

NOT IN HEAVEN

There is the Talmudic story of an angry debate between Rabbi Eliezer's faction and Rabbi Joshua's faction. Rabbi Eliezer said: "If the law is according to my view, let the walls of this House of Study prove it." The walls then started to cave in and were at the point of falling. Rabbi Joshua quickly turned to the walls and said: "If students of the Torah are arguing a point of law, why don't you keep out of it?" The justice of that rebuke was acknowledged. Out of respect for Rabbi Joshua, the walls did not fall; and out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer, they did not become erect, but remained aslant.

That is a recurrent Talmudic story theme, with rich layers of significance. For one thing, it referred to the limitations of the Bath Kol, the supernatural communication of God's will as it often seemed to be heard or seen by man, especially after the age of the prophets. It was sometimes taken into account, but often rejected as a final judgement. Later in the debate, when Rabbi Eliezer brought into evidence another Bath Kol ("daughter of a voice") in his favor, Rabbi Joshua rejected it, quoting from Deuteronomy: "It is not in heaven."

The new year is hard upon us, and it will be a tough year for Jewish public affairs. The American Jewish community will have to deal with an American policy on the Middle East which gets more and more complicated and ambiguous -- as does American policy on the Soviet Union and Soviet Jewry, e.g., how do we use the Olympics issue not just to "get Russia," but to get the greatest advantage for Soviet Jewry? The community will also have to deal with thorny questions of school vouchers, evangelistic thrusts and affirmative action.

It is axiomatic that we will be effective on these issues to the extent that we remain a community. But how will "community decisions" be made without becoming victim to a secular Bath Kol, as pronounced by some individual leader, or by some single group who say that they have been given the only proper zeal or correct vision on any given issue?

The walls of Rabbi Joseph and Rabbi Eliezer remained standing but aslant. That was the image of compromise; a reminder that no one has a full-nelson on the truth. That is an eminently Jewish perception. The Talmudic story instructs us that in interpretive matters, reason must prevail -- as arrived at by the engagement of many different minds. There is another name for that: democracy; not the democracy of a mob exhorting to instant action by a demagogue, but representative democracy as assayed in the United States and Israel.

It is not that easy in a voluntary community. The renowned European Kehillot of the 16th through 18th centuries had their own system. Typically the voters -- those who made their financial contributions to the Jewish community -- elected a selection committee of five to seven. The selection committee would then appoint four to ten Parnassim or Wardens, normally drawn from the upper tax brackets, who then substantially made the policy decisions.

American Jewry comprises an even more voluntary community than its medieval ancestors. But about 60 per cent of American Jewish households belong to one or more of many dozen different Jewish organizations. Adding those who do not belong to organizations but belong to congregations or Jewish Welfare Federations, at least two thirds of the American Jewish community are affiliated. That figure is a little higher in San Francisco.

If the people elected by their memberships to leadership in all these organizations, congregations and Welfare Funds come together to represent the general temperament and mind-set of the members who elected them, then we have as close a mechanism for composite reasoning, for representative democracy, as a voluntary community can get.

In the last thirty years, the American Jewish community has been establishing and attempting to strengthen just such mechanisms -- nationally in such a forum as the NJCRAC, locally in such forums as community relations councils. No one has to abide by any of their composite decisions. But, on the other hand, if any single leader or any single group, without the benefit of composite reasoning, says it has the only correct vision on a Jewish issue, we might remember to apply the admonition of Rabbi Joshua: "It is not in heaven."