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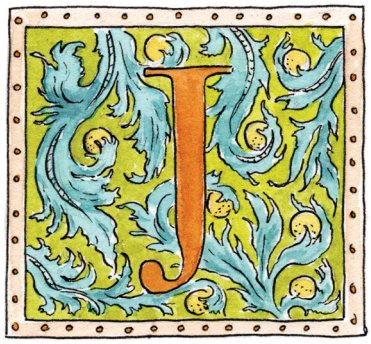
Publisher's Note

Diversity of thought is a Jewish superpower



JUDAISM has long celebrated the value of diversity, rooted in its traditions of argument, debate, and the respectful exchange of ideas. The Talmud exemplifies this ethos, presenting multiple viewpoints on complex issues, often concluding not with a definitive answer but with the acknowledgment of complexity: *kashiya* (it is difficult). This openness to diverse perspectives, epitomized by the students of Hillel who could articulate opposing views with clarity and respect, has been a cornerstone of Jewish thought for millennia.

Yet today's world seems to have lost its appreciation for diversity of thought. People isolate themselves within echo chambers, avoiding engagement with differing perspectives. Social media and technology, which hold the potential to foster connection and expose us to a wealth of diverse ideas, often amplify division instead. And disagreement quickly turns into personal animosity.

We've been here before. Thirty years ago, Haym Soloveitchik described the "rupture and reconstruction" of Judaism after the Holocaust as a lament for the loss of religious diversity. In a widely read article published under that title, he traced the roots of the dramatic changes in the Orthodox community in the 20th century. What accounted for its "swing to the right"? His conclusion was that the main culprit was "text." For most of Jewish history, one learned how to be a Jew by watching and copying what your parents and grandparents did. He called this mimetic Judaism. How to keep kosher? Hang around in the kitchen. How to prepare for Shabbat? Watch your grandparents get ready on Friday afternoon.

In the postwar period we saw an explosion of Jewish books covering all areas of Jewish law. These books often took a maximalist position that did not have the benefit of being moderated by a synagogue rabbi whose career was spent applying theoretical laws to real-world scenarios. Rabbis can be lenient, understanding, compromising. Books have a wrong way and a right way, and insist that the truth is universal. Of course, we are the People of the Book, and texts have always been part of Jewish life. But those texts were mediated by experience and by wise leaders who knew when to apply which standards.

I wonder whether we suffer from a similar problem. We also live in a culture of text. To make matters worse, our culture gives equal weight to the researched and to the asserted; to the genius and the ignoramus. We decide we understand someone's motives by reading 280 characters on X. We reach categorical, often pitiless judgments, based on remote, impersonal interactions.

We need to relearn the power of arguing with people we respect, with being fascinated by the opinions of people with whom we disagree. My teacher Rabbi Yitz Greenberg taught me that pluralism is not asserting that all ideas are true. Pluralism is an eagerness to learn

from those with other ideas, to discover new truths, to sharpen our own understanding of the truths we hold. For nearly 3,000 years, this diversity has been a Jewish superpower—a force that has enriched our traditions and strengthened our collective identity. If we take up the challenge, this can once again be one of Judaism's great contributions to the world. ✳