
A SYMPOSIUM

THE STATE OF ORTHODOXY

Introduction

In recent years the vigor as well as the image of Orthodoxy has been completely revitalized. Gone are the predictions of the inevitable demise of what was widely dismissed as an obsolete movement that could not cope with the challenges of the "Open Society." Orthodoxy has made such a remarkable recovery that its new self-confidence has regrettably generated in some quarters a deplorable sense of smugness and, occasionally, has given rise to a spirit of "triumphalism."

To be sure, parallel trends can be discerned in the non-Jewish community. Liberal churches are on the decline, while the ranks of Conservative and Evangelical churches are swelling. The upsurge of the Moral Majority is but another symptom of these developments. By the same token, the search for transcendence has led to a growing popularity of sects and cults which completely renounce the Western value system. It is a matter of speculation to what extent these trends are a reaction to the general malaise of Western society—the post-Vietnam syndrome, the urban, energy and ecological crises, and the ensuing sense of disenchantment with modern culture.

Within the Jewish community, additional factors have been responsible for the growing disdain for universal and, especially, liberal values. The impact of the Holocaust has revolutionized Jewish experience as well as thought. Moreover, resentment over the growing isolation of the State of Israel has given rise to a high degree of skepticism with regard to the benefits of modern culture. Having been turned off by the "world," the Jewish community proceeds on an inward course.

Orthodoxy, which by comparison to other religious movements

has made far fewer concessions to modernity, was bound to benefit from these developments. After all, it was the only religious denomination which had not succumbed to the pressure of reconciling Judaism with “the spirit of the time.” There is a general impression that Orthodoxy’s newly acquired status and influence must be attributed to the respect its “authenticity” commands. In some circles, authenticity is defined in terms of total insulation from modern culture—which reached its nemesis in Hitler and Stalin.

“Right-wing” Orthodoxy capitalizes on the disdain for modernity harbored by many who feel guilty over their own modern life style. Irrespective of their own practices, they idealize the “purist” right-wing approach which to them represents the highest form of Jewish authenticity. Modern Orthodoxy, on the other hand, is ridiculed by the right wing as an illegitimate hybrid issuing from the union between Orthodoxy and a basically incompatible modern culture.

In the face of the militancy of the right wing, considerable segments of modern Orthodoxy are in retreat. Symptomatic is the “revisionism” of Samson Raphael Hirsch’s ideology that is currently in vogue. In utter disregard of his stated position, it is claimed that Hirsch did not advocate his classical formulation of the synthesis between Torah and culture (*Torah im Derekh Erets*) as an intrinsic religious ideal. He allegedly resorted to it merely as an emergency measure in order to salvage those elements of the Jewish community that otherwise would have been completely overwhelmed by the onslaught of modernity.

What accentuates the self-doubt of modern Orthodoxy is the prevailing assumption that higher levels of religious standards are maintained in right-wing circles, who strive for ever higher levels of piety, because they are under no pressure to accommodate to the demands of modernity. This religious inferiority complex is reinforced by another factor. The very legitimacy of modern Orthodoxy is categorically denied in right-wing circles. But modern Orthodoxy does not reciprocate in kind. It shies away from any monopolistic pretensions. It is satisfied with claiming that it constitutes one of many legitimate versions of Orthodoxy. From the perspective of this limited “religious pluralism,” representatives of modern Orthodoxy accept as valid any approach to Jewish life which acknowledges the supremacy of the halakhah.

An additional source of the growing self-doubt plaguing modern Orthodoxy is the misconception that the very readiness to encounter modern culture is by itself a sign of spiritual inferiority. Unfortunately, a vital point made by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik many years ago is as yet not fully appreciated. In his view, the alleged “modera-

tion” of modern Orthodoxy need not point to spiritual inferiority. Instead, cogent religious reasons rather than a readiness to compromise may dictate the adoption of a “middle of the road” instead of an extremist position. When Maimonides espouses the “middle of the road” approach, he is not swayed by the practical common sense attitude associated with a man of affairs. He advocates this course for purely religious reasons; moderation reflects the attempt to resolve the dialectical tension between conflicting religious values.

