone in my city should hear, is a revolutionary innovation. That inviting a rabbi is hardly noticed by most Americans simply heightens its magnitude. This is an amazing country.

America the Ideal: A Great Experiment

The ideal of America is one of humanity's greatest experiments. Whereas other nations bind their people by common ancestry, religion, culture, or ethnicity, America was envisioned as a place where disparate peoples were linked primarily through their shared passion for freedom. An American looks like every people in the world, reflecting

the range of beliefs, traditions and cultures of all humankind. Our diversity (and exuberance) is almost unique: on only one other occasion did people who shared no other connection unite under the banner of a great idea, when the Israelites fled from Egyptian slavery. The Torah relates that they were joined by an eruv rav, a mixed multitude of impoverished Egyptians who made themselves part of this confederation of outcasts and former slaves. The rag-tag group that migrated toward the Land of Israel, where they were joined by down-and-out Canaanites rebelling against the hierarchical wealth of Canaanite culture, shared no ethnicity, no skin color, no common history, no common culture. All they shared was a desire to serve God and to follow the Torah. Like that ancient Israelite confederation, the peoples of America came together in pursuit of a great idea: freedom. Some were already here, some were brought by force against their will, and some came as a result of determination and grit, but all are connected by this passion for liberty, and by the unique conviction that the unfettered pursuit of freedom can unleash wellsprings of human creativity and well-being otherwise unattainable. The American people, if they are a people, are such only through that shared conviction. We share neither church nor history in common, neither a single culture nor a single tongue to bind us together. The only criterion for American identity is love of liberty and a willingness to share a joint destiny.

That experiment is still one of the grandest dreams in human history. That peoples of such diverse backgrounds could live together in mutual support, not seeking to diminish our distinctions but to celebrate them, not trying to impose a cultural monolith, but rather sharing a conviction that freedom and liberty are a sufficient birthright to bind a citizenry together. The dream of America is a dream unafraid of any speech, unwilling to subordinate religion to any government control or to the establishment of any particular creed. The dream of America was, and remains, a magnificent ideal.

America the Reality: Unfinished Business

As lofty as the American ideal may be, even the most passionate patriot must concede that our reality falls short of our dream. While the core idea of America may have been a nation in which all were created equal, this nation still wrestles with continuing bigotry and persistent inequality. Invidious distinctions based on skin color, gender, height, weight, age, sexual orientation, political affiliation, and a range of other characteristics continue to intrude into the ideal of a nation in which each individual enjoys the same opportunity as any other.

In fact, the idea was greater than even its ardent advocates knew. The same circles that recognized that "all men are created equal" wrote into the Constitution that an African-American was worth only 3/5ths of a European-American. The purchase of Americans as chattel and their disenfranchisement (along with that of women) wasn't recognized as a contradiction to that fundamental ideal for well over a century. The ideal is still bigger than most Americans: ethnic minorities, women, gays & lesbians, Jews, and many others regularly experience exclusion and degradation from their fellow Americans. Prejudice is still very much a part of the reality of many Americans, even if it is incompatible with the ideal of America. Even while claiming allegiance to the dream, these bigots betray it through their acts and words of division and disdain. The realities

of American life, and the persistence of bigotry and favoritism continue their assault on the American Ideal. We still fall short of our promise; still fail to realize its transforming power.

America: A Religious Ideal

My teacher, Rabbi Simon Greenberg, z"l, used to say that when a great idea is so powerful that even its advocates don't grasp its implications, that is a sign of divine inspiration. As did he, I share the conviction that the notion of the equality of all people that pervades the Declaration of Independence and the preamble to the Constitution is a result of divine inspiration. An idea so shattering, so without precedent, and so little understood even by its own supporters must have come from God. The greatness of the idea is a sign of its divinity.

I am not alone in seeing this idea as the result of a religious worldview. The founders themselves rooted the American ideal in our status as God's children: "We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." It is because we are the creations of a loving God that we enjoy intrinsic claims to the basic values of life, liberty, and happiness. It is only relative to the startling otherness of God that all humans could be described as equal, only in the light of the quantum gap separating even the most brilliant human from the intelligence of the Divine do we all reflect equal dignity.

