Today, my title derives from the Beatles’ song, “The long and winding road.” The road of Jewish-Christian dialogue is not only long and winding, but full of bumps, within the churches, in Israel, etc.

In Jerusalem, I am privileged to be a member of a long-standing Jewish-Christian group called “The Rainbow.” Each year we conduct monthly dialogues around a certain theme. The first year I joined the group the theme for the year was: “Embarrassing Texts in My Tradition.” We must all learn to be critical of our own traditions, a loving and loyal criticism from within. As was suggested by my former teacher, Professor Moshe Greenberg, a Bible scholar at the Hebrew University: “Even the choicest vine needs seasonal pruning to ensure more fruitful growth.”

I would suggest that the challenge of religious and cultural pluralism is one of the three major issues facing the world – the environment and socio-economic justice being the other two. This seems to be a major obstacle for Christians, who can’t seem to get over the idea that the only way to the Father is through the Son. I have a running debate on this issue with Rabbi Yehiel Poupko from Chicago. He told me that he has a debate with Professor David Sandmel. According to Poupko, Sandmel sees as a prerequisite for dialogue a
Christian renunciation of the idea that the only way to the Father is through the Son. Poupko says he doesn’t really care if that’s what the Christians believe; he is prepared to dialogue on any grounds. My own position on this question is what I would call the “middle position” – in other words, I would like to challenge our Christian dialogue partners to confront the issue, being prepared, in the end, to continue the dialogue no matter the outcome of their confrontation.

**CAN THERE BE PLURAL “TRUTHS?”**

It could be argued that religions which make claims to represent ultimate truths (a more apt phrase, I believe, than “absolute truths”) leave no room for other faiths and their truths. However, this might be an overly glib or superficial presentation of the nature of religions in reality. Another approach may be grounded in classical Jewish sources:

A Midrash\(^1\) relates that when God prepared to create Adam, the “angel” of truth argued against this move, saying that human life would be full of lies. God responded by throwing “truth” down to the ground. Some commentators have extended the metaphor by suggesting that on earth, truth has been shattered into millions of little pieces. Different people possess pieces of the truth.

Dr. Shlomo Fischer, who has been associated with the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, and Professor Suzanne Last Stone, of Yeshiva University in New York, have suggested that there are several “characteristics of Judaism that support pluralism and acceptance of diversity.”\(^3\)

One is “the internal structure of Judaism – its limitation to one nation – which has led to a positive valuation of the role of other collectivities in the divine plan.”\(^4\)

I would simply amend that to read not necessarily that it has led to a positive valuation, but that it could. The need for balance between the particular and the universal is seen already in Gen. 12:1–3. Abram – later to become Abraham – is chosen so that he will bring blessing to all the families of the earth. Another Biblical source in this context is Micah 4:1–5. There, the various nations stream to Jerusalem, each walking in the name of its god. In verse 5, it says, “And we will walk in the name of our God.” Some translations render the “and” as a “but;” that, in my view, is an unnecessary opposition.

Another classical and beautifully succinct statement of the need for balance is Hillel’s famous dictum in Hillel’s famous statement in Mishnah Avot 1:14, “If I am not for myself, then, who will be for me? But, if I am for myself alone, then what am I? And if not now, when?” One could pluralize this in a national context to read, “If we are not for ourselves, then who will be for us? But, if we are for ourselves alone, what are we?”

But many Jews, unfortunately, have gone to one extreme or the other. A dramatic example of this problem can be found in the work of an important 20th century Jewish philosopher, Leon Roth. Roth, in an article entitled “Moralization and Demoralization in Jewish Ethics,”\(^5\) makes reference to the famous Mishnah in Sanhedrin 4:5, “... if any man saves a single soul from Israel, Scripture imputes it to him as though he had saved a whole world.” Roth points out that in earlier manuscripts, the words “from Israel” are omitted. Indeed, in terms of the context – namely, the Creation of Adam – they do seem to distort the simple meaning of the text. Roth refers to the process by which a more universal text became “particularized” as the “demoralization” of the text. He writes: “The addition of the word me-Yisrael (from Israel) produces a sudden, and ludicrous, deflation.”

Sara Schenirer (early 20th century, founder of Beis Ya’akov, the pioneering movement for girls’ Torah education), in her work, Em B’Yisroel 2:75-78, (translation from The Jewish Political Tradition, Vol.1), says the following: “When we state that it is a mitzvah to love people, this means that it makes no difference who the person is, whether Jew or alien … Thus Abraham our father, through love and devotion, extended his hospitality to guests, dressing them and feeding them. He endangered his life for the sake of the King of Sodom and begged G-d’s mercy for Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses our master, too, was quick to come to the aid of alien shepherds and defended them from attackers.”