Another problem facing modern Orthodoxy is the lack of adequate self-definition. It has not as yet been clarified what should be the relationship between modernity and Orthodoxy. Should modern Orthodoxy merely attempt to preserve a commitment to Judaism while simultaneously living in two distinct worlds, or should modern Orthodoxy strive for a confrontation, if not integration, between Torah and the cultural values of modernity?

It was against this background of conflicting trends within a polarized American Jewish community that *Tradition* invited a number of Orthodox rabbinic and intellectual leaders to respond to the list of questions that follows.

We were disappointed that no spokesman of right-wing Orthodoxy accepted our invitation. We were, however, favorably impressed by our respondents’ remarkable openness to the positive contributions made by the right wing. It was also refreshing to note that modern Orthodoxy has managed to eschew the rigidity of a monolithic stance and has avoided the pitfalls of triumphalism in its approach to the non-Orthodox community.

Walter S. Wurzburger

THE QUESTIONS

1. *Do you believe that recent developments warrant the triumphalism exhibited by important segments of Orthodoxy which predict the total disappearance of non-Orthodox movements?*
2. *What do you regard as the basic challenges facing the Orthodox movement?*
3. *Are there common elements shared by the diverse groups comprising Orthodoxy or is Orthodoxy merely a coalition of separate movements held together only by common opposition to non-Orthodox groups?*

4. *How do you view the resurgence of right-wing Orthodoxy? Does it portend the eclipse of modern Orthodoxy?*
5. *Do you regard modern Orthodoxy as a philosophy of compromise or as an authentic version of Judaism?*
6. *How do you view the current teshuvah phenomenon?*
7. *How should Orthodoxy respond to the State of Israel?*
8. *What have been Orthodoxy's greatest achievements and greatest failures on the American scene?*

Marc D. Angel: (1) Orthodox Jews should be especially reluctant to make predictions about the disappearance of any segment of Jewry. How many times have we heard predictions of the disappearance of Orthodoxy? Yet Orthodoxy has survived and even flourished. It is the height of arrogance and self-righteousness to forecast calmly the demise of non-Orthodox movements. That they may be suffering from decline may be shown to be true by empirical means. That this decline cannot be stemmed is a statement none of us should answer with confident certainty.

Even if it could be shown that non-Orthodox movements would unquestionably disappear, this would hardly warrant any sense of "triumphalism." On the contrary, we should be frightened by such a possibility. With all our theological differences, yet we are part of one Jewish people and work together in so many ways for the benefit of the Jewish community here, abroad, and especially in Israel. It is not a happy prospect that the overwhelming majority of American Jews will lose their Jewishness. It is also extremely unlikely that vast numbers of the non-Orthodox community will move into Orthodoxy in the relatively near future.

(2) Orthodoxy faces a variety of challenges which might be considered as being basic. One of the major problems is intellectual openness. Right-wing Orthodoxy tends to be certain in its beliefs and pronouncements. It leaves little room for openness to contemporary intellectual life. Because of the growing influence of the right-wing movement, many Orthodox leaders are frightened. They do not want to make statements which may be criticized by their right-wing colleagues. Modern Orthodoxy has lost its confidence and has gradually been surrendering its leadership to the more singleminded and vocal right-wing movement.

Orthodoxy has a tremendous fear of change, and has no satisfactory mechanism for dealing with change. Whether in matters pertaining to the status of women, or conversion to Judaism, or in so

many other areas, Orthodoxy prefers to avoid the issues or to hide within the confines of technical legalism. There is definitely a lack of vision and, more especially, a lack of courage. It is very easy to say something is prohibited; it requires greatness to be able to see a problem for what it really is and to find positive solutions.

(3) Some years ago I attended a *tish* in Mea Shearim. I could not help wondering what there was that united me with the other people present. To the outside world, we might be lumped together as Orthodox Jews. Yet, in so many ways, we have little in common.

What unites all Orthodox groups is a belief in the Divine authority of the Torah, both written and oral. Yet, those Jews who hold these beliefs may have great divergences in their understanding of these sources and many differences of opinion on interpretations. It is really difficult to speak of Orthodoxy as a movement at all since there is so much diversity within it.

