

Harmonious Heteroglossia: Laura E. Adkins in Conversation

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What opinions in the Jewish conversation are valid? Who gets a voice? Laura E. Adkins is the opinions editor for the *Jewish Telegraph Agency*, an international news agency, and serves as a gatekeeper of sorts of Jewish opinions. In her conversation with 18Forty, she spoke about her willingness to consider opinions different from her own, and the curiosity that drives her openness to differing people.

To contextualize the broader significance of Laura's role and her thoughts on the many voices of the Jewish tradition, we turn to the Jewish history of multivocality. To better understand 2020, we have to look at 70 C.E., at Yavneh, the ancient Jewish city of learning, where this tradition began.

In the aftermath of the destruction of the second *Beit HaMikdash*, the sages escaped Jerusalem to Yavneh, and built the Oral Torah as we know it. It was in Yavneh that the Mishnah was organized, and it was in Yavneh that the great Jewish project of multivocality emerged. Professor Shaye J.D. Cohen, in an [article](#) on the Yavneh tradition, writes that in Yavneh there occurred:

The creation of a society which tolerates disputes without producing sects. **For the first time Jews “agreed to disagree.”** The major literary monument created by the Yavneans and their successors testifies to this innovation. No previous Jewish work looks like the Mishnah because no previous Jewish work, neither biblical nor post-biblical, neither Hebrew nor Greek, neither Palestinian nor diasporan, attributes conflicting legal and exegetical opinions to named individuals who, in spite of their differences, belong to the same fraternity.

The great *Beit Midrash* tradition of Torah learning, in which dissent is invited and disagreement cultivated was birthed in the post-destruction haven of Yavneh, as Cohen writes:

The dominant ethic here is not exclusivity but elasticity. The goal was not the triumph over other sects but the elimination of the need for sectarianism itself. As one tannaitic midrash remarks, “Lo Titgodedu” [Deut. 14:1]. Do not make separate factions (jagudot) but make one faction all together.” The destruction of the temple provided the impetus for this process: it warned the Jews of the dangers of internal divisiveness and it removed one of the major focal points of Jewish sectarianism.

In the kind of beautiful irony that history occasionally grants us, the Yavneh model itself has been the focal point of sustained [debate](#), as scholars and thinkers since have questioned exactly how elastic the ethic of Yavneh was – after all, even the Mishnah developed in Yavneh categorizes some beliefs as *minut* (heresy)! Surely the *Beit Midrash* was not *that* open! Yavneh is often thought about in terms of a different gathering in a parallel context – the synods of Nicaea, in which the early Catholic Church determined the more rigid boundaries to its dogma. The relationship between Yavneh and Nicaea – multivocality and univocality – is a deep and rich area for thinking about the boundaries of discourse.

This is no abstract historical question, but a deeply contemporary one: what are the boundaries for opinions? Does the Jewish tradition value all opinions, or does the rabbinic appreciation for multiple voices have limits? Should opinions be cancelled? For some,

Yavneh is a model for the limits of a multi-voiced discourse, and indicates that the ‘cancelling’ of some opinions is in fact necessary for a community of ideas. For others, Yavneh is a model for the need for an elastic dialogue with ideas, for allowing all ideas a place, and to ensure that ideas don’t ossify into sectarianism.

Consider this beautiful word: heteroglossia. From *hetero*: different, and *glossia*: Tongue, language, heteroglossia refers to the coexistence of multiple voices or styles in one work. In language, it refers to the coexistence of multiple language varieties within a single language. The poet Gerald Bruns uses this beautiful word in discussing Yavneh:

From a transcendental standpoint, this [rabbinic] theory of authority is paradoxical because it is seen to hang on the **heteroglossia of dialogue**, on speaking with many voices, rather than on the logical principle of univocity, or speaking with one mind. Instead, the idea of speaking with one mind ... is explicitly rejected; single-mindedness produces factionalism.

The many voices in the Jewish tradition can be understood as the heteroglossia of dialogue. This many-voiced beauty is alive and vibrant today, as the *beit midrash* of the internet has created opportunities for and challenges to society’s ability to tolerate dissenting viewpoints. Laura E. Adkins is at the front lines of this discussion. As a gatekeeper of multivocality, Laura decides who gets an opinion. What opinions and whose voices should be tolerated and magnified and which don’t deserve a place in the national conversation?

