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"Conviction and Community" December 20, 1991 Rabbi Aryeh Azriel

Living in tension is not a new position for Jews. Our Bible starts with the stories of Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph, and his brothers – tensions – sometimes tragically destructive tensions. Our tradition continues with the tension between priest and prophet, Sadducees and Pharisees, Chasidim and mitnagdin, mystics and rationalists – tensions – sometimes created constructive tensions. Judaism has said that it does not have to be either/or life can be both/and. "These and these are both expressions of the living God."

Those actively involved in contemporary Jewish life know that a very unsettling question is being asked – "Is the Jewish people going to split apart?" While we kid ourselves about the fact where there are two Jews there are three opinions, and that the only thing two Jews can agree on is how much a third Jew can give to charity, when all is said and done, we Jews have been fairly harmonious people. For all of our in-fighting, we've still been one.

All too often others have reminded us that we are one. In the Holocaust, no questions were asked about the level of Jewish observance of any man, woman, or child; what synagogue they prayed in or did not pray in; how some member of their family underwent conversion or anything like that. The yellow stars bore only "Jude", and there were no qualifying adjectives. But not only have our persecutors seen us as one; in our own fundraising efforts – whether it be UJA or Jewish hospitals, orphanages or yeshivot – all Jewish people were considered fair game, potential supporters, a united community, one harmonious people.

But there is a crisis building in contemporary life. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, who has valiantly tried to reconcile some of the sharp divisions which have developed in modern Jewish life, asks to point blank, "Will there be one Jewish people in the year 2000?" Let me quickly brief you on the major aspects of this problem. It is estimated that 10,000 people a year convert to Judaism in North America, most of them under the auspices of Reform Rabbis. Because Orthodox and many Conservative rabbis don't accept our converts as Jewish, either because they don't accept our ordination or our procedures for conversion or both, many of these converts are not recognized as Jewish by portions of the community. If we proceed forward one generation to their children, you see that the number of Jews in question adds up quickly.

Now we add in the issue of patrilineal descent. Eight years ago, the Central Conference of American Rabbis publicly, officially affirmed a long-standing Reform practice that a person can be considered Jewish if born of a non-Jewish mother and a Jewish father provided that the parental commitment is to raise the child Jewishly and that the celebration of such public acts as Brit Mila, naming, consecration, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, confirmation, and marriage would be considered in lieu of formal conversion. For our Reform Movement, the criterion of Jewish identity is how the child is raised, not which parent is Jewish. The Orthodox and Conservatives hold that this Reform position will result in children who are not Jewish by their standards and thus destroy the unity of the Jewish people. Again, the numbers begin to add up rapidly; Yitz Greenberg concluded that by the year 2,000 there will

be almost a quarter of a million children of mixed marriages who will be recognized as Jewish only by the Reform Movement.

Let's turn to the area of illegitimacy, mamzerut. As most of you know, when a couple is married here, they are married under two sets of laws – America and Jewish. When I officiate at a wedding, I sermonize the marriage in the eyes of our 4,000 years old Jewish tradition and in the eyes of the State. If that marriage is dissolved, traditional Jewish law requires a Jewish divorce, a "get", in addition to the Civil divorce. Reform Judaism recognizes that Civil divorce is valid and final and does not require a "get." Therefore, while Conservative and Orthodox rabbis would not marry someone without a "get", the Jewish divorce, we Reform rabbis will. According to Jewish law, any woman who marries without a Jewish divorce is an adulteress, and her children are illegitimate. A mamzer can only marry another mamzer, and their offsprings can only marry mamzerim for ten generations. Reform Judaism does not accept these regulations, and the problem is obvious. Given the present rates of conversion and remarriage without "get" continue, then by the end of this century [only nine years away], the Orthodox will not consider one-fifth of the American Jewish population as eligible for marriage with other Jews.

Thus, there is a growing polarization in Jewish life, much of it fostered by the denominationalism of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. Some Reform Jews, feeling that nothing we do will satisfy even the most modern Orthodox, have concluded – "If nothing we do is good enough for you, then we are going to stop trying. We'll approach issues out of our own perspective, out of our own convictions, and you do the same. It's obvious we cannot do business together on some things."

Increasingly, many would deem the Conservative Movement has given up trying to accommodate the Orthodox because of the same frustration and are now beginning to address their needs more independently; the best example is the Conservative Seminary's decision to ordain women as rabbis. In the Orthodox Movement, which is much less centrally organized than Reform and Conservatism, the mood today is to build higher and thicker fences around the Torah. Any talk of reconciliation, or even considering moving toward some kind of modus vivendi, is political suicide within the Orthodox Movement today.

