



Ziegler School of
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This week, beloved teacher and university rector Rabbi Elliot Dorff celebrates his 50th anniversary at AJU. For more information on Rabbi Dorff's role and mission, please read the article published in the Jewish Journal by clicking [here](#).

Over the past five decades, Rabbi Dorff's teachings on ethics, law, theology and interfaith work have impacted Jewish and American communities nationwide.

The Ziegler School wishes to thank Rabbi Dorff for these many years of service, scholarship, wisdom, and counsel. In honor of this momentous milestone, we are proud to share a previously published d'rash written by Rabbi Dorff on the virtues of pluralism that are still relevant today.

The Theological Basis for Pluralism

By: Rabbi Elliot Dorff

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There is a part of all of us that is anal-compulsive. To some degree we all want things to be neat and clean. We want them to be clear, and to stay the same, so that we can know what to expect in the future and be assured that our own view of everything is correct. Especially people who live as part

of a majority in a culturally monolithic area are prone to think that everyone does and should think and act as they do, but even those of us who live in large cities with people from many different ethnic and cultural groups want to some degree to have the certainty and security of knowing that everything is as we perceive it to be - and that we are right. Fundamentalism, of course, derives from this urge, but you do not need to be a fundamentalist to want this kind of safety and certainty to at least some degree.

The Jewish tradition, though, has had little tolerance for that approach. The Talmud, after all, is filled with one argument after another, and many are left unresolved. The Midrash does not even try to reconcile varying opinions on how to understand any given verse of the Torah; it just states one interpretation and then says, "Another way to look at it" (*davar aher*) without worrying in the least that some of the multiple interpretations it provides are not only different ways to view the text, but conflicting ones. In fact, the Rabbis assert that there are seventy faces to the Torah - that is, seventy ways to understand any verse of the Torah ([Numbers Rabbah 13:15-16](#)). And when Moses asks God to make one interpretation the definitively authoritative one, God refuses:

If the Torah had been given in a fixed form, the situation would have been intolerable. What is the meaning of the oft-recurring phrase, "The Lord *spoke* to Moses?" Moses said before Him, "Sovereign of the Universe! Cause me to know what the final decision is on each matter of law." He replied, "The majority [of the judges] must be followed: when the majority declares a thing permitted, it is permissible; when the majority declares it forbidden, it is not allowed; so that the Torah may be capable of interpretation with forty-nine points *for* and forty-nine points *against*." ([J. Sanhedrin 22a](#))

This undoubtedly drives the anal-compulsive part of all of us wild!

Because Jews tend to think that the whole world is Jewish (!) - or that, at least, the whole world thinks and acts as we do - let me inform you that that is definitely not the case. This summer I am teaching many groups of teachers in Catholic high schools, most of whom are themselves Catholic, as part of the Bearing Witness program of the Anti-Defamation League. As my co-teacher, Father Dennis McMannus says to his fellow Catholics, "We Catholics are good at reception. We receive what we are told." At that point I tell them that Jews are terrible at reception; we question everything! And it is not only the Catholics; in fact, in most cultures of the world - including Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists, followers of Confucianism, and many other groups - the virtue is to receive and obey, not to question.

Why is the Jewish tradition so committed to argumentation and pluralism? Part of the reason is because of how we Jews understand God and our relationship to the Eternal. God may know everything, but we surely do not. Thus the best that we can do is to argue vigorously with each other in an attempt to uncover the truth and the good together through this open-ended and vigorous debate, using, in religious matters, the Torah and the later Jewish tradition as our base.

Another part of the reason, however, is because Judaism depicts us humans as very different from one another. As the deservedly famous section from the Mishnah reminds us, human beings use one mold to create coins, and they all come out the same, but God uses one mold to create human beings - namely the image of God - and each of us comes out different (Mishnah, [Sanhedrin 4:5](#)).

Another indication of this is based on a verse in this week's Torah reading, Pinhas. (Coincidentally it is read this July 4th weekend.) Moses is told that he will die without entering the Promised Land, and he asks "God of the breaths [plural] of all flesh" to appoint a leader who will be able to gain

acceptance among all the Israelites so that they are not like sheep without a shepherd ([Numbers 27:16](#)). Where the same phrase to describe God is used in [Numbers 16:22](#), the Tanhuma there says that Moses, in using this phrase, was saying this: "Master of the Universe, You know the opinions of everyone, and that there are no two among Your children who think alike. I beg of You that after I die, when You appoint a leader for them, appoint one who will bear with [accept, sove/] each one of them as he thinks [on his own terms, *I'fi da'ato*]." We know that Moses said this, the Midrash asserts, because he describes God as "God of the *ruhot* [spirits, in the plural] of all flesh."

So we Jews are really committed to pluralism, rooted not only in our cultural modes, but in our theological views of God and human beings. This means, though, that we must learn how to argue with respect for those who hold other opinions. The Rabbis, in another famous section of the Talmud, emphasize this when explaining why the law always follows the School of Hillel rather than the School of Shammai:

R. Abba stated in the name of Samuel: For three years there was a dispute between the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel, the former asserting, "The law is in agreement with our view," and the latter contending, "The law is in agreement with our view." Then a Heavenly Voice announced, "The utterances of both are the words of the living God, but the law is in agreement with the rulings of the School of Hillel." Since, however, "both are the words of the living God," what was it that entitled the School of Hillel to have law fixed in agreement with their rulings? Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of the School of Shammai, and they were even so humble as to mention the opinions of the School of Shammai before theirs. ([B. Eruvin 13b](#))

As we celebrate the July 4th weekend this year, marking the birth of the most pluralistic nation that ever existed on the face of the earth, may we take pride in the strong basis that our tradition provides for just such pluralism. May we also learn from our tradition, in discussion with both Jews and non-Jews, to argue vigorously with each other as we seek to do the will of God in the world but to do so in the manner and in the character of the School of Hillel.

Shabbat shalom, and Happy Fourth.

For more on the issue of pluralism, both within the Jewish community and in interfaith relations, see Elliot N. Dorff, *To Do the Right and the Good: A Jewish Approach to Modern Social Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), Chapters Two and Three.



Rabbi Elliot Dorff is Rector and Anne and Sol Dorff Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the American Jewish University, Visiting Professor at UCLA School of Law, and Chair of the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. Author of over 200 articles and 14 books on Jewish thought, law, and ethics, and editor of 14 more books on those topics, his most recent books are *For the Love of God and People: A Philosophy of Jewish Law* and *Modern Conservative Judaism: Evolving Thought and Practice*.

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