

## The rock-steady suspension bridge: on principles and acknowledging difference?

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The recent Supreme Court ruling in the JFS case has inevitably re-awakened the topic of the relationship between Orthodox and non-Orthodox denominations. Many column inches have been dedicated to schools' admissions policies and other ramifications of the judgement. Little space, however, has been devoted to explaining the deeply-held principles that underpin Orthodox Judaism; these are obviously inextricably linked to the JFS case and why it came to court.

While Orthodox thinkers may disagree about all manner of issues, they are united in their commitment to certain key defining principles. Beyond the obvious beliefs in the existence of God and human accountability, these principles may be encapsulated in the following sentence. Orthodox Judaism believes in the historical veracity of the revelation at Mount Sinai at which God gave the Torah to the Jewish people, and accordingly in the eternal binding imperative of all of halachah (Jewish law), as understood by the Talmud and traditional sources. These ideas are the essence of Orthodox Judaism; all other matters, including the contentious ones, such as the standards of observance required for conversion, flow from them.

The truth of these assertions has been vigorously protected from their detractors for centuries, yet corroborating and defending them (and I believe that they can, and must, be defended very robustly) is not my purpose here. What is vital is the fact that for me, as well as for every other believing Orthodox Jew, these principles are central to our religious life, and consequently not negotiable.

I am realistic, however, and recognise that sadly, some do not accept these ideas. The United Synagogue, while proudly Orthodox in its beliefs and objectives for its members, has always welcomed people who represent the entire continuum: those of every shade of observance and conviction, and those of none: that is its *raison d'être*. Yet I feel passionately that the greatest achievement of the United Synagogue is its establishment of a non-judgemental environment in which Jews, whatever their beliefs, can share the privilege of being part of the Jewish people and where they can progress towards greater commitment and observance as equal partners on their Jewish journey.

Yet the simple fact is that the Reform and Masorti movements base their religious lives on different principles to those held immutable by the United Synagogue and the rest of the Orthodox community. As evident from any number of publications and movement websites, Reform does not claim to believe in the historical veracity of the revelation, while Masorti's redefinition of 'Torah from heaven' completely repudiates traditional interpretation. These alternatives not only reject the very basis of Orthodox Judaism, but attack the foundations upon which every one of its laws and ideas rest. Consequently, the other movements have beliefs, aspirations and halachic requirements that differ vastly from those of Orthodox Judaism. It is, of course, the prerogative of each movement to define its own beliefs and practices, but there are clearly intractable disagreements between them that penetrate to the very heart of Jewish belief and identity.

But even when we disagree profoundly, this need not stop us from engaging in courteous, mutually-beneficial conversation. We live in a small community where despite our intractable differences over

almost every aspect of Judaism, we must try to co-exist harmoniously. While, paraphrasing the words of Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik, we are committed to different dimensions of experience, we all profit from civilised conversation, joint representation, and pooling of resources where possible. Yet it is obvious, at least to me, that any discourse must be based on the principle that each party acknowledges the beliefs of the other without attempting to undermine them. In short, each must deal with the other on the understanding that it is unthinkable to expect them to forgo beliefs fundamental to their religious identity. Of course, this does not preclude the possibility of inspiring others to change their views, but 'outreach' and meaningful communication between groups with firmly-held and diverse beliefs are entirely different. Paraphrasing the words of a well-known Muslim story-teller, dialogue must not seek to debate, deny or convince, rather engender understanding and co-operation when it is possible.

Professor David Gelernter, in the final footnote of his recent book 'Judaism: a way of being' (Yale University Press, 2009) suggests that 'if mutual respect is a suspension bridge, it requires two rock-steady foundations of self-respect to support the towers'. I think that this is a good working model for respectful interaction between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox movements.

It is clear that the movements have different beliefs, practices, objectives and membership criteria, something that we are often reluctant to face. Yet I am certain that rather than producing friction between us, recognising this reality is the key to meaningful and tension-free discourse. Only where principles are stated and differences acknowledged and respected, can a space be created which allows mutually-beneficial conversation to flourish. It would be wrong of me to speak on behalf of the other movements, but from the Orthodox perspective, this means that purposeful discourse with the Reform and Masorti movements must be based on their accepting that we are committed to the Orthodox version of belief and halachah with all their ramifications. Of course this includes the unpalatable fact that we cannot, nor will ever be able to accept non-Orthodox conversions, nor will lobbying us to do so in schools, Shuls or elsewhere do anything other than create tension and make communication more difficult.

I accept that confusing messages about conversion have emerged in recent years from the Orthodox authorities in Israel and elsewhere. This is unacceptable and something that needs to change so that the public have a greater degree of clarity about what is involved. I hope very much that this will happen over time. Yet some have mistakenly conflated this lack of transparency with the matter of the validity of non-Orthodox conversions, with which it is not connected. And it is clear to me that the Orthodox world must accept, at least for the purposes of meaningful communication, that the standards, beliefs and focus of religious life of the other movements are different from our own.

For all concerned, this may be a hard pill to swallow, but it is unavoidable if we are to be partners in those areas where we can cooperate. We cannot continue craving the religious legitimisation from each other that will never be forthcoming, nor trying to score points in public battles in which both sides will inevitably be seen as losers. The sooner we acknowledge our differences and their principled nature, the closer we will come to building those 'rock-steady foundations' to 'support the towers' of a disciplined and loving Anglo-Jewry.