

Of late, considerable soul-searching has taken place within the Orthodox community with respect to its relationship to the overall community. The following series of four articles addresses itself from different points of view to various facets of this problem. Rabbi Spero, the author of the first article in this series, is Rabbi of the Young Israel of Cleveland and a frequent contributor to TRADITION and other journals.

ORTHODOXY VIS À VIS THE GENERAL COMMUNITY

DOES PARTICIPATION IMPLY RECOGNITION?

The question as to the proper way for our Orthodox leadership to relate to our Reform and Conservative brethren continues to vex and perplex us. While the type-face grows bolder and the tones shriller and while some of the most intelligent people have already delivered themselves of "definitive" statements or have declared that "the issue has been decided," nevertheless there has been a signal failure to isolate and analyze the central issues and bring the discussion to bear upon them. Much precious time has been lost tossing back and forth all sorts of names such as "fundamentalist," "separatist," "dissidents," "ultra-Orthodox" and "neo-Orthodox" which clarifies nothing and gains no points for either side. Similarly the use of persuasive definitions involving the making of bogus distinctions such as between "Rabbi" and "Harav" and "spiritual leaders" or between "Yeshiva" and "Orthodox Seminary" may be emotionally satisfying but is intellectually sterile.

Spokesmen for both camps have made certain assumptions and then have proceeded to hurl verbal brickbats with impeccable logic but questionable effect upon those who clearly do not accept the assumptions. If we are to make any headway in that process or intellectual cross-fertilization, which is what in-

Orthodoxy vis à vis the General Community

telligent discussion should be, then we must examine with greater care some of these crucial assumptions.

The following observations are offered, not as a "position paper" nor as a final word but merely as the beginning of an attempt to bring the discussion back to what is clearly the main track and hopefully to evoke such responses as will lead to better understanding and, who knows, perhaps ultimate agreement.

While the original *Pesak Din* prohibiting membership in the Synagogue Council of America and the New York Board of Rabbis did not offer any reasons for the ruling,¹ all subsequent writing purporting to explicate, clarify and defend that ruling give central prominence to the claim that participation of Orthodox Jewish leaders in the Synagogue Council of America constitutes recognition or implies recognition that Reform and Conservative Rabbis are religious leaders within Judaism. This would be wrong, the argument continues, because Torah Judaism cannot countenance the recognition of any viewpoint or adherent of any viewpoint which deviates from any of its basic tenets such as *Torah min Hashamayim* (divine Revelation of the Torah). It seems clear that all parties to the dispute agree on this latter point. Torah, in regard to its basic principles, is absolutist and cannot adopt a relativism which would accept the "three wings of Judaism" in any sense as equally valid. However, what is at issue is the first point which equates participation with recognition. Does participation in a group like the Synagogue Council of America mean or imply recognition of their Reform and Conservative components? Before we can offer a reply to this question we must understand its asserted content and this is by no means clear.

In general when we refer to the meaning or significance of a sentence, three kinds of meaning can be differentiated: (1) *What* is being said (2) *Why* it is being said (3) The *effect* of what is said upon the listener.

By "what is being said" we have reference to the cognitive content or semantic meaning of the statement. If, therefore, we wish to discover the meaning or implications of a sentence or description in this sense, we must consult dictionaries, observe ordinary usage and appeal to the linguistic conventions

and logic of the language involved. Thus, to assert, "The King of France is bald" is to imply that there *is* a king of France. To state, "That act is morally wrong" is to imply that *every* similar person in similar circumstances would have been wrong to commit that act. To say, "He ought to have done otherwise," implies that he was *able to do* otherwise. These are all examples of one proposition logically implying another.

