

Between left and right: a new dialogue?

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Riv-Ellen Prell's call for a new politics of dialogue and coalition-building appears, at least in design, addressed ideally to someone like myself. Like Prell, albeit much earlier than the 1980s, I became disenchanted with the politics of intolerance so characteristic of the New Left. Like Prell, I am interested in the relationships between political and Jewish identities. Unlike her, I find myself increasingly on the "conservative" rather than "liberal" side of most political and social questions.

Can our dialogue then be productive? Unfortunately, Prell offers us little substantive basis on which to proceed save a return to the "openmindedness" and "tolerance" she abandoned in the 1960s. Perhaps this is sufficient, for surely these values are in short supply in an increasingly polarized America of the 1990s. But a commitment to dialogue absent consensus of vision--even in broad terms--is likely to prove as frustrating today as it was a generation ago. Civility of discourse clearly is preferable to name-calling, but it is no more likely to proceed unless both sides are prepared to move substantively beyond earlier "truths".

Here, then, are my guidelines for substantive dialogue between Jewish conservatives and liberals:

1. Abandon Moral Absolutism

Prell recognizes that Leftist intolerance alienated moderates. Militant picketing of classrooms and political speakers, did, indeed, infringe civil liberties. Moderation

of discourse does not exclude the presence of "non-negotiable" items, but it does require that those items be carefully limited to what is truly non-negotiable.

Take, for example, the divisive issue of abortion, on which Prell admits she does not know "how to talk to people who oppose abortion". To speak of abortion as legally available yet ethically restricted is to uphold a woman's right to choose but also to state clearly that having an abortion may not be the ethically correct decision. Pro-choice advocates generally welcome statements that support the legal availability of abortion. However, it is becoming increasingly "politically incorrect"--vide the prevention of Gov. Casey from addressing the Democratic National Convention--to articulate qualms concerning the ethical acceptability of abortion as a choice.

2. Abandon Moral Relativism

It is tempting to replace the absolutism of the New Left with an "I'm okay-you're okay" posture in which there are no universals. People and cultures are simply different--not necessarily better or worse. Yet that moral relativism is as destructive of substantive dialogue as is the absolutism Prell correctly repudiates. Pluralism does not mean that all values are equal. It does mean that not all behavior that we protect is behavior that we prefer.

The example of homosexuality is particularly salient here albeit missing from Prell's essay. Most American Jews defend the civil liberties of homosexuals and do not wish any equivocating on this point. But that is a far cry from accepting homosexuality as morally equivalent to heterosexual marriage--a position over which there is no communal consensus. It is harmful to make homosexuals the pariahs of the Jewish community. Yet outreach to homosexuals cannot and should not mean that we fail to privilege heterosexual marriage as the norm of the Jewish community.

3. Recognize the Intellectual Integrity of Opponents

Those who disagree do not do so because they are selfish, racist, homophobic, sexist, or otherwise narrow minded. Their convictions flow from a sincere and deeply felt vision of what is good for society. Those who defended American intervention in Vietnam wished to halt the spread of Asian communism and prevent further atrocities. They may have erred in considering Vietnam a threat to American national interests, but that does not earn them the epithets of "racists" and "imperialists". Similarly, those who uphold the virtues of the two-parent home are not, as Prell suggests, so simple minded as to think the problems of the ghetto will disappear if only

people will marry and stay together. They are concerned that we do ourselves no favors by avoiding questions of "family values" that underscore commitments to marriage and celebration of the two-parent home as the most effective format for the raising of children.

4. Learn from One Another Rather than Speak Past One Another

Liberals tend to emphasize governmental activism, economics, and cultural diversity. Conservatives prefer the rhetoric of values and social responsibility. Both have much to learn from one another. Increased governmental activism can do little unless it is embedded within a culture of self-help and moral responsibility. Prell's call to abandon the politics of victimization is welcome. It must be followed, however, by a politics that perceives individual, family, and society as closely-intertwined units necessary to the health of all, and it is the responsibility of each of those units to be strengthening the other two.

5. Find Common Ground Within the Dialogue on Issues of Jewish Identity and Continuity

Remarkably, given Prell's earlier and justly-hailed scholarship, she has little, if anything, to say about Jewish identity as a bridge concern between liberals and conservatives. Yet both are confronted today with the identical dilemma of preserving and transmitting a specific content of Jewishness in a society that has been so open and receptive to Jews that Jewish disappearance is indeed a possibility. Can liberals and conservatives agree, for example, that intermarriage threatens Jewish continuity and, therefore, that it is not racist to encourage Jews to marry other Jews? Can they agree that Jewish texts and teachings ought to be studied for their own sake as the unique heritage of Jewish civilization? Can they agree, following Prell's earlier research, that ritual and community are the best guarantors of Jewish continuity? Prell eloquently searches for allies on the Right but paradoxically ignores the essential dilemma of her generation and the power of Jewish tradition to address that dilemma.

To be sure, major differences here also exist over the relationship between political and Jewish identities. Jewish liberals invoke social justice--*tikkun olam*--as the core meaning of Jewish identity. Traditionalists question whether *tikkun olam* need be translated as liberal rather than conservative social policy. Both sides must grapple with the durability and sustaining power of *tikkun olam* as an ideology to preserve Jewishness--whether social activism suffices to transmit the distinctive content of Jewishness.

6. Beginning the Bridge-Building

Will these guidelines make for effective dialogue between Left and Right? Many conservatives undoubtedly will dismiss Prell's appeal as little more than a corrective to the excessive dogmatism of the New Left. They will note, with considerable accuracy, that beyond changes in style, Prell continues to appear locked in the orthodoxies of the 60s. Her critiques appear limited to questions of tactics rather than substance.

Yet Prell's call for dialogue is too important to go unanswered. The Jewish continuity agenda is too broad and encompassing for any one sector of the community to address effectively on its own. New coalitions will be necessary to enable different Jews to find their particular way to Jewish tradition and community. Failure to heed Prell's call risks creating a Jewish community so narrow as to exclude precisely those Jews anxious to find the nexus between political and religious identities. Conversely, Prell has the potential to reach Jews disenchanted with mainstream Jewish communal politics. Unlike other veterans of the culture wars of the 60s, she is not prepared to "write off" those who disagree with her. For all these reasons, the appropriate response to Prell's call for dialogue is both to engage her substantively and challenge her to explore the relationship between our political and our Jewish identities. □

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