

There is No Story Here

By Brad Hirschfield

Recently, I was contacted by a Jewish writer from the Religion News Service, which provides newspapers across the country with articles of interest about the American religious landscape. She called me because she wanted to interview an "Orthodox practicing rabbi" about Joe Lieberman's pro-choice voting record and about how it squared with his Jewishness. "Are not the two in serious conflict?" she asked me. "Isn't that the position of Jewish law?"

I responded by telling her that, generally speaking, the mother's life takes precedence over the life of the child in halakha, but that life is seen as a gift and, like all gifts, it evokes obligations. The issue at hand is not pro-life versus anti-life, pro-choice versus anti-choice. I wanted her to understand that it simply was not a matter of either/or, but a matter of when, how, and under what circumstances. I knew that she wanted me to render an unequivocal halakhic decision, but I reminded her that halakha is not simply law in the American sense of the word -- it is quite literally the Jewish way, which is as complex and multifaceted as its name implies. While Jewish tradition is always on the side of life, it also realizes that when it comes to the question of abortion, many lives are affected.

I also pointed out that the media's treatment of the abortion question as a "religious issue" -- as if the religious public were concerned with this issue alone -- was a gross distortion. Women's health is a religious issue, the dignity of children is a religious issue, education is a religious issue and, for Jews, so too is the need to resist offering one-sided and ham-handed policy pronouncements.

After a long pause, she told me that there was probably no story here. "Without a conflict, there is no story," she said. As if plotting her next move, she informed me that perhaps she could still "save" the story if she could find a spokesman for an ultra-Orthodox group that opposed abortion and would go on the record to oppose Lieberman's pro-abortion record as contrary to "the Jewish view." While I told her that I could not comment on what they might say or might not say, I let her know that I hoped she would tell her overwhelmingly non-Jewish readership that "the Jewish view" she was presenting to them represented the opinion of no more than about 3% of Jews. My point was not to suggest that this minority opinion was somehow illegitimate, but rather that she should not represent it as if it were the only Jewish position.

"There is probably no story here." -- I am still astonished by the reporter's saying this to me. What a comment on our American public culture and on what counts as newsworthy. Have we reached the point where complex moral and social questions must always be reduced to an overly and simplistically dichotomized conflict? What kind of national conversation can we have when even our best journalists feel they must conform to this approach or else they "have no story"?

Instead of feeding this culture of polarization, they should be endeavoring to reshape it and to build in the correctives that would elevate the quality of our public debates about important issues.

Hanging in the balance is not American culture alone, but Jewish culture as well. Every time that we surrender to the tacit imperative to polarize and simplistically simplify, we are impoverishing Jewish culture and betraying our own richly complex tradition. There was a time when we resisted this temptation to reduce meaningful complexity and shun real moral ambiguity. We possess a record of the public culture that hails from that extraordinary period in Jewish public life. The record of this extraordinary conversation is called the Talmud. Now we have the opportunity to recreate our Jewish public culture and to influence the shape of the wider American public culture in which we also participate. Let us look to the Talmud for inspiration as we proceed, so that we might produce a public culture that respects the world's complexity and the rich multiplicity of opinions that pertain to any given issue. Our power and influence give us both the opportunity and the obligation to endeavor on behalf of this Talmudization of American public culture. May we make the most of this opportunity.