Another commentary, this time from northern Italy in the 19th century: *And love your neighbor as yourself* – Not that one should love every person as he actually loves himself, for that is impossible, and Rabbi Akiva already taught that “Your life takes precedent over your friend’s life.” Rather as yourself in the sense of [your neighbor] who is like you – as in [the verse] for you are like unto Pharaoh. So here too as well *Love your neighbor who is as yourself*; he is equal to you and similar to
you in that he was also created in the image of God, he is a human being just as you are, and that includes all human beings, for they were all created in the divine image. The Torah concluded [in the passage] everything with this commandment, just as it began with each man shall fear his mother and father, because one who honors the human image and considers it excellent treats himself and all other people well (R. Yitzhak Shemuel Reggio on Leviticus 18:19).

Going back to Fischer and Last Stone, another characteristic of traditional Judaism that supports pluralism and diversity is, in their words, “the tradition of intellectual pluralism within the normative halakhic community fostered by its skeptical approach to truth-claims.” The Jewish tradition of Oral Torah can be important here in a certain way: It helps to create a culture of discourse and debate, with room for alternate truths. The Oral Torah is based on endless discussions that compel the participants to look at the objects of their inquiry from many possible perspectives. Questions are raised about most assumptions. Students are rewarded for asking difficult questions. In the event that a student asks an especially interesting question that was heretofore asked, for example, in a relatively obscure Rabbinic or medieval source, he will offer a blessing to God.

It is well-known that the “houses” – in modern parlance, schools – of Hillel and Shammai were constantly arguing over points of Jewish law. The Talmud in Eruvin 13b records that finally, a Divine Voice came down from heaven and declared: “These, and also these, are the words of the Living God, and the Law is according to the house of Hillel.”

That passage is interesting in three ways: first, it seems to support the notion of plural truths. Another Rabbinic passage makes this point perhaps even more sharply: “These are the sages who sit in assemblies and study the Torah, some pronouncing unclean and others pronouncing clean, some prohibiting and others permitting, some declaring unfit and others declaring fit. But a person might say: How, then, shall I learn Torah? Therefore the text says, all of them ‘are given from one shepherd.’ One God gave them, one leader proclaimed them from the mouth of the Lord of all creation, Blessed be He.” So, perhaps we can summarize this and say that there is one divine source – the source of Truth with a capital T – but there are many truths on the human level.

Secondly, even when plural truths are recognized on a theoretical plane, a decision must be taken regarding lawful behavior in the real world. Otherwise, there would be no sense of community and society would degenerate into chaos.

Third, the passage seems to fly in the face of another equally well-known passage from another tractate, Baba Metzia 59b: Again R. Eliezer then said to the Sages, “If the Halakhah agrees with me, let it be proved from heaven.” Sure enough, a divine voice cried out, “Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, with whom the Halakhah always agrees?” R. Joshua stood up and protested: “The Torah is not in heaven!” (Deut. 30:12). We pay no attention to a divine voice because long ago at Mount Sinai You wrote in your Torah at Mount Sinai, `After the majority must one incline.’ (Ex. 23:2)” R. Nathan met [the prophet] Elijah and asked him, “What did the Holy One do at that moment?” Elijah: “He laughed [with joy], saying, ‘My children have defeated Me, My children have defeated Me.’”

So, do we listen to Divine Voices or do we not? Perhaps we can say that in general, we do not. Rational discussions are held on the basis of texts and the majority rules. But at one point in Talmudic “sacred history,” it became necessary for a Divine Voice to lend its sanction to the idea of plural truths.

Now, someone might claim that the plural truths being referred to in all of these Talmudic passages are representative of a fairly narrow form of pluralism; they all come from “dead male” rabbis within the normative Jewish tradition. Could this still be a basis for a Jewish appreciation of the Other, who is truly other?

Medieval rabbis have made it reasonably clear that Islam is a “true”, non-idolatrous and monotheistic faith. Christianity is more controversial, because of the belief in the Trinity, the use of icons, etc. But many authorities would see it, too, as a religion of truth. For example, the 12th century Tosafists, in their commentary on Avodah Zarah 2a, state, “… we are certain that the Christians do not worship idols.” Even more unequivocal was Menachem ben Solomon HaMeiri of Provence (1249–1316.) He averred that both Christians and Muslims were “peoples disciplined by religion” and that the theological problem of shittuf (believing in one God, together with other divine manifestations) was not applicable to non-Jews, thus allowing for Trinitarian Christianity.
than that would be the status of the Eastern religions, although some authorities have concluded that these, too, can be seen as true faiths. In any case, it might perhaps be argued that once you have a philosophical basis for the notion of plural truths, the parameters of those truths is a secondary question.

