



EDITOR'S NOTE: WE INVITED RESPECTED WRITER AND THINKER, RABBI DOW MARMUR, TO SHARE HIS THOUGHTS ON THE CHALLENGES CULTURAL DIVERSITY PLACES ON OUR SOCIETY AND OUR SYSTEMS. IT IS OUR HOPE THAT THIS THOUGHTFUL ESSAY WILL STIMULATE DISCUSSION AMONG READERS OF EDUCATION CANADA.

FIDELITY AND FLEXIBILITY

AN ESSAY ON RELIGIOUS ADHERENCE AND PRAGMATIC ACCOMMODATION IN OUR MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

THE BIBLICAL ABRAM, LATER RENAMED ABRAHAM, TO whom the three monotheistic faiths look as their ancestor and role model, was an outsider from the very beginning of his career: "The Eternal said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (Genesis 12:1). Later God told him that "your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed for hundreds of years" (15:13). Even when he had reached the land that God promised him, he still regarded himself as a stranger. Thus at Hebron, when he needed a burial place for his wife, he said to the locals, "I am a resident alien among you" (23:4). Later generations of Israelites repeatedly had to carry the burden of being aliens and living in exile: from ancient Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia and the Persian Empire down to our time, as Jews are now dispersed virtually all over the world.

In our days the Jewish condition has become a universal phenomenon. The challenge of the Jews throughout their history has been to retain their identity, yet accommodate themselves to the conditions under which they lived. The same challenge is now facing people in many parts of the world, including Canada. What follows is an attempt to reflect on the implications of this situation with the biblical, and later Jewish, experience as a starting point.

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Biblical accommodation began already with the above-mentioned purchase of the burial place. Though, according to the text, God had given the land to Abraham, Abraham nevertheless insisted on paying for the piece of ground he wanted to buy from Ephron the Hittite "at full price" (Genesis 23:9).

The Israelites as a people were shaped by exile, the first of which was Egypt. It is at that time that Moses, now a fugitive in Midian but destined to lead his people to freedom, named his firstborn Gershom, because "I have been a stranger in a foreign land" (*Exodus* 18:3). The Book of Exodus has graphic descriptions of the hardships the slaves had to endure and the miraculous ways in which they were saved.

But despite the radical alienation, pragmatic accommodation under very difficult conditions seems to have been the order of the day even then. Thus when Pharaoh instructed the midwives under his jurisdiction that all Israelite boys were to be killed at birth, the Israelites, with two notable exceptions, dispensed with the services of the midwives. Even when God charged Moses to bring out the Israelites from Egypt, Moses negotiated with Pharaoh for permission and only used violence – the ten plagues – when nothing else worked.

The need for accommodation remained central to Jews wherever they were, from ancient Babylonia, through North Africa, medieval France and Spain, to Russia and Europe. Even when those in power allowed for Jewish self-rule, Jewish law stipulated that in any dealings with non-Jews, the law of the land must be binding. That stipulation is



EN BREF Au cours de leur histoire, les Juifs ont dû relever le défi de conserver leur identité tout en s'adaptant à leurs conditions de vie. De nombreux peuples de multiples cultures doivent maintenant gagner ce pari. Le besoin de maintenir des traditions religieuses et culturelles ne doit nullement dispenser les immigrants de chercher à concilier leurs traditions avec les conditions dans lesquelles ils vivent ou de respecter pleinement les gens ayant d'autres traditions. Dans le même ordre d'idées, présumer que les façons de faire des premiers immigrants, surtout Chrétiens, sont plus authentiques et obligatoires que celles de ceux qui sont arrivés plus tard manifeste un impérialisme injustifié et malhonnête. Plus nous continuons de rendre l'intégration implicitement ou explicitement difficile, plus il est probable que les personnes qui se sentent privées de leurs droits veuillent nous secouer, parfois violemment, en remettant en question l'ordre établi.



