

Rabbi Fasman's article "Trends in the American Yeshivot" which appeared in our Fall issue has been the subject of much controversy. In this essay a distinguished member of our Editorial Board voices his disagreement with Rabbi Fasman's central thesis. Rabbi Feldman of Congregation Beth Jacob in Atlanta, Ga., and a former vice president of the Rabbinical Council of America, recently returned to his congregation after serving as guest lecturer in English Literature at Bar Ilan University during the academic year 1966-67.

TRENDS IN THE AMERICAN YESHIVOT:

A Rejoinder

It is evident that Orthodoxy cannot stand prosperity. The past several years have been marked by a number of attacks by Orthodox men on the *Gedolei Yisroel* and their Yeshivot. Were these forthcoming during a religious depression within Orthodoxy they would be, if regrettable, at least understandable. But they have come during a religious boom, at a time when the unmistakable impact of the *Gedolim* is manifest to all who would see. To add to the irony, this same period has seen growing numbers of our non-Orthodox brethren pay increasing homage, in their writings, to these very Gedolim and their ideas.

Obviously, Orthodoxy's spiritual affluence has increased its restlessness, and beneath much of the earlier criticism was an earnest search for new ways and avenues which might lead the masses of Jews back to Torah. If one did not always agree with the proposed directions, one had to respect the tone of elementary *derech eretz* with which they were suggested. The criticism was, after all, but a paradigm of the dislocations of our time.

Recently, however, the tones have become more strident, and what began as voices raised in self-examination has descended to a shrill cacophony of name-calling.

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Illustrative of this latest escalation in the wars of the Lord is the surprising article by Oscar Fasman in the Fall 1967 TRADITION. Surprising, because Rabbi Fasman is a former president of a Yeshiva, himself a disciple of the Yeshiva tradition, and yet has chosen to write an uncharacteristically bitter attack on the American Yeshiva system and its heads.

I grew sad as I read Rabbi Fasman's article. Not because I am fearful of what it might do to the Yeshivot — they will survive — but because I wondered if Rabbi Fasman, in his sustained exercise in derision, has decided to associate himself with that lonely group which constantly nips at the heels of the *Gedolei Yisroel*, accusing them of myopia and lack of wisdom and understanding to cope with the American Jewish community. And I grew sad because journals of the caliber of TRADITION — “a Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought” — have been used as the vehicle for the kind of accusations which, were they to have appeared in a journal of non-Orthodox Jewish thought, would have been correctly labeled by us as scandalous. And now the time has come for someone to use the pages of TRADITION to defend our *Gedolim* and our Yeshivot, and this is sadder still.

One of Rabbi Fasman's major contentions is that the emphasis on total immersion in Torah learning is a recent phenomenon in the Yeshivot, and that the older Roshei Yeshiva, unlike the more modern ones, actively engaged in and encouraged secular studies. This is not the forum for a discussion of the place of secular learning in creating a *Gadol B'Yisroel*. Let it only be stated that the attitude toward such learning has nothing to do with a “radical change in the Yeshivos which occurred after World War I.” but dates back at least as far as the *Rishonim* and *Acharonim*. It might well be true, as Fasman postulates, that the bloody experiences of Jewish communities in Europe made the values of the Gentile world especially intolerable; but the unwillingness of Yeshivot to put great value on secular learning long antedates the European experience, and stems rather from a philosophy which places Torah and its study at the center of things and all else at the periphery. That many *Gedolei Yisroel*, then and now, are learned and au courant in worldly scholarship

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is less an indication of the emphasis they have placed on these things than a fulfillment of the maxim, *hafoch bah vahafoch bah dekula bah*.

In addition, it is important to note that a total emphasis on Torah learning is not, as Fasman states, an indication of "isolation" and "self-centeredness" and "bitter hatred," but stems from much more profound considerations. When one truly believes that the Torah is the repository of all knowledge, one quite correctly devotes full time and talent and passion to Torah. A Yeshiva is not, after all, a mere training school for rabbis. It is the source of supply for genuine Torah scholarship in every generation, and hopefully it will produce men who will develop into the *Gedolei Yisroel* and *poskim* and *lomdim* without which there can be no future for Israel. This kind of an institution, in its scope and its purposes, has no parallel elsewhere, and as such it must maintain a unique and special atmosphere, or *ruach*: Not the spirit of an ordinary university, however scholarly, and not the spirit of a professional finishing school, however necessary. It requires a spirit of absolute and total submission to and immersion in Torah and *Kedushah* if there is to be any hope for a Jewish future.

Rabbi Fasman views such an uncompromising commitment as a new development fostered by post World War I Roshei Yeshiva who "introduced a violent spirit of negativism towards every manifestation of modern civilization," for no other reason than their bitter hatred for this civilization. He deplores this "radical change," and claims that its proponents somehow distorted the goals and direction of the earlier Yeshivos. Surely Rabbi Fasman would not include the saintly Chofetz Chaim, or the Brisker Rav, or the Chazon Ish, in this charge.