Human equality is cogent because we are all fashioned b'tzelem Elohim, in the Divine Image. Without the underlying premise of a single Creator God, the assertion of our equal worth would be as lacking in intellectual grounding as it is in empirical evidence. Surely some people make greater contributions to the quality of life than do others: the inventor of a vaccine saves more lives than a car mechanic. Some people are smarter, some stronger, some more beautiful. If we restrict our view of humanity to the standards of the economic system, it seems clear that all people are not of equal worth—differences in salaries are theoretically linked to different financial value. If all we have to go by are the measures of the visible, human equality is—as Nietzsche asserted—a lie.

The founders of American democracy were intelligent people, and they knew that an idea so preposterous and transforming as human equality had better be rooted in cogent logic. Belief in a transcendent God who created us all, who is radically different than us all, grounds the assertion of human equality, making that claim reasonable and coherent. The logic of "one person-one vote" is a religious logic; it assumes the divine image of each and every person. American democracy is founded on a distinctively religious claim.

There is yet another way in which American democracy presupposes a profound faith commitment for its citizens (however diverse that faith may be). While asserting that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right, the founders of the Republic wisely left the content of that happiness undefined, even going so far as to preclude the governmental

imposition of any single definition of “happiness.” The Constitution provides a framework of restrained government, so that all citizens may pursue happiness according to their own private understandings, relying on the teachings of specific faith communities to define happiness beyond any passing fad or destructive hedonism. Instilling the solid republican values of thrift, diligence, honesty, and decency is the responsibility of the religious communities—the secular duty of government is powerless to provide the pedagogy and is incapable of providing the inspiration. Instead, the government makes possible the flowering of many schools of religion, each of which trains its followers in its own understanding of goodness. The challenge, then, is to affirm our divergent understandings of what constitutes happiness while uniting around a common agenda of action.

How To Talk With Each Other

With the functioning of American democracy assuming, and dependent upon, strong faith communities, the urgency of learning how to speak with each other becomes particularly pressing. While religions all promise peace and joy, it should come as no surprise to any student of past or present that religious fervor often produces acts of zealotry and violence. Emboldened by an asserted monopoly on truth, fanatics of every religion (and of all secular commitments) have shed innocent blood. How to channel the passion and persistence that religious faith can summon, how to utilize the ability of religion to contextualize all issues in the largest and most universal of terms is the great desire of civil progress. To do so without also unleashing the genies of intolerance and self-righteousness is the great challenge of civil discourse.

In contemporary life, when the people of the world speak to each other every day, we have to be able to hear each other. While images of each others lives, values and cultures intrude in our homes through television, radio, and videos, there is simply no way to shut each other out. Nor is it possible to pretend that we are all “basically the same.” Our faiths (or lack of faith), our cultures, and our values are irreconcilably different. The challenge here is not to try to minimize our differences—a leveled culture would simply reflect an abandonment of our uniquely American experiment, living with each other even though we are different, forging an identity that is built upon celebrating our distinction.

There are Americans who in good faith believe that I will go to hell forever, simply because I do not adhere to their faith. There are Americans who believe that I have forfeited eternal life because I do not share their literalist belief that God dictated each word of the Written and the Oral Torah. Not all faith claims are reducible to some universal pabulum, nor do our religious traditions gain profundity from that procrustean amputation. Some perceptions do not admit compromise. Take, for example, the contentious issue of abortion. For those who believe that the fetus attains the status of a human being at conception, any deliberate act to end its existence must be considered murder. From this point of view, even the violent disruptions of abortion clinics represents a courageous refusal to tolerate murder. Surely if there were a clinic where newborn babies could be killed legally, those who favor legal abortion would resort to the very tactics of the anti-abortionists in order to prevent the slaughter of those infants.

