

## **The War Against Ourselves**

In the Jewish community we are fighting a war against ourselves. Interdenominational politics and disagreements are as old as Judaism itself. We know that the Second Temple was destroyed because of unacceptable infighting. It was, after all, a group of Jews who opened the Gates of Jerusalem to the invading Roman hordes.

During the second World War, the Berguson Group and Ben Hecht were labeled as terrorists by Rabbi Stephen Wise and his Roosevelt admirers. How many millions of Jews could have been saved, had the Jewish community supported the efforts of the likes of Ben Hecht is interesting speculation. Unfortunately, we are not alone. Lest we forget Catholics and Protestants killed each other for centuries. Muslim sects are still practicing genocide against one another.

Today, the Jewish publications are filled with stories about the differences between conservative and liberal or progressive Jews. Fortunately, the Jewish community is becoming more diversified, at least politically. This is a good sign. The Jewish community should not be owned by any political group.

At one time, the Jewish community was thoroughly in the corner of the Republicans. President Grant earned and received the admiration of the Jewish community after he excluded Jews from his military district during the Civil War. In those days, it was the Democrats who were segregationists and many of them remained so until the 1960s.

However, I recently ran into a situation that made me realize that our differences are not political alone. In fact, there is a deep religious schism within our community that is both destructive and offensive.

I was recently at the home of a Jewish man, a professional fellow, extremely bright and well educated. He does not have much of a Jewish background or education himself, but he generally seems to support the State of Israel and has raised his children in the suburban Conservative tradition.

I showed up at his house, having walked there because it was Shabbat. My own self-description would be that of a fairly average modern Orthodox Jewish American. I observe Shabbat and the holidays and keep the laws of Kashrut. I attend, when I can, a local Chabad in my community.

While I was hanging up my coat, my host verbally attacked me in the most aggressive way for being "Orthodox." He began to rail against a cruel unfair G-d; repetitious boring prayers; the "nonsense" of faith or even a belief in G-d. Finally, I very gently and quietly put my hands on his shoulders and I said to him, "I love you and I respect you whatever you think or believe. I simply expect the same in return. I did not come here to be excoriated or to defend Judaism or even G-d." At that point, he told me that I was right and he meekly apologized. I happened to run into the fellow after Shabbos at a kosher restaurant. He again started in on his problems with G-d and religion. No doubt this man has some reason supporting why he is a non-believer, an

Epicurus and a denier. Perhaps it is philosophical or maybe because of some negative or difficult experiences which he has had in his own life.

What was most unsettling about the exchange, is not that the gentleman is not a believer or thinks that faith is ridiculous, but rather that he was angry at my choice. It seemed as though my host not only has rejected G-d, religion and Judaism for himself, but has a highly self-justifying view that others who believe differently are on the wrong track and need to be corrected. It is not simply a matter of apathy, but hostility towards the observant which was a somewhat new and shocking experience.

My naïve response to my friend was not to argue with him or try to defend religion, but rather to express to him that it is something which informs and uplifts my life and lifestyle. During the dinner at the kosher restaurant, I told my friend that I consider him a religious and holy man since it is in the greatest of Jewish traditions to argue with G-d, and demand better. I pointed out to him that Abraham said, "Shall a just G-d not do justly?" There are many other examples throughout Jewish history of man's/woman's not only ability but obligation to demand better of this world. I do not think any of that impressed him. I left my friend telling him that I considered him a religious and holy person and wishing him the best.

Elie Wiesel has written eloquently of his return to religion after the Holocaust. That book was very useful to me when I was a young man. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, recently departed, has also addressed in a very intellectual and philosophical way, his belief in religion and G-d. I do not know if my friend will read any of these books, but maybe I will try sending copies to him.

What I am disturbed about, in giving this matter some thought and talking to a Rabbi friend of mine, is that the observant find ourselves on the defensive so often not only about political choices but even about our fundamental lifestyle. Do modern Orthodox like myself go around to other people telling them that they are evil hate mongers because they vote for the Democratic Party? Do we say that they are going to go to hell because of their lack of belief and their disregard of Jewish continuity? The only time that I seemed to get my friend's attention is when I said to him, "If all Jews believe as you do, there will be no Jews in the next generation and we won't have to worry about it." He nodded that he understood that.

This brings me back to my premise that I have been embracing over the last few years. A Jewish afterschool education is not enough. A friend of mine who is a college professor and himself highly observant, said that he wondered if anybody was going to do a study on the efficacy of traditional afterschool Hebrew School programs as opposed to those kids who have been exposed to Chabbad Lubavitch. He is not talking about the Lubavitch children themselves, but rather those who attend Lubavitch Synagogues and their afterschool programs.

The Jewish community needs seriously to think about embracing charter schools and day schools which are affordable. We put all kinds of money into beautiful buildings, magnificent sports facilities, highly paid executives and not nearly enough into making sure that Jewish children can afford Jewish summer camps and day schools. Before we send our young people to Israel for free, a great idea, we need to educate

them properly. Afterschool programs, in my view and based upon my own experience, are a dismal failure. Even many of the community day schools have questionable success rates from the point of view of Jewish continuity. Yet a not-too-long ago graduate of a community day school tells me that the kids in his class have done a lot better, from a Jewish perspective, than those who did not attend.

As far as my friend is concerned, I am serious when I say that I love him and I wish the best for him. I doubt that I will change the composition of his structural opposition to religion and G-d. I do not seek to do that. Rather, I would like to see my fellow Jews tolerant of those who chose the path less traveled, that of modern orthodoxy and Israel fidelity. Is that asking too much?

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