In the case under consideration, an Orthodox Rabbi joins a Board which includes Reform and Conservative Rabbis as well. Does a set of sentences describing his action imply recognition of the Liberal Rabbis in the Board? Here we must ask for a clarification of the meaning of "recognition." He most certainly may be said to recognize their *existence*. If our Rabbi admitted membership in such a Board and then denied the existence of Reform or Conservative Rabbis, he would be guilty of a self-contradiction. But surely no one denies the *existence* of Reform and Conservative Rabbis! But has our participant in such a general Board logically committed himself to an affirmation of the *legitimacy* of Reform and Conservative Rabbis? It is difficult to see that he has. In much of the discussion on this question there has been a constant blurring of what are two clearly defined levels of discourse. From my point of view as a committed Torah Jew there is only one legitimate version of Judaism and the others are perversions. But from the point of view of an outsider, let us say a non-Jewish sociologist, it surely must be granted that it is correct to say of the American Jewish Community that there are "three wings of Judaism." This is a value-free description, not an evaluative judgment. Very often we have to adopt this objective mode of discourse.

It must be obvious to all that the Synagogue Council of America is not the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. It is an umbrella institution of a type which by its very nature declares participation therein to be neutral to the issues which divide its constituents much the same way as sitting in the Knesset does not imply acceptance of Mapai ideology nor sitting in the United Nations constitute endorsement of Communism as a form of government. It is difficult to see how participation logically implies the recognition of the legitimacy of the other groups any more

Orthodoxy vis à vis the General Community

than would an *ad hoc* meeting of the same Rabbis to discuss some neutral problem which presumably the *Pesak* does not prohibit.

It has been argued, "When the non-Torah President of the Council speaks, he is then the voice of religion for Orthodox participants in the Council." Here again is a confusion between two levels of discourse. If, for example, the President of the Council protests the treatment of Jews in Soviet Russia in the name of the three wings of Judaism, then he is merely reporting, no more and no less than a newspaper correspondent, that as a matter of fact, Orthodoxy (which we are convinced is legitimate) and Reform and Conservative Judaism (which we are convinced are perversions but which nevertheless exist) are in agreement on this issue. The very "logic" of such a position as Council President dictates that he is a "voice" exclusively in the area in which the Council permits him to report.

Two actual incidents come to mind which in the judgment of the writer illustrate correct and incorrect uses respectively of this notion of recognition. When Dov Gruner refused to appeal to the mercy of the court because such an action would imply recognition of the legitimacy of the British occupation of Palestine he was logically correct. In terms of our own case, an equivalent would be if Orthodox Rabbis were to accept the *Ketubah* of Conservative Rabbis. It would certainly be recognition of their halakhic competence and hence legitimacy. But when an Arab diplomat recently refused to appear on the same TV panel discussion with an Israeli spokesman on the grounds that such an appearance implied recognition of the legitimacy of the existence of the State of Israel, we simply had another instance of Arab xenophobia.

If instead we seek the significance of a statement in "why it is being said" or the meaning of an act in the intention of its agent, then here again in reference to the action in question, we fail to find any implications of recognition. For it is quite clear from the avowed declarations of the Orthodox participants in the Synagogue Council that it is not their intention to recognize the legitimacy of Reform and Conservative Rabbis.

But perhaps by the statement, "Participation implies recogni-

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

tion" is meant not logical implication but a causal relationship of a psychological nature. Thus while the participation by an Orthodox Rabbi does not logically imply any recognition of legitimacy, others may psychologically be moved to conclude from this action that Orthodoxy is now recognizing the legitimacy of these versions of Judaism. If this is the claim then we must note immediately that it has now become an empirical claim which is open to factual verification or falsification. Indeed he who makes the assertion must furnish evidence that people would in fact so construe the action or that it would have such an effect, for it is far from self-evident that it would. It would be instructive for someone to make a study of a sampling of Orthodox Synagogues in large, middle size and small communities to determine the effects of Orthodox participation in the Synagogue Council of America over the past eleven years. Then we would have a valid basis for drawing conclusions. It seems somewhat dubious to base one's views merely on the reaction of the religious editor of the *New York Times* to the Synagogue Council of America Dinner or on any other subjective impressions.