IN OUR DAYS THE JEWISH CONDITION HAS BECOME A UNIVERSAL PHENOMENON. THE CHALLENGE OF THE JEWS THROUGHOUT THEIR HISTORY HAS BEEN TO RETAIN THEIR IDENTITY, YET ACCOMMODATE THEMSELVES TO THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH THEY LIVED.

behind the fundamental principle in Jewish law *dina d'malkhuta dina* (the law of the governing state is the law).¹

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The experience of homelessness was reflected in biblical as well as later Jewish law in the treatment of strangers. Numerous are the passages in the Pentateuch reminding the Israelites of their responsibilities to outsiders. Thus "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (*Exodus 22:20*). As the Hebrew Scriptures became part of the Christian Bible and biblical passages were also reflected in the Koran, the implication was, and has so remained, that Christian and Muslim societies, no less than Jewish, would live by that precept. The expectation is that secularized modern states follow the same pattern.

The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who drew on Jewish tradition but did not see himself as a specifically Jewish thinker, made the idea of responsibility for the other the cornerstone of ethics, which, he argued, must take precedence over both metaphysics and ontology. His proof texts included biblical injunctions about the treatment of strangers. "I understand responsibility," he said, "as responsibility for the Other, thus the responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me."² His characterization of human existence, in modern times no less than in antiquity, manifest in justice, is founded on this affirmation.

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The above reflections are intended as a basis for consideration of contemporary relationships between those who regard themselves as strangers and others, usually men and women in power. By describing myself, with the biblical Abraham, as "a resident alien," I am signaling my determination to retain my identity. But that should in no way absolve me from seeking to reconcile it with the conditions under which I now live and which obligate me to have full regard for those who come from other traditions.

As headgear has always been an outer symbol of belonging and has become an issue in our society, this seemingly trivial example may be relevant in our context. Being a Jewish male, I may wish to show my fidelity to my tradition as I understand it by covering my head at all times. However, there is nothing in that tradition to suggest that my headgear should consist of a large fedora or fur hat that stands out in the crowd. In fact, these headgears are borrowings from East European non-Jewish culture, even if those who nowadays wear them, as well as other forms of dress, tell us that they do so in order to parade their Jewish otherness. Most of their mainstream co-religionists who are no less faithful to their religion have found ways to cover their heads in more discrete ways.

The question of Muslim women's headgear should be seen in the same context. Among the different forms in use, one – the *burka* – covers the woman's face completely. Many non-Muslims and some Muslims have reacted against it on grounds that they cannot relate to somebody who is wearing what amounts to a mask. Levinas sees the human face as the primary bond between human beings.



He writes: "Face and discourse are tied. The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse."³

When I hide my face, I am saying that I do not wish to engage in any discourse with you. In spite of what many apologists are maintaining, cultures in which women are required to hide their faces seek to exclude them. In the world in which Levinas taught and in which we live, not being able to see the face of the other prevents me from discharging my ethical responsibility and thus deprives me of being fully human.

It is difficult to believe that hiding your face in this manner is what God wants of you, if for no other reason than that there are other no less devout Muslim women who cover their heads without concealing their faces. Therefore, it may be legitimate for our society to expect the removal of all face masks, be it for religious, cultural or other reasons. Neither the burka of the Muslim woman nor the balaclava of the insurgent should have a place in our society.

More generally, Jewish and Muslim religious law (*halakha*

and *sharia* respectively) may be viewed in different ways by different groups of adherents, but all should, by definition, be sufficiently responsive to emerging conditions to be open to new interpretations, or at least to a realization that there are situations in which these laws cannot be applied. For example, divorce laws in Judaism and Islam may be different from the laws of Canada, but that cannot be sufficient grounds for the government of Canada to allow Muslims, Jews and others to unilaterally determine a citizen's marital status. The law of the land must be the only basis for such determination.

