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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

DIVERSITY, DIFFERENCE AND DIGNITY

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Diversity is the spice of life, but the scandal, of science, philosophy, and theology. How can there be difference?

For physicists, all matter is made of the same stuff, and for many cosmologists, it all started at a singularity—so why do we have both hot dogs and buns?

For Maimonides, G-d is the only necessary existent and diversity can occur in contingent existence. But it's not clear why this explains diversity, as all contingent existents relate to the Necessary Existent in the same way.

For the kabbalists, and perhaps for Kant, diversity exists in perception but not in reality. Everything that exists is the simple undifferentiated G-d, but we perceive Him through glasses rainbowly. But it is not clear why a homogeneous reality generates diverse perceptions, or how human perceivers exist, and I don't fully understand what happens when a tree falls in the forest with no one there to hear it.

The challenge for each approach is to properly calibrate when to focus on unity and when on diversity. My dear friend Rabbi Yaakov Nagen argues in his new book, **התעוררות ליום שבת**, that this is a key to understanding the ritual of the *Beit HaMikdash* and its role in Judaism. As the place where G-d's Presence is most manifest on earth, and therefore where the perception of diversity is most likely to be lost, it necessarily has rigidly defined roles and limited-access spaces as constant reminders of difference.

Rabbi Nagen fascinatingly develops his explanation by comparing and contrasting the *Beit HaMikdash* with the Golden Temple of the Sikhs, a religious community that he argues we should be building a relationship with. He argues (all descriptions of Sikhism here are my reading of Rabbi

Nagen, without appeal even to Wikipedia) that Sikhism blends the monotheistic incorporealism of Islam with the tolerance of Hinduism, while rejecting the rigid caste system as unjust. Sikhism, he argues, is Judaism's religious grandchild, and relationships with grandchildren are generally less fraught than those with children.

The Sikh Temple has sacred scripture at its core, and white-garbed musical attendants. Unlike ours, it is open on all four sides, and has a space specifically intended to host non-Sikhs. Unlike ours, it does not have crucial religious importance. Rabbi Nagen argues this is because Sikhism lacks Judaism's sensitivity to the relationship between difference and holiness. Sikhs see their Temple as significant only because it houses their Book; the notion that some spaces are *per se* holier than others is alien to them. One of the rituals of the Golden Temple is that each visitor receives a portion of food to eat. This reminds Rabbi Genack of the *Pesach* sacrifice, which is eaten by all members of the Jewish community.

But here we reach a point that is perhaps somewhat elided in his presentation. Difference does not logically entail exclusion or hierarchy, and Judaism, specifically the Temple, institutionalizes both. Even the *Pesach* sacrifice explicitly excludes non-Jews. Why must the *Beit HaMikdash* be more holy than other places, rather than differently holy? (*Mutatis mutandum*, this point is also given insufficient attention in Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks' *Dignity of Difference*.)

A recent online discussion addressed the question of whether one may invite non-Jews to the *seder*. One argument against was that since non-Jews cannot eat the Paschal sacrifice, it would be inappropriate to invite them to our

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symbolic commemoration of eating that sacrifice. A counterargument was that Halakhah demands that we make crystal clear that we are not in fact eating a sacrifice, so as not to convey the impression that sacrifices can be brought outside the *Beit HaMikdash*. The presence of a non-Jew therefore serves the positive function of demonstrating that no Paschal sacrifice will be eaten. Blurring distinction among humans serves to emphasize distinction among places.

The issue at the heart of the disagreement may be this: One side feels that the absence of the *Beit HaMikdash* generates a risk of flattening, that Jews will elide other vital distinctions when they no longer have a regular ritual connection to super-sacred space. The other side feels that those other distinctions are intended to be ancillary to the fundamental reality of sacred space, and so when the *Beit HaMikdash* is gone, there is much less meaning to the other distinctions. One can see the same conversation with regard to the social privileges and duties of *kobanim* post-Destruction.

Judaism of course has sacred time and sacred space, and the sacred space of Shabbat specifically may be largely unaffected by the absence of the Temple. Perhaps that persistence also serves to justify the persistence of human distinctions.

Rabbi Nagen emphasizes that Sikhs reject the notion of an untouchable caste, but he suggests that the price of their human egalitarianism is egalitarianism in time and space.

The emphasis on difference as a fundamental component of holiness is classically rooted in the notion that *kedushah* is really best translated as “separated.” In the classical form that separation seems almost always to be hierarchical, *kodesh* as opposed to *chol*. The philosophic and kabbalistic analyses seek to make *kodesh* and *chol* into aspects or perceptions of the same underlying matter, but it remains clear that *kodesh* is the goal.

The question for those with fundamentally egalitarian commitments is whether celebrating differentiation as enabling the perception of holiness, even if it entails hierarchy in the realms of time and space, can be transferred to human beings without the same hierarchy. This does not seem to have been a major Jewish concern historically, as hierarchical categories such as “form” and “matter” were often used in the context of Jewish chosenness or gender. But it is very much a modern concern.

To be specific: Some kabbalists respond to the scandal of difference by maintaining a dual consciousness, recognizing

that one must relate to our reality as if difference exists while understanding that our reality is fundamentally an illusion. This may work well with regard to rocks and trees, but with regard to human beings, I submit, a recognition of underlying sameness does not justify maltreatment in the here and now.

I would prefer to go with Levinas and see difference as the ground of value and of ethical obligation. It is because you are different than me that you are infinitely valuable to me, not because of what you share with me. At the same time, this powerful argument doesn't well account for family love, and perhaps even for human speciesism, both of which I have no interest in overcoming.

Celebrations of diversity *per se* must constantly slide toward notions of “separate but equal,” which tends more or less inevitably to “different but equal.” This can be resisted politically to some extent by libertarianism, which seeks to limit government to the negative role of preventing coercive imposition. This enables separateness to be choice rather than mandate, but on the other hand gives private prejudice free reign. It is unclear whether religious approaches celebrating difference can resist the slide to “different but equal.”

Perhaps such resistance is unnecessary. Contemporary America properly anathematizes “separate but equal,” and manages to celebrate multiculturalism at the same time without irony. But multiculturalism without separation consumes itself, as children raised equally in all cultures will grow up homogenized.

The tensions I've tried to outline throughout this discursus are at the heart of *Pesach*. G-d intervened in history to rescue one people, and that intervention justifies our religious particularism by giving Him a special claim on us. But the claim He makes on us is grounded in the universal claim that what was being done to us was wrong, not because of who we were particularly, but simply because we were human.

The difference in value created by relationship is inevitably hierarchical: *a* becomes more valuable to *b* as their (positive) relationship deepens. But in the best of such relationships, our acceptance of greater subjective value—we love each other—also heightens our awareness of objective value—other people are capable of love. The challenge for us is to use all the privileged religious experiences of Judaism as catalysts for appreciating the spiritual capacities of all humankind. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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