Putting this aside for the moment, let us ask — who are the people upon whom we fear participation will have this undesirable effect? If it is the people in our own camp, or anyone else interested in our viewpoint, then surely, since it is not our intention to recognize the legitimacy of Conservative and Reform Rabbis, we can easily counteract any misconceptions by forthright periodic statements of our true position. On the other hand if we are concerned about the Jews who are already affiliated with Reform and Conservative Synagogues, then it becomes highly questionable whether our supposed recognition or non-recognition will have any significance for them.

If we were to become clear on this point we would be able to see the childishness of attempts to withhold the title of Rabbi from Conservative and Reform religious leaders. It is childish because it is in bad taste and tactically either unnecessary or ineffective. The people in the other camp couldn't care less and for the people in our camp, it is sufficient to indicate the distinction by saying *Conservative* Rabbi or *Reform* Rabbi. Interest-

Orthodoxy vis à vis the General Community

ingly enough Scripture does not withhold the title *navi* (prophet) from the *neviei ha-Baal* (prophets of the Baal).

There seems to have developed a rather curious notion on the part of many people, born no doubt of a desire for caution and a fear of error, which would require that every statement that one utters and every move that one makes, be true and make sense not only in context but constitute a fully qualified, complete "position statement" impervious to any misconceptions. Such a program if carried out would be as intellectually stultifying as it is unnecessary. No intelligent person will attempt to infer the total beliefs or convictions of a person or movement on the basis of a single utterance or single move, particularly if that person has expressed himself elsewhere and if he is around to be questioned for further information. Our Rabbis long ago taught us the proper attitude to have towards this problem, an attitude which is compounded out of contempt for the willful misinterpreter on the one hand and confidence in the intelligence and sophistication of our people, on the other. Say what you have to say —² "he who wants to err will err."

We live today in an open society. Our people are well aware of the existence of Reform and Conservative Judaism. To be Orthodox today *means* that one has consciously opted for Orthodoxy and rejected the deviationist. (If it doesn't mean that then I'm afraid nothing will help us.) If a layman finds the participation of his Orthodox Rabbi in the New York Board of Rabbis confusing, let him ask his Rabbi for clarification. This is no heavier burden to impose upon an Orthodox layman than any of the other manifold *she'ailot* for which he must seek guidance in our complex and rapidly changing world. It is far from obvious that this problem constitutes some sort of tremendous, overwhelming danger for Orthodoxy. Those who claim that it does will have to do more than simply assume that it does and insinuate that anyone who doesn't agree is not God-fearing.

There is yet another issue which plays an important role in this controversy but which has so far escaped careful scrutiny. How is one to regard Reform and Conservative Rabbis?

Has one fully exhausted the subject by noting that they are by the standards of Tradition *Apikorsim*, *Mumrim*, *Maisitim*?!

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

Is this all that can be said? Shall we attribute no relevance to the distinction that can be drawn between the classic Apikoros who denies certain fundamentals, is militant in his skepticism and rigid in his disbelief and the many Conservative and Reform Rabbis today whose problem seems to be that they cannot bring themselves to complete faith because of some ingrained rationalistic bias but who struggle with their problem and are open to new insights that can lead to greater commitment. There have been sufficient shifts and changes in Reform and Conservative theology and practice over the past decades to give unmistakable evidence of their flexibility.

As I have indicated elsewhere, the present state of philosophy generally is such as to give no special warrant or abetment to the tenets of Liberal Judaism.³ The major intellectual challenges of our day are along lines that threaten all religious positions — the Liberal no less than the Orthodox; the Orthodox no more than the Liberal. Once one is able to take up a stand anywhere within the Jewish religious spectrum, movement upwards towards greater commitment is philosophically less difficult than was arriving at the original position. These considerations already constitute a *prima facie* difference between these groups of our own day and the Karaites and Sadducees.

