

Judaism, Culture and Intolerance

By David Kraemer

This has been a season of embattlement for free expression in this country. The newly privileged creationist curriculum in Kansas schools, the mayor's assault on the "Sensation" exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, the removal of "occultist" Harry Potter books from school libraries in several states-all speak to a fear and intolerance in American culture. This is not, unfortunately, a benign condition. Such a combination of fear and intolerance obviously has consequences for life and policy.

Before weighing in with a condemnation-in the name of "Judaism"-of these developments, we should at least be honest enough to admit that Jews and Judaism have not escaped such intolerance. So, while it may be true, as many have argued, that Jews have rarely been fundamentalist in reading scripture, this is only a partial truth. Jewish fundamentalism doesn't look to the written word of the Bible for the immutable truth; it looks to rabbinic interpretations of the Bible for that truth. And, with the authoritative interpretation in hand, many Jews through the ages (including our own) have been just as fundamentalist as some of our Christian neighbors. As far as artistic expression is concerned, we should recall that the Ten Commandments prohibit any "plastic" representations of living forms-"sensational" or otherwise. And when the "artistic" symbols have been religious in nature, Jewish tradition does not counsel a radical tolerance; consider the Bible's accounts of the "golden calves" of the northern Kingdom of Israel for just one example of a profound intolerance. Indeed, in the matter of religious aberrations of any sort, Jewish monotheism (like all monotheisms) has not been a paragon of tolerance. We have taught the world more than liberalism.

Nevertheless, I would argue that the dominant voice in Judaism is a voice for tolerance. The Midrash, for example, asks what lessons the creation story wants to teach because the science of the rabbis' day taught them that its literal word could not be true. Interpretation makes texts pliable, and literal readings are naïve. Better to look to the biblical account for religious lessons, not science-the rabbis would counsel. Better to leave room for alternative interpretations when we cannot fully account for the full wisdom of God's word or God's divine plan. And though the Ten Commandments prohibit representation of the living form, archaeology has shown that Jews-including pious, synagogue-going Jews-mostly observed this prohibition in the breach. Furthermore, the Mishnah teaches in at least one story that should the representation be idolatrous-so be it. Idolatry is silly and powerless-despite the beliefs of others. Why should we get anxious-let alone intolerant-on account of their errors?

In the end, whatever the teachings of our tradition (and they are contradictory), we should appreciate that Jews benefit immeasurably from the tolerance of "heterodox" opinions and expressions. When "other" opinions have been

prohibited, our opinions have too often been deemed the opinions of the "other." So let the oxen gore, with full awareness that our own ox may be gored now and then. The only alternative is to chain the oxen-and the sheep and the goats and the pigs. We would all be poorer, and more at risk, in a society that allowed such chains.