

Compromise: The Largest Jewish Contribution to Humanity

Rabbi Michel Schlesinger

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"When I was a small child, as the Israeli author Amos Oz once wrote, my wise grandmother explained to me in simple terms the difference between a Jew and a Christian. 'You see,' she said, 'Christians believe that the Messiah has been here once and will one day return; Jews maintain that the Messiah has yet to come. Over this,' my grandmother continued, 'there has been endless hatred and bloodshed. Why?' she wondered, 'Why can't everybody simply wait and see? If the Messiah comes saying, 'Hello, it's nice to see you again,' then the Jews will have to concede. If, on the other hand, he comes saying, 'How do you do? It is very nice meeting you,' then the entire Christian world will have to apologize to the Jews. Until that time,' concluded Amos Oz's very wise grandmother, 'just live and let live.'

In my opinion, the most important contribution Jews have made to humanity was not the Ten Commandments. Neither was it gefilte fish, Einstein, or even the Yiddishe Mama. In my opinion, the largest Jewish contribution to mankind was the holy notion of compromise.

The Talmud, in its majestic collection of Jewish wisdom, was produced orally; then it was transformed into written manuscripts. It became a large set of books many years later, and today the totality of its contents is available online. The characteristic of this immense material is that no question is answered in a monolithic way. Check for yourself and click on any page of any given Tractate, and you will see. There are always several different answers to the same question. Even more fascinating is the fact that, in general, there is no conclusion. When our Cartesian minds expect a final answer, something very contemporary happens: we learn that all the solutions are valid. In that sense, the Talmud is postmodern; it knows how to live with open questions, like Amos Oz's wise grandmother.

Let me give you a few examples.

When the sages in the Talmud discussed the right position for the Mezuzah on the doors of our houses, some said it should be vertical, and some said it should be horizontal. We can find beautiful explanations for it being vertical; after all, the Mezuzah represents our connection with God, linking the human and the divine. As for the Mezuzah in the horizontal position, we may say it represents the connection between one human being and another. Nevertheless, our sages decided to compromise, and it became an Ashkenazic tradition to put the mezuzot diagonally, in order to express our appreciation for each of the opinions quoted above.

A similar discussion happened around the number of cups we should have during the Pesach Seder. Some Rabbis defended the idea of four cups of wine, and some thought it should be five. The rabbis opinions differed on how many times did God promise to deliver Israel. In order to solve this conflict, the Rabbis from the Talmud decided again to compromise. Today, we do not have 4 cups of wine on the Pesach Seder Table, neither do we have 5, but 4 and a half. The cup of Elijah, in some egalitarian traditions accompanied by Miriam's cup, is a half cup because we have it on the table, but we don't actually drink from it.

Finally, we have an example directly connected to Rosh HaShana. An interesting Talmudic discussion tries to determine how the *teruah* blast of the Shofar should sound like. The rabbis agreed that it should sound like a cry. More specifically, the weeping of General Sisra's mother when she learned that her son had died in the battle that took place at the time of the prophetess Deborah. While one rabbi believed that the crying was sobbing, something similar to our Teruah, another sage argued that the crying would have been a lament. Consistent with its pluralist tradition, the Talmud decided not to adopt a single opinion but to compromise once again. It introduced a third blast to accommodate the divergent opinions. Thus was born *shevarim*, the third blow of the Shofar, similar to a lament.

Compromise can be seen as a sign of weakness. After all, we may think, someone who compromises is not so sure about his or her convictions. Actually, the contrary is true. Only someone with strong convictions gains the ability to appreciate the beauty of the opponents' opinions.

The problem does not lie on the right but on the ultra-right; the challenge doesn't rest on the left but on the extremism of some leftists; the problem is not among religious people, but with the ultra-Orthodox; the challenge is not with seculars, but with those who believe that only what can be proven matters. The problem does not exist with human pluralism but with inhuman fanaticism. Humanity, with its doubts, is not the problem but, to my mind, the solution.