Why should we not combine these observed differences with the great principle enunciated by Maimonides that those of our brethren who were educated in the ways of disbelief, although they are later brought into contact with Torah Judaism, are nevertheless not to be considered Apikorsim and “are to be drawn with peaceful words.”⁴ We see that Maimonides considered decisive not the ways in which these second generation heretics were the same as their fathers but the ways in which they differed. Can we be any less sensitive to the profound complexities involved in the mechanisms of skepticism, than was the Chazon Ish who wrote concerning the heretics and sinners of our day that we have no right to hate them inasmuch as this is permissible only after they have rejected rebuke and today the giving of rebuke has become a lost art. In explaining why a law prescribing physical violence against sinners does not apply today, the Chazon Ish states that in those periods when

Orthodoxy vis à vis the General Community

Providence was manifest, this approach had positive results but today when the divine Presence is hidden, the implementation of such a policy would have negative consequences.⁵ This law, therefore, does not apply. In this ruling there is a profound principle. Policies in regard to our errant brethren are to be constantly reviewed and re-evaluated against the reaction they might generate. A clear and explicit principle of physical force is declared by the Chazon Ish to be inoperative today because changed conditions render the anticipated results highly improbable. Does this not suggest that in connection with our problem we are obliged by Torah considerations to determine empirically in the most rigorous and thorough manner available, whether a policy of boycotting institutions such as the Synagogue Council of America will result in improvement or further deterioration? In matters such as this, opinions cannot be formed by *a priori* considerations alone.

It would also appear that the precise role of the Liberal Rabbi in the American Jewish Community today is open to some question. Is he primarily the bellwether who leads his flock away from authentic Judaism into error or is he largely the creation of a certain set of conditions in American Jewish life, responding to existing needs on the part of certain segments of our people?

Is there no difference between a situation wherein the masses are observant and committed to Torah and skeptics arise to lead them astray, and a situation where the people are religiously illiterate and indifferent and Reform and Conservative Rabbis in many instances give them some sense of Jewish identity and encourage Jewish literacy? It is to be doubted whether any "missionary" effort of a positive character on our part on a grass roots level would arouse opposition by Reform and Conservative Rabbis. Indeed it should be easier to convert good Conservative Jews to Orthodoxy than those who have no sense of Jewish identity at all.

I seek not to justify or condone the practices or beliefs of Reform and Conservative Rabbis but only to raise the question whether Liberal Judaism today is the same in all significant respects as it was yesterday and therefore whether our responses

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

which were valid then are the correct ones today.

If we can admit the possibility of different answers to this question then it becomes apparent that not all the parties to this dispute really perceive the same set of "facts." What do you see when you perceive a Reform or Conservative Rabbi? Is your answer the description of a fact or more likely, is it a judgment? In making this judgment how do you know what weight to assign to their deviant views and what weight to the circumstances of their upbringing and their potential for change? Against what set of alternatives do you determine the "damage" they are doing to Yiddishkeit?

In summation: I have (1) suggested possible meanings to the assertion, "Participation implies recognition" and shown the difficulties inherent in each alternative and (2) offered considerations tending to support the contention that present-day Reform and Conservative Rabbis elude simple classification. I have attempted to "start the ball rolling" on only two of the several issues involved in this controversy. Let the shooting resume but, for heaven's sake, let it be on target.

NOTES

1. The issue of "authority" which is also involved, is a question I will not treat here. This includes the concept of *emunat chákhamim* and *da'at Torah* and asks: "If eleven Gedolim have ruled on a question, who has the authority to dispute their decision? It should be observed, however, that those who defend the ruling sometimes seem to follow a "hit and run" policy. First they attempt rationally to defend the ruling with arguments, and then, when others respond to the arguments, they introduce the element of "authority," foreclosing debate. If there is no disputing the ruling then, to avoid temptation, no reasons ought to be offered even as the *pesak* gave none.

2. *Bereshit Rabbah*, 8:17.

3. "Stirrings in Reform Judaism" in *The Jewish Observer*, Vol. 1, No. 8.

4. *Hilkhhot Mamrim*, 3:3.

5. Chazon Ish, Yoreh Deah, 13: 16, 28.