Where the two groups differ, then, is not really on the facts, but on their assessment of what those facts mean. From the perspective of those who favor legalized abortion, the fetus may be a potential human, but it does not yet claim human status. Since it's not a full person, the woman's right to control her own body is supreme. Both viewpoints are internally cogent, impelling action that is reasonable according to their own premises, and both are irreducibly incompatible with each other. Either the fetus is a human being or it is not; either terminating its life is murder or it is not. There is no rational middle ground. The real challenge of American democracy, then, and the special challenge of religion in America, is to fashion a way that incompatible faith assertions can still talk with each other, still learn from each other. Without ignoring our very real differences, we have to be able to live with each other.

How do we speak with each other? How can we construct a helpful dialogue that doesn't require omitting the most significant aspects of our identities and beliefs? I would propose that we have failed to distinguish between inner and outer dialogue. Inner dialogue, among members of a single faith community, attends to matters of theology, to issues of religious authority and ancestral tradition. Within a particular religion, who said it is often more important than what was said. If the teaching carries sufficient weight, then it has a determinative force because of its teacher. Being part of a community reflects a willingness to be persuaded to accept its central tenets. I am often asked, "Rabbi, what do we believe?" The seeking Jew is willing to accept (or to try to accept) whatever answer I give to their question. That desire to believe characterizes all vital communities, religious or secular, modern or ancient. It is part-and-parcel of belonging.

However compelling that inner dialogue may be to a believer/belonger, it is massively irrelevant to an outsider. That Jesus prohibits something means nothing to me as a Jew, just as the fact that a Talmudic rabbi asserts its opposite is insignificant to a Buddhist. The language of inner dialogue is appropriate within the community of worship but is beside the point anywhere else. Posters that quote from someone else's sacred scripture simply impose a sense of being an outsider, rather than foster a way of understanding why a particular community takes a particular stand, or clarifying the reasons that would justify that position. We have erred by repeating our inner dialogues when a different form of discourse is called for. When speaking across communal borders, what is relevant is not authority, but reasoning. What logic may support a particular conclusion, how that conclusion may serve the common good or further shared goals—these are the proper grounds for public discourse because these are susceptible to cross-cultural exchange, to the scalpel of reason and the light of discussion. The reasons underlying a commitment don't rely on someone else's authority for their vindication; they are accessible to all.

That outer dialogue focuses on consequences, not on beliefs, on justifications, not quotations. It's not that the latter aren't significant—indeed, they are central to the life and self-perception of the believer. But they are at best distractions in a pluralistic culture, and at worst they enforce and maintain separation, a sense of superiority, and of exclusion. Focusing our public discourse on the reasons undergirding our

commitments, on the consequences of one choice as opposed to another, can bring us together, can allow us to teach each other and to sharpen our own awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the consequences of our own faith.

Distinguishing between inner and outer dialogue, and restricting each to its own appropriate sphere provides an added advantage as well: it doesn't privilege any one tradition over another, and it doesn't require a believer to relinquish that tradition's claim of privilege in the realms of belief and conscience. One can accept the truth claims of one's own faith (as a matter of faith) without having to assert it as a condition of dialogue. Reasons can be shared and evaluated independently of the axioms on which they may rest. By distinguishing between inner and outer dialogue, we will be able to retain the vitality of our faiths while simultaneously creating a place where citizens of all creeds (and of none) can speak as members of a community of destiny. Walking on our own distinctive paths, we can still come together for the advancement of a common goal.

What We Can Assert Together

Once we establish safe ways of speaking with each other—paths of discussion that allow us to cherish our own sacred truths while creating a shared place for exchange, analysis, and learning—we can then move to formulate a truly religious agenda for the nation. Focusing on the consequences and results of our faith commitments, rather than on the content of those commitments, allows us to realize that we do share an mutual agenda of priorities that we can offer the broader public. These agenda items unite the divergent faith communities of America in their priorities, not in the ways each community arrives at them. Again, our focus must be on the realm of the outer dialogue, since our interest is in elevating America the real to the vision of America the ideal. I would propose that our shared practical conclusions are these:

1. B'tzelem Elohim: All people reflect the Divine Image. While different faiths may understand this pivotal point of Biblical/Rabbinic faith differently, in America the value of each person has become a unifying assertion that transcends any particular denomination. The task of the religious communities, then, is to point out the implications of this far-reaching value to those who already claim to accept it. From this broad biblical principal, we can derive three significant consequences:
 - The equal worth of all people: Regardless of wealth, gender, race, creed, or sexual orientation, all people derive their worth from being a creature of God, not as any political grant nor as any governmental largesse. Their value is irreducible and inalienable. Statues and policies which denigrate any group, which strip one group of rights or privileges bestowed on another must be opposed as contrary to this fundamental biblical principle, as contrary to the fundamental of the American ideal.
 - A local passion: since the primary image of God in the world is each and every individual person, it follows that the nexus of value is local. Why did God create the first human single? To teach that one can only redeem the world one person at a time. A passion for the particular, for each human

being, each individual locale, each tree, field, animal, and stream is the truest implementation of the ideal that the Divine Image is only manifested in the particular. We must learn, as the slogan goes, to think globally and to act locally.

- The primacy of the individual. Whatever the risks of loneliness or alienation, recognizing the primacy of the individual is a cornerstone of Western democracy. Rather than subsuming the individual within a group identity, rather than chaining identity to any external label or class, the locus of rights and privilege remains the unique individual, each reflecting a unique version of the Divine Image.

2. Ha-Aretz l'Adonai: the Earth belongs to God. Seen as God's creation, rather than as the tool for humanity to impose its will, the Earth becomes more than simply a wondrous gift. Our precious blue planet becomes a memento from God, an offering and a challenge. Humanity's intelligence and power are to be used to further the Earth's ability to sustain ourselves and to sustain life. In the Earth's remarkable ability to renew itself and to provide for its inhabitants, the person of faith perceives a bountiful God. Indeed, "bountiful" is a better contemporary rendering of the Hebrew word "Barukh" than the more common "blessed" or "praised." God as bountiful is manifest in a bountiful world, a world placed in our hands to tend, to nurture, and to enjoy. When we cherish and revere creation, we live consistently with our biblical faith. But when we act as managers rather than as tenants, as engineers rather than as stewards, we betray our mandate from God, hurting ourselves and God's planet. Two principal consequences emerge from this consensual assertion:

- Humanity has an obligation to enhance and preserve the biosphere, to implement the mitzvah of Tza'ar Ba'alei Hayyim, compassion for animals, and to preserve diversity of species (as the medievals often put it, "God desired the world for habitation.") Our religious recognition of Creation as precious impels an involvement with environmentalism and an assertion of caring for Creation in the political and social realms.
- If the Earth is ultimately God's, then our political divisions are merely provisional, important only when they advance the goals of this inclusive religious agenda. National boundaries and political units must serve humanity; humanity is not the servant of any political order. So long as nation-states further the causes of freedom and equality, so long as they allow people to fulfill their stewardship toward creation, they retain a utility that justifies their authority. But political authority cannot justify injustice, cannot excuse destruction and waste. There is a higher authority.

3. Rodef shalom u'vaksheyhu: seek peace and pursue it. It is commonplace to point out that the Hebrew word shalom means far more than simply the absence of war. It conveys a sense of security, well-being, wholeness, friendship, and tranquility. The pursuit of that state is so pressing that the rabbis teach that in the case of the other mitzvot it is sufficient to do implement only when the opportunity arises, but for the sake of shalom we are commanded to create the opportunities

for its accomplishment. Shalom is not merely the willingness of nations to live in harmony, it also implies the willingness of human beings to live in peace with each other. Jewish tradition singles out the first Kohen Gadol, High Priest, Aaron, as the exemplar of one who pursues peace, and the two examples the tradition offers are how he would facilitate the reconciliation of friends and the reconciliation of spouses. The pursuit of shalom implies three principal consequences:

