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Using the Talmud as a model for interfaith dialogue

In Israel, I want to believe that the secular Jew, the religious Zionist, the Arab Israeli and the ultra-Orthodox can perhaps also meet one day on their own Talmudic page.

By David Meyer | Mar.16, 2012 | 3:24 AM

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BRUSSELS - A few years ago, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks used an interesting metaphor to describe the interfaith reality of Europe's pluralistic society. Living with multiculturalism, he argued, we must ask ourselves whether we intend to be together in the same shared house, or whether we are just guests in the same hotel.

The difference between the two images is striking. If we are indeed sharing a common home, even building it together, we need a common set of goals and frank give-and-take, lest our shared residence never get off the ground. Alternatively, if we are just guests who will pass one another occasionally in a hotel lobby, it will suffice if we can converse politely when we happen to meet.

As a European rabbi, I have made my choice. I am building the house. And the current multicultural nature of our society makes me want to find partners of other faiths with whom to share the effort.

But what sort of communal home are we aiming for? We each have identities and differences that we are just not willing to give up. So even though our common European house should indeed have solid foundations and a pleasant ground floor room for all to meet - it's equally important that we have our own individual rooms one floor up, with doors we can safely leave unlocked. The challenge, then, is double: setting the foundations right so that we can customize our own rooms without endangering the building's stability, and finding a way to share this vision in an exciting way with a wider audience.

I found my inspiration in the Talmud. The Talmud is a unique text in more than one way. Not only does it

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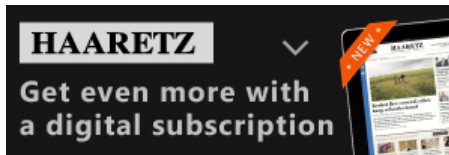
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cover the diverse spectrum of topics of Jewish life, but its actual layout is unique. The starting point is the text in the center of the page. It consists of a rich debate of rabbinical arguments and counter-arguments. In the margins of the page are the personal commentaries of other rabbis on the central text. Studying the Talmud is to be moving constantly from the center to the margins and in so doing, to gain in understanding by confronting the various opinions expressed.



I was intrigued as to how the structure and format of the traditional Talmudic page might lend itself to modern-day interfaith dialogue. Could an analogy be made between the central text on a page of Talmud and the common ground floor in my metaphorical multi-faith house, both of them providing a solid base structure? Could the rabbinical commentaries in the margins not be considered like the individual rooms on the first floor, separate from the ground floor yet connected and accessible to all? Might there not be a new way of writing - literally - that would aid us in our house-building exercise? Why not set as a common section, at the center of a page, a text that would be jointly signed by all the multi-faith participants? Simultaneously, why not use the margins of the page to enable the signatories to refine and personalize their own specific understanding of the common text? The result would be a modern-day Talmudic page, starting jointly in the middle but gaining in complexity and diversity as it reaches the margins.

With some trepidation, I approached the Belgian newspaper La Libre Belgique to propose just such a column. The editors, while slightly dubious at first, were also curious and interested. More difficult was to find Muslim, Christian and secular leaders willing to participate in the exercise. For a Muslim, entering the religious heritage of a Jew at a time of political conflict is not obvious. For a Christian, partaking in the tradition of a book that, for centuries, the Church has banned or burned is also not easy. For a secular thinker, seeing in a religious text a possible source of wisdom is rare. Despite the difficulties, some courageous religious personalities accepted the challenge.

With such a diverse group ready to go, we decided to address the increasing and arguably dangerous rise of European nationalist ideologies. While our common text could express a shared anguish and concern for this new brand of nationalism, we certainly each needed our own space in which to redefine and elaborate our individual views.

As a rabbi, I saw in such a political reality a dangerous reminiscence of the not-so-distant past. I see in many Europeans today a temptation to identify the state, and its historical ethnic identity, as the supreme value in itself. As Jews, we know where this can lead. For my Muslim counterpart, however, the rise of dangerous nationalist ideologies was the consequence of very successful Muslim integration, which has blurred the frontiers of traditional European identity. However, threatening, the nationalism could not eclipse the bright future of Muslims in Europe, both shaping the Continent and being shaped by it. The Christian theologian among us chose to question the very notion of "borders of identity," highlighting instead the concept of "multiple identities" favored by the Church where one's religious affiliation is not a barrier to a constructive give-and-take with other cultural influences. Our secular thinker also had his own take on the issue and saw a fear of multiculturalism as a symptom of weak identity, both personal and national.

Facing our differences in the margins while still being able to write and sign a common text in the center was, for us, the way both to build our shared house, yet still retain our individual spaces. In Europe, a Jew, a Muslim, a Christian and a secular philosopher were all able to find their places. In Israel, I want to believe that the secular Jew, the religious Zionist, the Arab Israeli and the ultra-Orthodox can perhaps also meet one day on their own Talmudic page.



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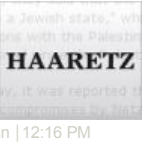
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
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