A 20th century Jewish philosopher and mystic Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook wrote, "Some err and think that world peace can be built only through total consensus ... But the truth is that real peace, on the contrary, can come to the world only through precisely the multiplicity of peace, and this is when all sides and opinions come to light, and are proven to each have their own place." 13

We should bear in mind that Rabbi Kook died in 1935, before the Holocaust. Had he lived longer, he might have amended his position to exclude certain sides and opinions; I don’t know. I believe that there are limits to pluralism, and I’m certainly not arguing for a nihilistic relativism. But I am arguing, using social scientific terminology, that what we need in society is not "the replication of uniformity", but "the organization of diversity." 14

Now there are many obstacles to inter-religious dialogue that go beyond the issues of pluralism and universalism. Unfortunately, the Jewish attachment to the Land and State of Israel has begun to function in this regard, as obstacles, rather than opportunities. Judaism involves a relationship with the Land of Israel; Zionism, with the State of Israel. As a Zionist, I believe that today one can not have a deep relationship with the Jewish people without involvement with the State of Israel. However, that does not mean identifying with a particular policy or position. As the government of Israel is a democratically elected government, it can be supported or opposed by democratic means – without calling into question one’s loyalty to the State.

But I maintain that this applies to non-citizens of Israel, too. Sometimes commitment and love are best expressed through criticism. We have a wonderful Biblical role model in Abraham. The prophet Isaiah 15 has God referring to Abraham as “my lover” or “my friend.” Yet it was Abraham in Genesis 18:25 who, pointing an accusing finger at the Lord, asked, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?” Thus we see that criticism need not be a sign of alienation.

The question of the appropriate channels for expression of criticism may be debatable. But Jews and non-Jews ought to be able to freely criticize the government of Israel and its policies, without being accused of anti-Semitism or anti-Zionism. On the other hand, when the criticism holds Israel up to standards never demanded of any other nation, or when anti-Semitic stereotypes and canards are used (e.g., as in the headline, “the Israelis are crucifying the Palestinians in Lebanon,”), Jewish ears become sensitive to the criticism in the wrong way.

Several years ago, a popular bumper sticker in the US tried to express this point of view, “Wherever I stand, I stand with Israel.” Jews could expect their Christian friends to support Israel’s right to exist without necessarily defending all of its actions and policies. The range of opinions within Israel is often much greater than within Jewish communities in the Diaspora. The more people abroad are knowledgeable about what is actually going on in Israel and the more they are connected with various groups in Israel, the more complex and sophisticated will be their awareness of the issues.

As is customary within the particular context of our cultural tradition, I would like to approach a conclusion by offering a d’var Torah: Twice in the Torah – once in Leviticus 11 and once in Deuteronomy 14 – we find a list of nonkosher birds. Among those listed is the chassida, the stork. It would appear that the name of this bird is derived from the word chessed, “lovingkindness.” Our great medieval biblical commentator Rashi, following the Midrash, asks, “Why is the bird called chassida? Because it performs acts of chessed by sharing its food with other storks.” It took hundreds of years for the next logical question to be addressed; namely, then why isn’t it Kosher? This question was asked in the 19th century by the Gerer Rebbe known as Chiddushei HaRim. The answer he gave: “Because it performs acts of chessed by sharing its food with other storks. Only with other storks.”

In this short parable we have the strength and the weakness of communities; we have the dilemma of particularism and universalism. Strong particularistic communities do chessed towards members of their own group, but how do they relate to outsiders, who may be members of other communities? This is the educational challenge we have today: to develop proud young Jews, grounded in their own culture, who will not be like the storks, but like human beings who can shown compassion and concern for members of other communities as well.
2] Breishit Rabba 8:5.
4] Ibid.
6] Writing the name of the Deity this way is an Orthodox convention, intended to prevent a transgression of the commandment not to take the Lord's name in vain.
7] I am indebted to the modern Orthodox organization Edah for this passage. See: www.edah.org.
10] Here I am using the male pronoun purposely to indicate that regrettably, for most of history, women were not involved in this kind of Jewish discourse. The situation, fortunately, began to change in the last quarter of the 20th century.
12] See Beit HaBechirah, his commentary on the Talmud; particularly, Baba Kamma 113b and Avodah Zarah 20a.

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