Let this be said clearly: the writer of this rejoinder, busy in the fields of congregational life for over a decade and a half, would be the last to discount the need for proper professional training for the American rabbinate, and for adequate preparation to meet the intelligent American layman on his own ground. And this author deplores the tendency of some Yeshiva students to denigrate the rabbinate as a life's work for a Jew. Yet it is important to note that this attitude is found among some students

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and not, as Fasman states, among the leading Roshei Yeshiva. I have been privileged to have personal contact with a number of *Gedolei Yisroel*. Without exception they recognize and appreciate the efforts of American rabbis, and encourage their qualified students to enter the rabbinate — just as they encouraged this writer. To state that the “Roshei Yeshiva went to great pains to deride the rabbinical career, to discourage their students from entertaining any thought of the pulpit,” is to do them a gross injustice. And even the unfortunate tendency among some of the students must be understood for what it is: an extension of their total commitment to *shlemut* (perfection) and study and service of God which views apparent professionalism and careerism with a jaundiced eye. The researcher in medicine frequently looks down upon the practicing physician as one who has left the tower of ivory in favor of the fleshpots. So is it with the legal scholar versus the lawyer, and the physicist in the university laboratory versus the physicist in the faceless corporation. Yet we do not label the researcher or the scholar or the professor as bitter or narrow or isolationist. Although I know the great achievements for Torah which can be accomplished in the active rabbinate, I am willing to forgive any Yeshiva student his looking down upon me, for I know his soul and it is a Torah soul, and as he matures he will come to the understanding that the so-called career rabbi is no less concerned with God and Torah than he. A bit of extremism during one’s youth is not only to be expected; it is a sign of health. Sincere passion is much to be preferred to smooth professionalism.

A further disturbing facet of Rabbi Fasman’s article is that he chooses to ignore the massive achievements of the American Yeshiva movement and the *Gedolim* who founded and direct them. These achievements are of such magnitude and are so evident that it should be unnecessary to list them.

- a) The new prestige and status of advanced Torah scholarship which manifests itself in the numerous *kollelim* where young men devote many years to intensive Torah research at great personal sacrifice, as well as the large cadre of lay and professional men who study Torah in a regular and disciplined way.

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- b) The new generation of American born and trained *talmidei chachamim* who have already published the "volumes of Talmudic novellae and responsa" whose lack Rabbi Fasman bemoans but whose constant presence he has evidently overlooked. *HaDarom Magazine*, so many of whose contributors are American trained, is a case in point.
- c) The establishment and development in every corner of America of the Hebrew Day School network whose original visionaries and leaders were the disciples of the very Roshei Yeshiva Rabbi Fasman derides.
- d) The audacious and daring beginnings of a similar national network of Yeshiva High Schools, whose prime movers are again the same kind of students, backed by the same Roshei Yeshiva. In light of this, how hollow is Fasman's cavil that the Roshei Yeshiva "urge their students to seek the kind of employment that would keep them geographically safe, surrounded by their own kind of religiously-committed families, and holding positions that would not tempt them to depart from any established patterns."

Equally unfortunate is Rabbi Fasman's flagrant misreading of the entire Halakhic decision-making process. When he says that "some of the great Talmudists have neither the experience nor the inclination to study the issues," but make decisions based on the analysis of their advisers, he surely does not mean to be taken seriously. Similarly, we must confine to the realm of hyperbole his suggestions that Roshei Yeshiva are "almost in terror" of being considered *mekilim*, that the Halakhah is stifled and not permitted to develop in every direction, and that only those *Gedolim* who have strong secular backgrounds care enough to maintain "the open line of communication which is shunned by the post World War II Roshei Yeshiva." One looks in vain in Rabbi Fasman's article for the words of understanding for the *Gedolim* and the Halakhic process and methods which would underscore the fact that he himself has always been among those who have wanted to build Halakhah and not destroy it.

It should not be necessary at this stage in Jewish history to discuss the question of who is *Gadol B'Yisroel*, but with Luzzatto

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in the *Mesillat Yeshtarim* it is occasionally necessary to re-state the obvious.

Who then is a *Gadol B'Yisroel*? Not simply one who has studied much and becomes expert in Torah. Nor is he one who is highly trained in the intricacies of Talmudic method or procedure. Many know but few are chosen. There are numerous experts in Jewish law, many men who know a great deal of Torah and Talmud and Halakhah. They fill the faculties of Yeshivos in America and in Israel. But they are not *Gedolim*, do not claim to be *Gedolim*, and are not regarded as such by the Torah world. For a *Gadol* is not elected to leadership; no one speaks for his candidacy; no one promotes his image in the eyes of the public. He is selected by a sure and subtle process which knows its leaders and places them in the fore front of a generation. Call it mystical, call it non-rational: it is both. But somehow the genius of *K'lall Yisroel* has been able to distinguish between a true *Gadol B'Yisroel* and an ordinary scholar. The *Gadol* not only knows Torah: his life is Torah, his every word, even his ordinary conversation, is Torah, so that he is in a very real sense the repository of Torah on earth.