This problem grows out of a new challenge for us – not anti-Semitism, external oppression – but freedom. It comes from openness of the society that accepts many varied alternatives of lifestyles. For me, the greater variety of Jewish expression there is, the more chance there is that Jews will choose one of the alternatives and thus the better our chance of survival. And yet, at the same time, we have to face the reality that some of the alternatives threaten our unity even as the increase our chances of survival.

Let me give you one more painful example of what living in the most open society we Jews have ever experienced does. I have said repeatedly that inter-faith marriage is the price we pay for living in an open society and that I don't think any of us would be willing to stem the tide of inter-faith marriage by returning to a closed, self, or forced ghettoized society. Egon Mayer, author of a new sociological study entitled – "Love and Tradition" reports that of every three marriages in which a Jew is involved today, one is with a person from outside the Jewish community. Of these so-called "out" marriages, approximately 33% eventuate in conversion to Judaism of the non-Jewish partner, either in advance of or

subsequent to the marriage ceremony. In another 45%, there is not conversion by either partner, each continuing to identify himself or herself according to religion of birth. As Jews committed to the Jewish community, who want the world to be populated by Jewish grandchildren, how shall we respond to such statistics of inter-faith marriage without rejecting our sons and daughters and the partners whom they love and without turning our back on the open society in which we live?

I think our Reform Movement has been in the forefront of creatively confronting this challenge. When in 1978 Rabbi Alexander Shindler, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregation, articulated the Outreach Program, it was viewed as a radical departure. Now, years later, we have a stunning record of success which testifies that to the reality of the need. Our Movement has reached out, not only to those 33% who become Jews by choice, but to the 45% group, the inter-faith married, and has helped those non-Jewish partners to find a welcoming place, a sympathetic response in the Jewish community. In an accepting and inclusive spirit, we have encouraged them to educate and identify their children as Jews regardless of which parent is Jewish.

At Temple Israel we have every reason to be proud of our ministry to those Jews who inter-faith marries. Though not the ideal, we acknowledge inter-faith marriages as a fact of American Jewish life, as Rabbi Shindler put it – “The sting which comes with the honey of our free and open society.” Through Outreach and patrilineality we have endeavored with integrity and courage to extend a warm hand of support and understanding to such couples. In my opinion, there is absolutely no reason for Reform Jewry to consider compromising our conviction in this area.

Reform Judaism has demonstrated how to blend the rich heritage of our people with the dynamism of modern life. The outstanding example of this fusion is the manner in which Reform has led the way for women to achieve equal status in Jewish life. Our detractors predicted dire consequences; they mournfully prophesied that congregations would not accept women rabbis and cantors; they woefully forecast that women would crumble under the unpredictable demands of the rabbinate and the unremitting responsibilities of family life. Now, almost twenty years, 150 women rabbis and 70 female cantors later, nearly every Jew I meet recognizes that women have infused the Jewish liturgy with new strength. No longer are 52% of the Jewish people relegated to the synagogue balcony. Their sermons, their teaching, their counseling, their life-cycle ceremonies are every bit as good as their male counterparts. Their very presence on the pulpit of North America, Australia, Great Britain and now Israel, declares without equivocation that we practice what we preach, that every Jew is entitled to fulfill his or her potential for Jewish leadership irrespective of gender.

Women rabbis also provide valuable role models for American Jewish men and women in their twenties and thirties. Many have successfully blended a career with the Mitzvah of raising a Jewish family. Not just women rabbis, cantors, educators, and synagogue presidents, but full and equal participation of women in the synagogue and the Jewish community is a conviction no longer debatable or negotiable as far as I'm concerned.

Where then is the line between compromising our convictions and preserving the unity of the Jewish community? Where is the line for any of us between the adjective that

shapes us – Orthodox, Conservative, Reform – and the noun that defines us – Jew. None of us can pretend that ours is the only approach to Jewish life that makes sense or that insures survival. Rather we must begin to understand the historic Jewish reality with that within unity there can be diversity. More than any other ancient document, the Talmud is a record of differences. Long after Hillel and Shammai died, the schools of thought continued to oppose one another, to debate the issues of their day. The diversity is preserved with remarkable accuracy in the Talmud. The Midrash is replete with explanations of Biblical verses that literally conflict with each other, yet both are recorded and preserved. Different points of view, even institutionalized ones, are not new to Judaism. Within Jewish life there is richness which comes from allowing people to disagree and still be counted. Attempts to write those who disagree out of Jewish history have always been unsuccessful; may they continue to be unsuccessful. Ahavat Israel, the love for all Jews is our ideal. Yet polarization is a growing reality in contemporary Jewish life.

