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Religious Intolerance: An Internal Problem?

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu
<http://attila.stevens.edu/~llevine>

When Jews hear the term “religious intolerance,” they most probably think of the oppressive actions of Christians and Moslems. Indeed, our history unfortunately is replete with acts of discrimination against us by followers of these religions. Anyone interested in getting an overview of what Christianity has done against us should read the book *Europe and the Jews: the Pressure of Christendom over 1900 Years* by Malcolm Hay. For information on how Moslems have mistreated us the reader is referred to Serge Trifkovic’s book *The Sword of the Prophet: the Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam* and *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam* by Bat Ye’or. The information contained in these books is both disturbing and disconcerting to say the least.

Most of us do not think of the term “religious intolerance” when it comes to Jews dealing with other Jews, but today this seems to be more and more the case. For example, recently the Menahel of an elementary school yeshiva wrote a letter to the Hamodia about an incident in which one of the yeshiva’s pupils was overheard saying that the rabbonim on one side of an Eruv controversy cannot learn. This Menahel expressed great concern that “our precious children’s minds are being poisoned by scorn that is being poured on *Gedolei Torah*.”

I think that the situation goes beyond *Gedolei Torah* and is not restricted to children. Today one hears all sorts of remarks and attitudes about other Jews that exemplify nothing less than religious intolerance. Certain groups of people seem to thrive on thinking and speaking negatively about others who do not conform to their particular brand of Yiddishkeit. They are completely intolerant of even minor deviations from what they consider to be proper. For example, in certain circles anyone who wears a hat with the brim down is thought of, and even at times publicly called, a “Shaigist.” The fact that he is a Shomer Torah and Mitzvoahs is completely discounted, because this individual does not adhere to the standard of wearing a hat with its brim up.

One should not make the mistake of thinking that those on the so-called “right” have a monopoly on religious intolerance. There are some who are in what is often labeled the “Modern Orthodox” camp who are just as intolerant when it comes to the issues of

Zionism and Israel. If one points out to these people that Rav Shimon Schwab, zt"l, wrote an article entitled "Zion or Zionism" (reprinted in *Selected Writings* pages 147-153), the response more often than not will be a strong condemnation of Rav Schwab. The fact that Rav Schwab had a reasoned and well thought out approach to Zionism that led him to write this article is dismissed simply because he is viewed as being anti-Zionistic. The great persona, learning and accomplishments for Yiddishkeit of Rav Schwab are dismissed out of hand.

The same is certainly true for any "right-wing" Orthodox Jew who espouses Rav Schwab's view that "truth compels us to state unequivocally that most certainly Zionism is not at all identical with Judaism, that in fact it is diametrically opposed to it." (The reader should keep in mind that we are not condoning the negative and destructive actions of those on the extreme fringe who burn flags and perform other reprehensible acts. As Rav Schwab wrote in his essay, "Let us state at the outset that we have no sympathy with certain irresponsible anonymous advertisers in the N.Y. Times who claim to speak in the name of the Torah, but in reality speak in the name of nobody.")

It is bad enough that there is uncalled for verbal disparagement of some Observant Jews by others who hold differing approaches to certain practices. However, from time to time we hear of religious intolerance that goes beyond words. It is well known that there are a number of controversies regarding the establishment of *Eruvim* in various areas of Brooklyn. As to be expected, there are those on both sides of these controversies who passionately support their respective positions. This is fine provided that those on each side respect each other and treat their "opponents" with *Derech Eretz*.

Unfortunately this is not always the case. A few weeks ago I read a report about what was termed a "spontaneous" demonstration in Williamsburg, NY in which hundreds of men opposed to the establishment of an *Eruv* there began a march after davening on Shabbos morning. Apparently it did not take long for this march to become so boisterous and rowdy that it was necessary for the police to be called. The result was that 18 Jews were arrested, fingerprinted and booked on Shabbos! In this case religious intolerance led to both Chillul Shabbos and what must be considered a major Chillul HaShem. In my opinion there is no possible justification for such actions by anyone who wants to be considered a Shomer Torah and Mitzvos.

The Observant Jewish Community is certainly in need of adherents who take their Yiddishkeit seriously and passionately. However, no matter how passionate one is about certain beliefs, his approach to others must be guided by *Derech Eretz* toward those one disagrees with. Rav Yisroel Salanter is purported to have said that the Rebono Shel Olam gave us two eyes so we could use one to see the virtues of others and the other to see our own imperfections. Today it seems that there are some who are cross-eyed. This is a great sadness, because it leads to attitudes of intolerance that are self-defeating and destructive.

We are supposed to be the Am HaShem and our actions should show the world the way to the truth. Jews and gentiles dealing with observant Jews should come away with the impression that they have dealt with people who are in some way special and that this

specialness stems from their religious commitment to the Torah. It behooves all of us (myself included) to keep this in mind in all that we do. There is certainly no place for religious intolerance if we are to fulfill this mission.