

## CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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### WHAT IF AVRAHAM HAD LIVED IN AMERICA? THOUGHTS ON THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF HUMAN AND JEWISH BEING

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Kabbalah teaches that all difference is illusion, because everything is G-d, in Whom inheres no difference. But illusion is necessary, as human beings cannot understand G-d as pure simplicity. Human comprehension emerges out of analysis, or breaking things down into distinguishable components.

One can therefore argue: The difference between Jews and other human beings is a necessary illusion. But just as the illusion of the world must be a means to comprehending the undifferentiated G-d, the illusion of Jewish difference must be a means to comprehending the image of G-d in all humanity.

This suggests that consciousness of being “different” is an essential aspect of Jewish identity, as in “They are a nation that dwells alone.” Jean Paul Sartre in *AntiSemite and Jew* challenges this idea by distinguishing between “authentic” and “inauthentic” Jews. Authentic Jews define themselves by who they are, without reference to others. Inauthentic Jews define themselves by what differentiates them from non-Jews. Anti-Semites by definition live inauthentically, since they define themselves in contrast to Jews. Jews should strive to be authentic.

My question is whether Sartre’s authenticity is possible, or rather impossible because distinction is necessary for human understanding. Could one be a self-conscious Jew if all human beings were Jewish? Is it possible to be meaningfully Jewish without self-consciousness?

Rabbi Soloveitchik in his essay “Confrontation” opens up what can perhaps be described as a kabbalistic corrective to Sartre. Self-consciousness is essential, and difference **is** necessary for self-consciousness, but difference does not require the presence of an external “other.”

According to the Rav, Jewish human beings properly perceive themselves as both fully human and Jewish. It follows (my extension of the Rav’s argument) that one can define one’s Jewishness by distinguishing it from one’s own generic humanity, without having resort to an external “other,” and without denying that one remains a generic human.

This dual nature as both human and Jew is embodied in Avraham Avinu’s paradoxical self-description “ger v’toshav anokhi imakhem,” “I am (simultaneously) an alien and a citizen among you.” The Rav understands these as discrete conditions. A Jew qua human is a

citizen of the world, and qua Jew is an alien. Jews are both different from and the same as all other human beings.

Jews throughout history have lived this dichotomy as fiddlers on the roof, with varying degrees of success. Sometimes we fell off on one side, losing track of our Jewishness; sometimes on the other, losing track of our humanity. But there was never doubt that the roof was slanted on both sides.

Until 20<sup>th</sup> century America.

Here’s why.

In previous Diaspora cultures, Jews could participate as equals (when and where they could) only by giving up their particularism. The “generic” cultural or political space might allow them to maintain their particularism in segregated areas of life, such as worship, but as citizens, they were required to be undifferentiatedly human.

Most often, this undifferentiatedness was an illusion, and the “generic” space actually reflected a dominant non-Jewish culture. More sharply: Judaism was always posterior to the generic culture, whereas some other religion(s), philosophic system(s), ways of life etc. were anterior to that culture. To enter that space as a Jew meant stripping off part of one’s prior being.

By contrast, for a post-enlightenment Christian, or a Golden Age Muslim, being a part of generic or universal human culture might mean living in a space where only part of one’s Christian or Muslim being could be **expressed**. But this limit on expression was not a limit on one’s being. One could be political as a Christian, or artistic as a Muslim, without in any way becoming “other.” Generic humanity essentially meant the parts of Christianity or Islam that could be lived even by those who were not Christians or Muslims.

I contend that 20<sup>th</sup> century America was different in that Judaism was anterior to the generic culture.

But that claim needs clarification before being applied to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as follows:

Judaism is anterior to generic Israeli culture in the same way as Christianity is anterior in Europe. What makes America different is that Judaism is anterior to the culture in the same way as Christianity is *within the same generic culture*.

Here my claim can be understood in two very different ways.

(1). America is a Judeo-Christian culture (or, if one wishes to be more inclusive, an Abrahamic culture).

