

Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter

To my mind it all comes down to one very simple and basic issue: Do we have respect for the legitimacy of opinions with which we disagree? I believe that many of the challenges to harmony that we face in our community stem from the fact that too many of us are not prepared to respond yes to this question. And yet, for me, the answer is obvious. It is a truism that our tradition has always recognized the simultaneous coexistence of a multiplicity of opinions, and it has done so in a variety of contexts. On a most obvious level, Rashi and Ibn Ezra may have very different interpretations of a *pasuk*, the Ramban may be very critical of the Rambam in his *Perush al haTorah*, and the Mechaber and the Rema may have radically different halachic opinions, but it is clear that each opinion is valid and legitimate.¹

This diversity exists not only in matters of exegesis and even halachah, but also in the realm of worldview or *hashkafah* within which many of our most bitter contemporary cultural battles today are being fought. Most pertinent here is a comment of the Netziv in his Torah commentary at the end of *parashat Shelach*. He writes that not everyone's approach to *avodat Hashem* is similar: one person may be exclusively involved in Torah study, another in *avodah* and another in *gemilut chasadim*, and they are all acting "for the sake of Heaven." And, he continues, within the world of Torah study itself there are different "ways of learning," and even in the realm of religious observance, different people have a right to be scrupulous about different *mitzvot*.

*And if a person were to come and ask what is the most correct way that he should choose in his studies or about what should he be most punctilious [in his mitzvah observance], it is for this that Kohelet said, "And follow the ways of your heart," that is, to what one's heart is attracted.*²

This passage, in which the Netziv champions a substantial measure of personal autonomy and individual choice in determining the specifics of one's relationship to God, is extraordinary and needs to be reproduced and emblazoned on the doors of all our communal institutions and private homes. Its message is clear: no one perspective has a monopoly on truth, and alternative approaches are all equally legitimate. Genuine harmony and greater tolerance within our Orthodox world without compromising one's core beliefs and ideals could be achieved if this message were to be successfully delivered. The well-known rabbinic principle of *eilu v'eilu divrei Elokim chayim* (*Eruvin* 13b), although worn thin by repeated citation, needs to have moral, not only intellectual, consequences.

Notes

1. There is a large—and growing—literature on this subject. See, for example, Michael Rosensweig, "Eilu ve-Eilu Divrei Elokim Hayyim: Halakhic Pluralism and Theories of Controversy," in Moshe Sokol, ed., *Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy* (Northvale and London, 1992), 93-122.

2. Netziv, *Ha'amek Davar* on *Bamidbar* 15:41. The notion that Jews may have different spiritual propensities—all of which are legitimate—was an important one for the Netziv. See also his *Ha'amek Davar* on *Vayikra* 19:2 and *Devarim* 10:12.

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Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel

Writing in the *Jewish Observer* twenty years ago, Rabbi Moshe Sherer z"l, the late president of Agudath Israel of America, focused on the challenge of Jewish unity from an Agudath Israel organizational perspective:

We must recognize that there exists an inherent tension between, on the one

Achdut: A Grave Matter

While hiking in the fall of 2008, a member of Temple Beth Jacob, a Reform synagogue in Newburgh, New York, discovered several headstones with Hebrew inscriptions on a steep, thickly wooded hillside. It turned out that the Jewish cemetery, in desperate need of repair, belonged to the Temple.

The Temple's youth group did an initial cleanup in April 2009, but it was clear that a fence was required. The only question was, where would the money come from?

Several residents of the neighboring Satmar community of Kiryas Joel, led by Zalmon Weinstock of Congregation Oitzer haChesed, read about the cemetery's need for a fence and drove to Newburgh to meet with Kenneth Packer, chairman of Temple Beth Jacob's Cemetery Committee.

The Kiryas Joel delegation raised funds within the Satmar community for a gated chain-link fence that still allows passersby to see into the cemetery.

Packer and several men from Kiryas Joel gathered to say Kaddish over the graves and do more work cleaning and repairing the headstones.

"Many stones are broken and will have to be repaired, at great expense," Packer was quoted in a news article as saying. "But the generosity, kindness and energy of the residents of Kiryas Joel have been invaluable to us. They've forged new ties between our two communities."

FEATURES

- 12 Back to Yeshivah: A Growing Number of Retirees Are Returning to Yeshivah**
By Steve Lipman
- 16 The Story of Mahanoy City: The Disappearance of a Jewish Community in a Small American Town**
By Akiva Males
- 26 A Kinah on the Tragedy in Toulouse**
By Moshe Sokolow
- 29 COVER STORY**
Can We All Get Along?
Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein, Dr. Erica Brown, Rabbi Hillel Goldberg, Rabbi Eytan Kobre, Rabbi Yosie Levine, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter, Shira Leibowitz Schmidt, Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel
- 48 Be Your Own Lobbyist: How to Speak Up for Your Community**
By Amy Handlin
- 50 The OU: Getting You and Your Community Politically Involved**
By Maury Litwack

DEPARTMENTS

- 2 LETTERS**
- 6 PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE**
Supporting the Jewish Homeland
Dr. Simcha Katz
- 8 CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE**
Gerald M. Schreck

10 FROM THE DESK OF RABBI STEVEN WEIL, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
Confusing the Victim with the Perpetrator

20 TRIBUTE
Remembering Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, zt"l
By Ahron Lopiansky

INSIDE THE OU

52 Mashiv Haruach: Deepening Israeli Soldiers' Connection to Judaism and to the Land
By Hillel Kuttler

56 New Books from OU Press

57 PHOTO ESSAY
If I Forget Thee, O Jerusalem: Personalized Zecher L'Churban Projects
Text by Adina Hershberg
Photos by Yehoshua Halevi

60 ISRAEL
On and Off the Beaten Track . . . The Menorah—Official Symbol of the State of Israel
By Peter Abelow

62 JUST BETWEEN US
The True Simchah
By Reuven Spolter

64 WELLNESS REPORT
Shabbat Menu Makeover
By Shira Isenberg

68 THE CHEF'S TABLE
Food for Travel: Never Leave Home Without It!
By Norene Gilletz

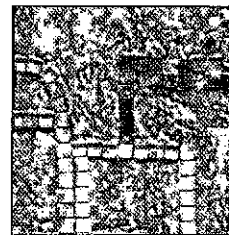
BOOKS

- 72 Hush**
By Eishes Chayil
Reviewed by Tzvi Hersh Weinreb
- 74 Let's Stay Safe**
By Bracha Goetz
Reviewed by Norman Blumenthal
- 75 Angels at the Table**
By Yvette Alt Miller
Reviewed by Hillel Goldberg
- 76 A Timeless People**
By Saul Landa
Reviewed by Ben Ehrenkranz
- 77 Seven Steps to Mentschood: How to Help Your Child Become a Mentsch**
By Stanley H. Fischman
Reviewed by Yaakov Bieler
- 78 Reviews in Brief**
By Gil Student

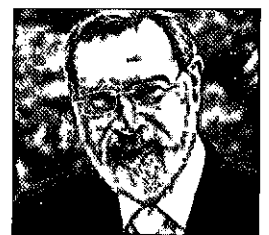
LASTING IMPRESSIONS

80 Taking the Plunge
By Ann Koffsky

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page 57



page 29

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