Similarly, there are strong arguments for enabling religious communities to run their own schools where adherence to and observance of the religion is so much easier. However, for the state to permit such schools, perhaps even finance them, it must insist (1) that its agreed curriculum is adhered to, (2) that the specific tradition is taught over and above, not instead of, the secular studies that the regulations demand, and (3) that nothing in these institutions contravenes Canadian law.

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Of course, the majority's challenge must never become an attack on a minority. The Jewish experience of accommodation should be seen in the context of the biblical, universal commandment to respect the stranger. My responsibility to balance my fidelity to my faith with the flexibility that my tradition affords me in dealing with the majority culture must be matched by the readiness of that culture to live by the precepts that affirm and respect the stranger. It is reasonable to assume that it was the courtesy and consideration of Ephron the Hittite that prompted Abraham to accommodate himself.

The commandment to respect the stranger is meaningless if it is to exempt the majority from its observance. In fact, it is only the stronger majority, by virtue of its power, that can fully practice it. This means in the context of Canada and other free countries that the state must give strangers maximum opportunities to retain their identity and their traditions, as long as this does not contravene the laws and the ways of the society in which they now live. There may be a case for prohibiting hiding one's face, but there can be no justification for banning headgears that, despite the stress on otherness, in no way inhibit fundamental face-to-face relationships or in other ways interfere with the social order.

This is particularly true of a country like Canada where, other than the First Nations, everybody is, if not formally a stranger, then a descendant of one. Here only malicious amnesia would allow us to ignore the biblical injunction, "You shall not oppress the stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt" (*Exodus 23:9*). The assumption that the ways of the early immigrants, mostly Christians, are more authentic and binding than the ways of later arrivals reflects an unwarranted and unseemly imperialism.

Similarly, though there is a compelling case for making sure that every resident of the country is familiar with its official languages, there can be no justification for inhibiting the learning of other tongues, especially when these – as in the case of Arabic in Islam and Hebrew in Judaism – are essential tools for the practice of religion.

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The inequalities to which immigrant communities are subjected in most host countries have prompted members of these communities to view accommodation as a sign of infidelity to the heritage in which the strangers were reared. That is why one way in which members of minority groups show disdain for the surrounding culture is to embrace extreme forms of their heritage and at times express it in violence. If no amount of accommodation on my part is going to give me equal opportunities in establishing myself in my new homeland, I am tempted to react to the seemingly unbridgeable gap by being subversive. If I suspect that you do not want to see my face under any circumstances, I might just as well hide it completely, be it by deploying a *burka*, a balaclava or some other symbol of radical otherness.

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As already mentioned, the above reflections may start with the Hebrew Bible and Jewish history, but their subject is contemporary politics, even more than education. Though the latter, based on the interplay of fidelity and flexibility as argued here, is a necessary beginning, it is not in itself sufficient – which may account for the many extremists who, though beneficiaries of a Western education, have nevertheless turned against it. For even those who have overcome difficult conditions at home, and acquired the same grades at school as others, have often been discriminated against when they came to look for jobs or housing. Some have, therefore, turned their acquired skills and knowledge against those who originally imparted them, be it by way of piety or militancy, or both.

A political order is, therefore, called for. It would allow for affirmative action on behalf of strangers as the basis for their accommodation. The more they could be made to feel at home in society, the less likely they would want to willfully separate themselves from it. As long as we make integration implicitly or explicitly difficult, at times quite impossible, the more likely will those who see themselves as disadvantaged wish to shake us up, at times violently, by challenging the existing order. Therefore, educational endeavours must go hand in hand with political steps calculated to reward accommodation and flexibility without threatening the fundamental religious commitments of individuals and groups. **I**

DOW MARMUR is Rabbi Emeritus of Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto. He is the author of six books and editor of two.

Notes

- 1 Babylonian Talmud, tractate Gittin 10b.
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, Conversations with Philippe Nemo, translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 95.
- 3 Ibid.