

Rabbis who Ban

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

People have every right to decide what they will read and what not. What or to whom they will listen or not. They also have the right to try to dissuade people from what they consider to be undesirable events and occasions. But the one thing that annoys me intensely, and I think is absolutely futile, is to try to censor or to ban. As the Bible says, "Stolen water tastes sweet and bread eaten in secret tastes better." Banning something tends to make it more attractive, not less.

Once again, a Chief Rabbi has issued a ban on going to a Limmud conference. This time, it is in South Africa. Interesting how such bans have tended to be in communities of the late unlamented British Empire! Where centralized authority was and still is the norm. And the cultural atmosphere was always one that tended towards conformity and obedience rather than encouraging difference and disagreement.

The previous Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Rabbi Sacks, issued such a ban on attending Limmud to the rabbis under his control. Given his otherwise open minded and tolerant approach, one wonders what malevolent pressure was brought to bear on him that he capitulated on this instead of standing up for freedom of thought and expression. His successor, Rabbi Mirvis (of South African stock ironically), had the courage to lift the ban.

There are always going to be speakers from across the spectrum of Jewish life, some of whom you might disagree with or even condemn. Does anyone believe they will magically disappear, or their voices will be silenced, if you refuse to allow your flock to hear them? Or give them the choice to see them? Is everyone so incapable of making up their own minds?

Surely Orthodox, Charedi or whatever kind of traditional Judaism you choose should be able to stand on its own merit. It should have enough confidence in the power of its own message to focus on that rather than on attacking other variations or denominations. As for not even meeting them, what could be more divisive in our small, beleaguered religion? It is a sign of weakness if you have to defend your position by trying to shut out other narratives.

For hundreds of years, the Catholic Church had a list of forbidden books (it is referred to by its short name, the Index). They often burnt books they did

not approve of including the Talmud. But they came to realize what an ineffective and self-destructive weapon it was.

But let us consider the dreaded evil that Limmud presents to the innocent vulnerable minds of World Jewry.

It was founded in the UK by a group of young, orthodox Jewish Studies teachers in 1980. They had been to an educational conference in the USA called CAJE and were so impressed by the range of teachers, ideas and teaching methods that they came back to England determined to do something similar in the UK. Initially it was entirely run on a voluntary basis and is still largely amateur. One of its founders taught at Carmel College. Another was a former pupil and some of the earliest conferences of Limmud were held at Carmel College.

Over time, it has grown exponentially into a veritable festival of Jewish religious, artistic, musical and political ideas with hundreds of presenters on everything from Jewish cooking and dance to the whole panoply of different religious points of view, Jewish life and culture. Thousands of people are attracted to its annual conference in the UK. And just as many to the local and international conferences around the Jewish globe. It is an amazing achievement – both in organization and the range of age groups it caters for. It is one of the great Jewish innovations of the past 50 years.

So, why the opposition? Because there is a vein running through Orthodoxy called the ostrich mentality. If you don't like something bury your head in the sand, pretend it isn't there and if that doesn't work, ban it! As if *rachmona litzlan*, "Lord deliver us," (a phrase Chief Rabbis love), a pure innocent orthodox rabbi might be converted to heresy or seduced or brainwashed by a reform clergyman or woman.

It is the same mentality that says, "do not engage with people from other religions". "We can't recognize them," goes the refrain. They may corrupt you, or worse, convert you. As if they will disappear if you don't engage! Such an attitude might have been justified under Christian and Muslim oppression of the Jews and their desperate and often violent attempts to force Jews to convert. But in this day and age, this is simply not the danger it was. Even the Catholic Church has now declared it is against its principles to try to actively convert Jews.

In New York, the Jewish Community Center holds an annual *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* where over three thousand Jews of all flavors attend. Speakers range

from Charedi, Chasidic, Orthodox right across the Jewish religious spectrum to as far left as you can get. You are free to choose. No one forces anyone. No one is sat down in a straight-jacket and force-fed any heresy. There are also completely secular Jews coming to watch Jewish movies, taste Israeli wine, attend poetry reading and drama. Or just coming to drink, eat cheesecake and blintzes and mix. And perhaps (Lord deliver us) hook up with someone and actually celebrate Shavuot instead of going to a night club or a den of vice.

How come the US Jewry can do this and not collapse? But in the old British Empire they cannot?

Once upon a time, I could understand. Orthodoxy was a beleaguered minority interest in the Diaspora. It hung on by a thread in danger of disappearing. It was revived by a post war generation of very Orthodox remnants from Central and Eastern Europe and the benefits of social welfare and political support in Israel. Nowadays, hundreds of thousands of young men and women from Israel and the Diaspora study in religious institutions each year. And hundreds of thousands sit learning Torah instead of going to the army in Israel. Wherever you look Orthodoxy is booming, expanding and thriving (and I am fully aware that some drop out on the way). So, what the heck are they scared of?

Censorship and banning just makes a monkey of those who try to ban. Remember how they tried to ban the internet and have manifestly lost the battle? The answer is to educate. Not ban. They look foolish and insecure. King Canutes trying to hold back the waves. Orthodox Judaism will survive because of its passion, its commitment, its beauty and majesty and intellectual grandeur (despite often shooting itself in the foot) – not by being petty and defensive.

There is an important obligation of *Ahavat Yisrael*, loving one's fellow Jew. It does not mean only those who share your same, exact views. We need to welcome others, not ban them.