(4) History tends to be cyclical. At certain times one group is in power and at other times another group is in power. During one period some ideas seem invincible, and at other times these same ideas become discredited in favor of other ideas. That there is a resurgence of right-wing Orthodoxy is an indication that Orthodoxy is a dynamic and living entity. It is only natural to expect the pendulum to swing. It is a mistake to predict the eclipse of modern Orthodoxy on the basis of a resurgence of right-wing Orthodoxy. There will always be Orthodox thinkers who will not be comfortable in a right-wing setting. Their voices may be suppressed, but they will not be silenced. In due time, their voices will be heard again and right-wing Orthodoxy will decline. And so the process continues.

(5) To answer this question, we first need a definition of modern Orthodoxy. I suppose that many who would classify themselves as being modern Orthodox have great differences with others who would place themselves in the same category.

If by modern Orthodoxy we mean intellectual openness combined with a commitment to *Torah min hashamayim*, then it is certainly no philosophy of compromise. It is a valid way of dealing with Judaism as a living entity. I think this question reflects the widespread self-doubt of modern Orthodox Jews. Those who would consider modern Orthodoxy as a philosophy of compromise can hardly speak with conviction and prophetic enthusiasm. And if they are always apologizing and feeling guilty, they can hardly be true spiritual leaders.

(6) The current *teshuvah* phenomenon, I believe, is also an aspect of the cyclical nature of spiritual life. There are times and places when having a comprehensive faith seems very important to people, and there are other times when it seems less important or

even unimportant. At least a small part of our society now seems receptive to intensified spiritual life. This manifests itself in the *teshuvah* movement, but also in movements towards other religions and sects. It is an aspect of the *zeitgeist*. I believe this phenomenon will run its course, although I hope that while it continues, it serves to strengthen the Jewish people.

(7) The emergence of the State of Israel is the most significant positive event in Jewish history since the days of the Maccabees. It represents the hopes and aspirations of the Jewish people. Needless to say, on the day to day level, there are aspects of Israeli life and Israeli society which Orthodoxy should find disheartening. Orthodox Jews must be in the forefront of rectifying those aspects of Israeli life which should be remedied. For an Orthodox Jew—or any other Jew—to oppose or be neutral to Israel on principle is to isolate oneself from the history and destiny of the people of Israel.

(8) Orthodoxy's greatest achievements would include the establishment of the day school and yeshivah movement. But we should also note the significant accomplishments of Orthodox synagogues in the areas of adult education and *kiruv rehokim*. Orthodoxy has given more courage to American Jews to stand up for their rights. By being vocal and unashamed, I think Orthodox Jews have hoped to give all Jews more pride in themselves.

On the other hand, when we consider the failures of Orthodoxy, we must note that Orthodox Jews are a tiny minority within the American Jewish community. National studies have indicated that those who identify as Orthodox may represent only eleven or twelve percent of American Jews. Obviously, Orthodoxy's message has not reached or not adequately influenced the overwhelming majority of American Jews. Internal dissension within Orthodoxy, an excessive amount of "politics" and infighting may have contributed to this failure. On the other hand, we must realize that American society is not naturally conducive to Orthodox living. We live in a highly mobile and convenience-oriented society. Religion in general has suffered a decline in the United States and it should not be surprising that Orthodoxy has suffered along with the general religious community.

With all our achievements and failures, with all our successes and errors, Orthodoxy remains a vital force in the lives of many thousands of us. We should neither despair of the future nor be excessively optimistic. We ought to be calmly confident.

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David Berger: Any Orthodox Jew considering the confident predictions of the disappearance of American Orthodoxy that were so common several decades ago cannot resist at least a fleeting moment of smugness and self-congratulation. Nevertheless, whatever the temptation to make similar assertions about Conservatism and Reform, reality is too complex for confident prophesying, and the errors of an earlier generation should serve as a warning against glib triumphalism by any party. Attitudes evolve, trends change, and crises force people to take action; Conservative Judaism, for example, is no longer as reliant as it once was on people with Orthodox backgrounds, and Reform has not remained entirely oblivious of the challenge of intermarriage and assimilation.