In her discussion with 18Forty, Laura discusses how she maintains her centeredness in a multivocal society, and how she has learned to appreciate the many voices, the heteroglossia, with curiosity:

Dovid Bashevkin: You are the opinion editor at the *JTA*. You are navigating so many opinions from personalities and ideas that do not cohere with one another, they contradict. A lot of the contributors and people who you choose to publish, they probably couldn't even be in the same room with one another. They really, really disagree on fundamental issues. How do you keep your own centeredness in your Jewish values when you're negotiating with so many contradictory and oftentimes mutually exclusive opinions on issues related to Jewish life and the Jewish people?

Laura E. Adkins: First of all, I would push back about the idea that people can't be in a room together. I actually think the more we force people into rooms together, the more we see one another's humanity. It's very easy to tear down a straw man, or a steel man, or this idea in our heads of the Trump supporter, or the Hillary supporter, or the Orthodox Jew, or the settler, or the Israeli, or insert your preferred bogeyman. But when we're actually forced to engage with one another, both the ideas of one another and actual people behind those ideas, it makes it a lot harder to be blustery. I almost think of it in my head sometimes as pulling together the same way I would plan a Shabbat meal. With a Shabbat meal...we're having dinner together, we're going to be civil to a certain extent, we're going to eat and have a lot of fun.

The standards for the opinion section, I think, are, you have to be interesting, you have to be reasonable, and you have to be offering a novel idea. It doesn't threaten my Orthodoxy to run a piece challenging fundamentals of Orthodoxy. In many ways, my personal views are irrelevant except in so much as they shape my understanding of the topics that people are trying to explain. **I don't think objectivity is real for opinion writers, and I think that drawing out the writer's lived experience is actually helpful. Maya Angelou, the wonderful poet, once said, "People don't remember what you said, they remember how you made them feel." I think that's certainly true in opinion pieces.**

This heteroglossia is not always harmonious, but Laura believes that we must be real about the challenges of religious life, and find meaning from within this messiness:

Laura E. Adkins: Look, I think it's important to be real about the challenges. I think there are a lot of challenges, and I think to shorten it, I think what I draw strength from is the fact that humans are human and God is transcendent. We can acknowledge that Jews are human, and fallible, and also tap into all the good things that Judaism has to offer...I think just being honest with yourself about the realities of things and not putting people on pedestals is really helpful for when they fall...

Something that I've seen I think within the last few decades in the Orthodox community, this idolization of rabbis, people having pictures of rebbes in their living room. I have a very complicated feeling about it because, on the one hand, a lot of these people did amazing things, and on the other hand, if your relationship to Judaism is contingent upon the actions of man, that's... Man is fallible. I'm looking now at my picture of several *rebbeim* that I have on my *sefarim* shelf, but it's a picture from the Talmudic story of the rabbis who went out into *Gan Eden*, and one died, one went crazy, one became a heretic, and Rabbi Akiva was saved because he kept in mind: "What can I bring back to the real world to help other Jews elevate themselves?"

I think a lot of people, if you said you have an opportunity to go to *Gan Eden*, they would just say, "Amazing, enjoy it, have fun, just soak in paradise." But I think in that same way that really grounding oneself to the reality of, "Life is not *Gan Eden*, and we have to bring back the wealth from our tradition because life is real, life is not *Gan Eden*." And if you keep that in mind when you're tapping into our tradition, that you are going to meet real life challenges...

I recently did an in-depth study – or an in-depth class – through Nishmat, of the book of *Iyov*, with someone who had lost a son in a terrorist attack. And for a lot of people that would shake their faith to the core, but I was so moved by Rabbanit Henkin's ability to engage with the messiness and the deep dark incomprehensibility of this world, but not lose faith...I think I draw strength from just keeping in mind that real life is not paradise, and being Orthodox does not mean you're not going to have significant real challenges.

Engaging with the complexity, and finding meaning and beauty within struggle – what better way to enter the new year. Laura discusses her role in this national conversation with purpose and sensitivity, and brings to 18Forty her balanced and honest perspective. Laura's curiosity and humility are lessons for all denizens of the 21st century – how do we engage with viewpoints with which we disagree? With humble curiosity and a desire to learn.

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