But even this is not enough to set a *Gadol* apart. For piety, saintliness, integrity, and scholarship are qualities not limited to *Gedolim*: *K'lall Yisroel* is fortunate in having, if not an abundance, at least numerous such men. What sets a *Gadol* apart is something unique: his perception, his ability to penetrate beyond the surface, his capacity for the intuitive flash of insight which discovers reality not as it appears to be but as it is: reality in the light of Torah. In the *Gadol's* capacity to pierce the veil which often obliterates reality, and to discover the truth which is concealed beneath the surface, he is in a vivid sense an heir of the prophets — though he would be the first to refute the analogy — making manifest to us the way of Torah and Halakhah and, ultimately the way of God.

This is not a kind of voodoo magic; this is the result of a life devoted exclusively to God and Torah and is a divine gift bestowed upon certain men in each generation. That we venerate such men is natural; that such men are mortal and subject to human error no one denies: they do not claim infallibility; but

that such men should be subjective in their decision-making, or that they should not "have the experience or the inclination to study the issues" but instead take the word of their immediate circle of friends as bases for decision-making — such charges are preposterous.

They are preposterous because of the highly-tuned and sensitive instruments which are their mind and heart. And they are preposterous because of a very practical fact: the *Gedolim* are in daily contact with the manifold and variegated problems which reach them by phone and letter and in person from the four corners of the earth. Even Charles Liebman, who cannot be accused of being a fanatic defender of *Gedolim*, has written of them: "It is inconceivable that men who individually spend hours deciding matters of Halakhic minutiae would be indifferent to questions which they feel are of national and even international concern."

Rabbi Fasman's views about the relationship between Halakhic scholarship and secular learning are especially puzzling. Surely he knows that for every Halakhic scholar — even for those who have conquered the secular disciplines — there is only one absolute value and that value is Torah. All else, including "man's creative genius, literature, painting, and music," is relative. It is therefore curious to read that the "challenge of our day is to *forge a combination* (my italics. E.F.) of Torah ideals, practice and learning with the major values of civilization." Certainly Halakhic scholarship does not ignore or flee from the realities and disciplines of any age, but to set up as an objective the forging of a combination of Torah with the major values of civilization tends to equate the two and to transform Torah into a relative, albeit "major" value. That Rabbi Fasman is aware of this is evident from his next sentence: "Only in Halakhic Judaism can the truth of the Hebrew faith be found." Why, then, the rush to forge any combination with other values, major or otherwise?

Our confusion is compounded by the fact that in the very same paragraph he insists that "obviously an interpretation of Torah in terms of flexibility, relativity, frequent variations of philosophy, and relentless revision of ritual defeats the very

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purpose for which the divine gift was made at Sinai." Surely, then, the carriers of this divine Sinaitic gift who reject the values of contemporary culture should not be labeled — and libeled — as "reactionary," "narrow," "retrogressive," — to cite only a few of the epithets which Fasman heaps upon them.

No one believes that the American Yeshivos have achieved the millennium, or that they have begun to fulfill their promise. That there is a place for self-criticism goes without saying: there are many areas within the Yeshivos which can be improved for the ultimate betterment of Jewish life, and it is a measure of Orthodoxy's maturity and self-awareness that such criticism of Orthodoxy in its several institutional manifestations continues to appear from time to time. Perceptive critiques and self-examination are symptoms of strength, while hyper-sensitivity to criticism are signs of weakness.

But criticism, to be effective, must be in good taste and, at the very least, mannerly. Some of Rabbi Fasman's cavils, as on pages 54-56, are simply too tedious to be noted or refuted here. It must be said, however, that they are not only unfounded: they are a serious breach of elementary good manners. The printed word leaves a permanent record. It is unlike a lecture or a sermon in which even extreme statements tend to evaporate and are forgotten with the passage of time — a condition for which all speakers are occasionally very grateful. Not so the written word. Here the hazards of ambiguity, imprecision, and loose value judgments can be badly destructive, for words remain in black and white, stark, accusing, unrepentant, and unrelenting. This is why writers must mercilessly revise, rewrite, edit, and expunge. Rabbi Fasman has been too merciful in his own editing. He obviously intended to write a devastating critique; instead, the shrill tones become tiresome and unconvincing: "the big world beyond the walls of Yeshiva"; "freeze" and "glacier" in reference to Halakhah; "internal congealment," "Talmudic stockade," "extremism," "Torah pygmies." A man of such long experience in public life certainly knows that one should not use explosive baggage so carelessly, lest the casual onlooker, did he not know better, ask *halanu ata im letzarenu*.

The bitterness of Rabbi Fasman's printed words are in such

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sharp contrast to the gentleness of his own person that they cannot be an accurate reflection of the author but are apparently a result of *ani amarti bechafzi*. For there are those among us, including the members of the editorial board of TRADITION, who shudder to think what American Judaism might have become had it not been for those post-war Roshei Yeshiva whom the Almighty preserved in life and sent to these shores to sustain us. And I am certain, after all is said and done, that Rabbi Fisman would continue to list himself among this group.