The Reform response, in fact, may well exacerbate one of the greatest dangers facing both Orthodoxy and world Jewry in general. Alexander Schindler's proposals that children of Jewish fathers be classified as Jews and that "unchurched" Gentiles be the objects of a Jewish mission will hasten the day when there will no longer be a valid presumption that Reform or nonreligious Jews are really Jews. Even if such steps are not taken, the conversion to non-Orthodox Judaism of the Gentile woman in an intermarriage will mean that non-Jewish children will be brought up as Jews and sincerely believe themselves to be Jews. In short, I am far more concerned by the transformation of certain forms of non-Orthodox Jewry into movements with a growing non-Jewish constituency than I am by the prospect of their virtual disappearance.

Moreover, I confess that I would not look forward to such a disappearance. There is something disconcerting about Orthodox Jews rooting for the elimination of their rivals through intermarriage and assimilation, and it is worth noting the sorrowful reaction ascribed to the Baal Shem Tov in the wake of the conversion to Christianity of Jews as marginal and dangerous as the Frankists. The Jewish loyalties and observances of non-Orthodox Jews are decidedly better than nothing, and even from the perspective of crass self-interest, Orthodox Jews are in a stronger position now than they would be as the dominant group in a sharply shrunken American Jewish community. (It is almost superfluous to add that such a situation would also be profoundly detrimental to the interests of the State of Israel.)

The only weakening of Conservatism and Reform for which Orthodox Jews can legitimately hope would come through conversion to Orthodoxy. No such development appears imminent in statistically significant numbers; nevertheless, it is worth noting that Jews estranged from religion and searching for meaningful faith are far more likely to be attracted by Orthodoxy than by rival movements. Though Conservatism and Reform are supposed to provide easier ac-

cess for the acculturated Jew, people profoundly moved by a genuine spiritual quest often gravitate toward the more demanding option, which they tend to perceive as the more authentic one. Such a perception can operate beyond the confines of Orthodox Judaism; it accounts in part for the attractiveness of certain cults, and I suspect that it explains the remarkable success of 16th and 17th century Calvinism, which was the most forbidding and demanding version of early Protestantism.

In the case of Judaism, people seeking authenticity justly find their home in Orthodoxy, but the syndrome which identifies “more extreme” with “more authentic” is the key challenge for modern Orthodoxy with respect to the turn to the right among American Orthodox Jews. In his landmark essay on Orthodox Judaism in the 1965 *American Jewish Yearbook*, Charles Liebman noted that Orthodoxy must be granted legitimacy by rival movements while it can deny such legitimacy to them. To be sure, some non-Orthodox spokesmen have labelled Orthodoxy nonauthentic or even a heresy, but few of them have the fortitude for too strenuous a defense of the proposition that the Judaism of the Gaon of Vilna is a thoroughly illegitimate version of the historic faith.

Within Orthodoxy itself, Liebman’s point takes on a new dimension. Orthodox Jews tend to perceive Judaism as possessing only one authentic form, and outright denial of authenticity to right-wing Orthodoxy is unpersuasive and futile. Hence, in the presence of a militant Orthodox right, modern Orthodox Jews are placed on the defensive in an asymmetrical polemic. The tendency of the modern Orthodox to make contemptuous remarks about parasitic *kollel* students isolated from economic and intellectual realities does not quite obscure a sense of uneasiness in the presence of superior religious devotion.