(2). America is a genuinely pluralistic culture, in which **all** religions and ethnicities are understood to be anterior to the generic culture.

The difference between these claims roughly maps onto the difference between conservatives (1) and liberals (2).

For conservatives, Jews participate in generic American culture **as Jews** because it is fundamentally a Jewish (and Christian, and possibly Islamic) culture. So that others can participate, we restrain ourselves from fully expressing our Jewishness in the political sphere. But we recognize and acknowledge that for some others, full participation in that sphere requires a contraction of being and not just of expression. (For example: We might contend that democracy is a fundamental value of our religion, and that (cue Mendelssohn) Judaism has no need or desire for power, whereas other religions see the enforcement of G-d's Will as mission-central.)

For liberals, Jews participate in generic American culture **as Jews** because it is a culture which is continually recreated in the image of all its participants. No one should ever have to contract their religious being to participate fully, and everyone should have to contract their religious expression equally in the political sphere.

For conservatives, therefore, being a Jew and an American still allows the Jew to define him or herself against an internal human other. The generic American is not a generic human.

For liberals, by contrast, there is no difference between the generic American and the generic human – there are no prior religious commitments or noncommitments that can constrict one's relationship to generic American culture, and limits on political expression never constitute limits on being. Therefore, the Jew and American has no internal other to define Jewishness against. The Jew in America is by definition a *toshav* and not a *ger*, not because Jews specifically are *toshavim*, but rather because the category *ger* is not relevant to anyone with American citizenship.

One consequence of this analysis is that the project of liberal Jewish identity in America may be impossible to sustain. But I am leery of making strong concrete claims on the basis of abstract philosophy, let alone kabbalah. Perhaps absolutely authentic being is possible, and can be the basis of a viable mass program. Perhaps differences in religious expression are sufficient to create the necessary illusion of difference.

I am more interested in exploring the consequences of this analysis for the generic American public space. Here's what I want to say:

The liberal position rests on the assumption that religious expression and religious being are wholly separable. There is no restriction on religious expression that in any way impacts on religious being. Or most sharply: There is no circumstance in which I can argue that a restriction on my religious expression in a public space is also a restriction on my being.

This yields a variety of easily recognizable results. For example, banning prayer in public contexts, on the grounds that theistic prayer excludes atheists, or monotheistic prayer excludes polytheists, etc. Or requiring Catholic photographers to work the weddings of divorcees without expressing their opposition in either word or deed.

The conservative position rests on the assumption that there are no generic humans, and every restriction of religious expression **is** presumptively a restriction of religious being. Conservatives therefore are suspicious of attempts to extend the generic sphere beyond the political (thus the opposition to "political correctness"), and leery of expanding diversity in the political arena when that risks constricting their religious expression within it (as they think has happened too often already).

Now the "liberal conservative" recognizes that there is great value in building a polity that includes difference, lest we fall off the other side of the roof and forget our common humanity. Liberal conservatives are therefore willing to sacrifice some of their religious expression, and consequently their religious being, for the sake of creating a generic political culture. They may for example be willing to settle for generically monotheistic rather than explicitly Jewish or Christian or Judeo-Christian public prayer, or agree to decriminalize adultery.

But where liberals see diversity as a cost-free value, liberal conservatives contend that substantive diversity (meaning a diversity of values, as opposed to superficial diversity such as skin color or dress) always has a cost, for all members of the generic culture, and that a responsible society engages in ongoing cost-benefit analysis. There is an at least theoretical point at which diversity-accommodation become a Procrustean bed, and multiculturalism eliminates all the substantive differences that made its constituting cultures valuable in the first place.

My own sense is that Jewish conversation about America should take place within the liberal conservative framework of *ger vetoshav*. We should acknowledge the great value of building a diverse polity, but also the costs of diversity, and then argue passionately about how best to maximize the former and minimize the latter, and about how to balance them when there is no choice but to choose.

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