- The first, and most obvious, is to work for the end of war. War is a human creation, and is therefore subject to human will and human restraint. It is a religious obligation to work toward a world in which conflicts are resolved through words: negotiations, binding arbitration, or formal judgment. The lives of far too many young soldiers, not to mention the endless waste of civilian lives, is an affront to any religious assertion that we ought to be God's servants, advancing the day of God's sovereignty. God's rule is peaceful, just as Jewish tradition teaches that one of God's names is Shalom. We have an obligation to beat swords into plowshares, to make recourse to combat unnecessary and unthinkable.
 - The often strained relations between men and women, and the frequency with which some men batter, rape, and belittle women is a serious challenge to the establishment of shalom. Far too many girls grow up thinking themselves inadequate, and far too many men are willing to take advantage of that lack of esteem. That women are human beings, deserving of the same dignity and honor as any other person is an essential component of any lasting shalom.
 - Abuse. Far too many children are robbed of their innocence, the exuberance, and their joy by abusive adults. Sexual, emotional, or physical abuse leaves permanent scars on the psyche (and often on the body) of its victim. Clear evidence shows that the overwhelming preponderance of child abuse is inflicted by relatives of the child, not by dangerous strangers. Children must be seen as beacons of divinity, the sacred illumining our mundane world through the shimmering souls of children. By shattering their wholeness, abusers shatter what holiness may exist in the world. The pursuit of peace requires a public repudiation of child abuse and a concerted effort to educate people in how to raise children effectively and responsibly. The inviolability of children is a consequence of faithfulness to the children's Creator.
4. Ve-shinantem le-vanekha: You shall teach your children. Judaism was the first religion to establish reading a book as its central religious act. God demands not only the service of the heart, but of the mind as well. The Mishnah goes so far as to assert that an unlearned Jew cannot be pious. Not only through the elevation of the Beit Midrash and the Yeshivah to pride of place in any Jewish hierarchy, but by inserting the reading of Torah as the pinnacle of the Shabbat worship service, we assert the holiness that can only emerge from reverencing the mind. Christianity and Islam have followed in Judaism's footsteps through their own elevation of study and holy books. There are several consequences that emerge from viewing study as a sacred act:
- If study is sacred, then it must be accessible to all. Public schools, State colleges and universities, and active programs for adult learning are surely a

religious priority, since without these institutions, men and women won't have the tools to devote their minds to the service of God, nor will they be able to discern God's glory through the miracle of the world. Excellence in education, and easy accessibility must remain religious priorities across any denominational divide.

- If learning is a sacred act, then teaching is the portal to eternity. Without actively transmitting the accumulated wisdom of the ages to a new generation, that wisdom will simply languish on the shelf. Children have to see adults engaged in learning, and learning cannot simply be relegated to hired professionals. Instead, parents, neighbors, friends, and communities must take charge in teaching their children. And assuring that children are in a position to learn—through adequate nutrition, safe learning environments, and rigorous standards—can unite religious communities on behalf of the common good.

Conclusion

Founded on religious principles, the United States is an experiment-in-progress. The hypothesis it tests is that a diverse population can come together in a shared passion for liberty and in celebration of our differences to produce a level of accomplishment beyond the dreams of any previous social order. In that continuing experiment, religion plays an essential role: as logical grounding for democracy's premises, as the primary vehicle for democratic discussion among a broad number of people, and as a way of keeping our focus on ultimate values. Unless we learn to nurture the distinctive religious beliefs (the inner dialogue) within each faith community, unless we shape our public discussion (the outer dialogue) to conform to cross-cultural standards of reason and mutual understanding, the promise of American democracy will falter. We must learn to speak with each other in ways that we can all hear, in words that allow for learning and growth even amidst disagreement.

At stake in this endeavor is the last, greatest hope of humanity. And that, surely, is worth the effort.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson (<http://www.bradartson.com>) is the Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University, where he is Vice President. He is the author of *The Bedside Torah: Wisdom, Dreams, & Visions* (McGraw Hill) and the author of a weekly email Torah commentary, "Today's Torah."