The Jewish movement that better captures the tension between tradition and change, in my opinion, is the Conservative Movement, or *Massorti* in Hebrew. When I first decided to become a Conservative Rabbi, it was because of the way our movement decides to balance the tension that exists in religious Judaism. A Reform Jew will, in general, privilege change over tradition. An Orthodox Jew will, more often than not, privilege tradition over change. A *Massorti* Jew will embrace the tension.

The rich space between the right and left, the black and white, the up and down, the everything and nothing, is the space where the Conservative Movement operates. Sometimes change will prevail over tradition, and sometimes tradition will triumph over change. Nevertheless, it will always be important to preserve the tension between them.

For the Massorti Movement, the questions are far more important than the answers. Good questions last forever, whereas the answers are always temporary, always provisional. We should never be afraid to ask brave questions such as: How should our religious services look like in order to remain attractive? Which parts of our tradition do we consider essential, and which are the ones we are willing to let evolve? What are the rituals that ceased to represent our values, and what are the new values that we want to incorporate into our ancient rituals? Are we serving the contemporary Jewish family? How do we assure our congregation's doors are wide enough for the multifaceted liquid identities?

I once learned from my Halakhah professor at Schechter Institute in Jerusalem, the Conservative Rabbinical School in Israel where I was ordained, that forbidding something is always easier than allowing. I know, it is counterintuitive, but it is absolutely true. On one hand, if I am not sure about something, I always decide to err on the side of caution, and I freeze; I just repeat the old pattern; I hinder any chance of advancement, and I fear evolution. On the other hand, when I am comfortable with my own set of beliefs, I am accepting of innovative ways, I finally understand that different paths can lead to the same result, and experimenting ceases to be so frightening.

We are living in a time of polarization. It is happening everywhere. People are not appreciating the power of compromise. Different opinions on abortion, drugs, weapons, healthcare, immigration, vaccines, religion, politics, the messiah, are driving people apart. We, Jews, have the opportunity to stick to what I consider to be our most remarkable contribution to humanity. We have the chance to highlight the best legacy we inherited from our tradition: the capacity to compromise.

During the High Holidays, we are surprised, every year again, by a God ready to compromise between the attributes of justice (midat hadin) and mercifulness (midat a rachamim). Several of the Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur prayers draw us to the center of the tension between these Divine attributes. Traditionally, we think God is judging us on this day. But the truth is, as I see it, God also invites us to witness God's attempt to find a compromise between justice and mercy. As if God was asking us how God is doing in this holy exercise of balancing two opposing forces. Sometimes it feels like it is God who is asking us to judge God.

In the prayer HaYom Harat Olam, we read: "im kebanim, im kaavadim." Sometimes we are God's servants, and sometimes we are God's children. God is at the same time our parent "Avinu" and our majestic ruler "Malkeinu". "Rav Chessed veEmet", "full of love and truth". Among many other examples.

For me, the message is crystal clear. The power of God lies in God's capacity to be at the same time parent and ruler, just and merciful, strong and kind, severe and malleable. God's power exists in the seek of balance, in the sacred search for compromise, and so should ours.

During these High Holidays, I would like to invite you to rescue this amazing gift presented by our Jewish tradition. Let us practice the holy art of compromising in our own homes, congregations, workplaces, and schools. Let the Jewish People be known for its outstanding contribution to humanity. Let us be recognized for our capacity to dialogue, to debate, to negotiate and to compromise.

Yehuda Amichai, also an Israeli author, wrote a sensational poetic warning about absolutism:

“מִן הַמָּקוֹם שֶׁבוֹ אָנוּ צוֹדְקִים לֹא יִצְמָחוּ לְעוֹלָם פְּרָחִים בְּאָבִיב”

(“From the place where we are right, flowers will never grow in the Spring”).

May 5784 be a year of courageous compromises and beautiful flowers.

Shana Tova!