Some of you are going to be disappointed in your Rabbi today. You'd like me to neatly tie up this tension between conviction and community, to tell you how we can live our convictions as Reform Jews and at the same time maintain the unity of our world-wide Jewish community. I wish I knew how, but I don't have an easy answer or ready solution.

These are my modest suggestions. I think we need to accentuate those situations where cooperation and mutual co-existence work. The Orthodox community is not a single, monolithic structure. It has its extreme, as well as its moderate factions. Some reject us totally and will aim to exclude us from the community, but they do not represent the totality of Orthodox Jewry. There are Orthodox Jews knowing the deep convictions we hold respect us and are willing to work with us and share our common concerns. We welcome this cooperation and hope that these members and leaders of the Orthodox community will not yield to pressures of those who take an extreme, reactionist point of view. In the long run, ongoing dialogue – even when we strongly disagree – can be healthy. Separatism weakens all of us. Working for the United Jewish Fund Campaign in our community and throughout the country is significant. We must be one in our responsibility to help our brothers and sisters who depend on us. Every Jew must respond to our peoples' needs.

We need to educate ourselves and our children about the varieties of Jewish expressions, and this needs to be done respectfully and honestly. As a Reform Jew, I cannot mock the Orthodox and make fun of them, they must stop referring to our synagogue as churches and our congregants as "goyin".

We must strengthen non-Orthodox Jewish religious life in Israel. We can do it best through ARZA. There needs to be a viable option to Orthodoxy for Israelis, and that option should not just be secular Judaism. If we believe that there is religious meaning to being a Jew, then we must provide that option for our Israeli brothers and sisters and help support it. Judaism is an evolving religion which flourishes best in a climate of openness, cooperation and understanding, an atmosphere of personal freedom and communal consent, rather than through the imposition of state authority. We believe that the power of the state should not be used to legislate the religious issues or to enforce and police religious observance. No movement has a monopoly on battling the ravages of indifference, assimilation, and

ignorance. Conflicts within our communities can be resolved only with a willingness to listen to and understand one another.

Finally, we Reform Jews need to stop romanticizing about traditional Judaism and feeling that we are somehow inauthentic and illegitimate. We Reform Jews are in the spirit of normative Judaism throughout the ages. The prophets were reformers, the Pharisees were reformers, even the Chasidim were reformers. We are bonafide Jews and our Movement is Kosher. We need not apologize for our modifications of Jewish tradition as long as they are made sincerely and not just for convenience, as long as reforms are made with the intention of preserving Judaism and the essence of Jewish life. If we change just to change or to assimilate, we deserve to be criticized. But when we make changes because they are expressions of our convictions about the essentials of Judaism, we need apologize to no one.

The time has come to stop name-calling and finger-pointing and labeling. All of us are Jews. All of us are committed to the survival of the Jewish people. All of us believe the world is a better place because there are Jews. There is so much that binds us together. We must bind ourselves together more and more strongly if we are to survive the diversity that continues to increase. It's not by changing who we are but being more of what we are – Jews – that we will keep ourselves together.

I conclude with a poignant story which summarizes my feelings about how to live with the tension between conviction and community. An elderly Jewish lady moved from the Bronx to Miami Beach to spend her last years in comfort. She was a religious lady and so, when the holidays arrived, she found herself in a beautiful Shul, but somewhat lonesome. She did not know a soul there. At the conclusion of services when family turned to family and friend turned to friend to wish each a good year, she felt alone; she had no one to greet and no one greeted her. So, our dear little old lady waited for everyone to leave and then stood in front of the Holy Ark. And she thought, "I know, I will wish God a Shana Tava, a good year."

Then she said out loud, "What can I really wish for God? Can I wish – May You be inscribed for a good year, year of life? All life comes from God. God is the author of life. I cannot wish God good health; God is the master physician. I cannot wish for God Parnasah, that God should have a year of sustenance; God is the source of all sustenance."

Then a bright idea came to her and she cried out with all her heart, "O God, this I wish you for the new year – may you have nachas from all your children." This, my friends, is what I hope and pray – that God will have nachas from all our people, one people living Jewish lives with conviction and harmony. Amen.