To a disturbing extent, modern Orthodoxy deserves this inferiority complex. As a parent of children in modern Orthodox schools, I can testify that a majority—probably a large majority—of children from observant homes ignore *netilat yadayim*, rarely recite *brakhot rishonot*, and have hardly heard of *brakhot aḥaronot*; both observation and logic indicate that these derelictions are not confined to the younger generation. In a sense, these minor transgressions are more clearly symptomatic of religious malaise than the major ones that might be cited. It hardly seems likely that the evil inclination is working overtime to tempt people not to recite a blessing; what we are confronting here is an absence of religious seriousness that is all too common in the modern Orthodox community. Although modern

Orthodox ideology affirms the desirability of intense religious emotion and the necessity of meticulous observance, reality and theory are depressingly at odds.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that the ideology is wrong; it means that too many modern Orthodox Jews fail to take it seriously. The Torah should not have to retreat into a corner in order to survive; it should be possible for Jews to confront the best of human thought and emerge with profounder insights inspired by that confrontation. This means much more than going to college to study computer science and accounting or even law and medicine; the Orthodox college student who apologetically cites *parnasah* as a *hetter* for his higher education is not what modern Orthodoxy should be about. If we are to experience a religious renaissance without sliding into the "right," we must renew the fading conviction that modern Orthodoxy represents a genuine Jewish ideal. Torah combined with secular learning is not merely an economic necessity; it is one road to human perfection. From a position of confidence in the validity of this approach, we need not deny the legitimacy, even the desirability, of another approach as well. It is hardly heresy to suggest that God is pleased that both Rashi and the Rambam pursued their respective careers and that we would be immeasurably poorer if either had not lived.

Regrettably, the Orthodox right is also plagued by serious shortcomings. It would be naive to express surprise that ethical behavior is not the inevitable result of an Orthodox commitment. (Gershom Scholem once remarked that an Orthodox acquaintance told him that God had made a serious mistake when he placed *lo tignov* among the ten commandments; instead, he should have arranged a gloss to a gloss on the Ramo which would have said, "*Yesh nohagin shelo lignov.*") What is distressing, however, is that the study of Torah has become the very justification for forbidden behavior ranging from cheating on exams to presenting fraudulent transcripts to obtaining funds by questionable means. Such actions are not universal in the Orthodox right, and I am not even arguing that they are more prevalent there than among non-Jews; nevertheless, Orthodox Judaism cannot flourish indefinitely in the midst of moral contradictions, and I regard this as a practical, not merely an ethical danger.

Finally, for all my insistence on the legitimacy and value of right-wing Orthodoxy, I must confess to profound disappointment bordering on embarrassment at the intellectual constriction and naivete that it sometimes fosters. Comparing the intellectual atmosphere of the Mosad HaRav Kook series of biblical commentaries with that of Art-

Scroll (even allowing for the radically different genres that they represent) is a wonderful exercise in renewing one's faith in the value of an Orthodoxy that does not close its eyes to the outside world.

Notwithstanding these and other problems, the resurgence of American Orthodoxy is a historic phenomenon. It will, I hope, become increasingly difficult for American Jewish organizations to promulgate positions opposed by Orthodoxy as *the* views of the American Jewish community. More important, despite rampant assimilation among American Jews, this resurgence indicates for the first time that the destiny of an acculturated and emancipated Jewish community in the modern West must not lead inexorably toward a weakening of traditional commitment. Though we continue to confront both internal and external challenges of ominous proportions, American Orthodoxy has broken through to a new level of security and confidence from which those challenges can be met with guarded but justified optimism.

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Louis Bernstein: Serious deviations from Orthodox Judaism, in our homeland and in the diaspora, have sprouted periodically throughout Jewish history primarily because of the inability of the contemporary Jewish leadership to meet specific challenges of their times. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same inability still prevails. Whereas, the non-Orthodox movements are suffering from critical demographic problems and are not sanguine about their own future, they will continue to exist in one form or another. Their diminution and attenuation do not warrant triumphalism as few of their losses are Orthodoxy's gain. Most are lost to the Jewish people forever, losses that we can ill afford.

From my observation tower, non-Orthodox Jews have become aware and sensitive to the dangers confronting them. As a result they are seeking anchors for survival in Israel. Reform, in particular, has come full circle. From the bastion of anti-Zionism, it not only encourages support of the State of Israel but has an embryonic settlement movement. The lines of demarcation between mainstream Reform and mainstream Conservatism are becoming blurred. They cooperate closely in efforts *vis à vis* Israel. The line between them was always one of degree. The gut feeling of survival makes total disappearance of Conservative and Reform most unlikely in the

