ESSAY ON CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN JEWISH LIFE

TO THE EDITOR:

Dr. Marvin Schick has performed an invaluable public service in his “Essay on Contemporary American Jewish Life” (Tradition 35:2, Summer 2001). His astute analysis of recent trends in public life demonstrates how demographers and social scientists have facilitated what he calls “the neat trick of being dualistic, of abandoning most of Judaism as they seek to maintain Jewish identity, of chucking off most of the Jewish past as they sincerely claim to want to ensure a Jewish future.” Halakhically Jewish or not, committed to the full range of values or not, as long as you “feel” Jewish, you can call yourself Jewish—with devastating ramifications. The ground rules of Jewishness are simply being washed away.

Schick further claims that “along the way, they have gained adherents among other intermarried and, more critically, among Jews who still believe that intermarriage is not good for the Jews.” The general observation may have some validity, but I must take exception to a few of the specific examples he cites to support his contention.

A case in point: Schick portrays recent advertisements from the “Am Echad” campaign as a radical departure from the Hirschian Austritt rejection of Reform. He claims that “as its contribution to the debate on pluralism in Israel, Agudath Israel mounted an expensive ‘we-are-one-people’ campaign. While its impact has been nil and this won’t change, the campaign demonstrates in a stark way that in America, the cultural norm is to get along, to tolerate, if not to accept.”

Unfortunately, he failed to read the bold-type copy on these display ads, for every ad prominently featured a clear statement that Rabbi S.R. Hirsch would have surely subscribed to.

For example, an ad featuring a photo of Ben-Gurion was headlined: “The architect of Israel’s policy on pluralism didn’t favor Jewish
Orthodoxy. He favored Jewish Unity.” The text began with the opening paragraph: “The standard he chose is the only one that is acceptable to all Jews. Namely, Halacha—traditional Jewish religious law.” Hardly fudging on principle.

A Shavuot ad, entitled “We Were One,” shows a photo of a mountain, and reads: “When our ancestors stood at Sinai, 3,311 years ago, they were united ‘as one person with one heart,’ in the Midrash’s phrase. What united all Jews then unites us still today.” How can this unequivocal definition of Judaism be misconstrued as pluralistic?

Again, a Kotel ad that ran in the Summer of 2000, entitled: “Orthodox, Reform and Conservative Jews have worshiped here for decades. Let’s pray that this Tisha B’Av be no different.” It then reads: “All visitors, Jews and non-Jews alike, have respected the 3000-year-old Jewish tradition of men and women praying separately.” Is this compromising?

In a footnote to the text, Schick characterized The Jewish Observer’s response to the Reform movement’s “move in the direction of greater acceptance of religious practice and tradition” in Hillel Goldberg’s article, “Is Reform Jewry Coming Home?” (Summer, 1999), as “a warm welcome responding less to Reform’s religious changes as to the American imperative of indulging in public relations and evoking the image of tolerance.”

While Rabbi Goldberg did indeed welcome Reform embrace of some mitzvot, he clearly questioned how the recent positive moves can be seen as encouraging in the face of long-standing trends in defiance of standard Judaic practice. Moreover, this article was accompanied by a sidebar penned by Rabbi Yaakov Perlow, Novominsker Rebbe (Rosh Agudath Israel of America), which stated: “Of course, the moral sequence of mitzva observance is the acceptance of a Divine ‘Metzaveh.’ Here is where Jews with faith in Torah MiSinai part ways with the heresies of Reform.” Where does Schick see evidence of indulging in “public relations and . . . tolerance”?

Schick further faults Orthodox outreach efforts for falling into “the dialectical trap that dictates that the progress we make among assimilated Jews brings with it the high cost of adding confusion and complexities in our communal life. Put differently, [he phrases it as a question]: can we engage in outreach activities without being the inadvertent handmaiden to the acceptance of intermarriage and Judaic abandonment, so long as they come in a Jewish identity wrapping?” In effect, he characterizes contemporary outreach to assimilated Jews as acceptance of their Judaic abandonment!
I find it difficult to believe that someone as knowledgeable as Schick is unfamiliar with the highly effective, uncompromising kiruv efforts that grace our landscape, such as Torah Umesorah’s decades-old SEED program, which mobilizes kollel couples and mature yeshiva students to teach Torah in grassroots communities across the length and breadth of America; or the highly successful Partners in Torah, which was singled out for praise by the late Rabbi Shimon Schwab, zikhronei l’ivrakha, our generation’s prime spokesman for Hirschian ideology; or the Community kollelim that light up the entire countryside with Torah; Agudath Israel’s JEP; Discovery, Gateways, Arachim, and Aish Hatorah Seminars; all of which are accessible to all—indiscriminately—yet do not waffle in the least in terms of denominational integrity and ideological purity.

In any case, we all have much to learn from Schick’s cautionary remarks that form the earlier part of his article, as we do from the exemplary efforts of organized Torah Jewry to honor R. Hirsch’s literary and personal outreach to all Jews who are earnestly groping for an understanding of their ancestral heritage. Indeed, R. Hirsch paved the way for us through his outreach activities in the University of Bonn and the publication of his classic works (such as The Nineteen Letters), while eschewing the conferring of legitimacy on organized expression of rejection of our Mesora.

(RABBI) NISSON WOLPIN
Editor, The Jewish Observer
New York, New York

TO THE EDITOR:

Marvin Schick included a footnote in which he wrote that Agudath Israel, as evidenced by its magazine The Jewish Observer, welcomed the Reform movement’s recent semi-acceptance of mitzvot for the wrong reasons. Schick attributed this unworthy motive to the Agudah and Jewish Observer: “The Agudath Israel was responding less to Reform’s religious changes as to the American imperative of indulging in public relations and evoking the image of tolerance.”

Despite the inclusive characterizations of the object of Schick’s criticism as “Agudah” and “Jewish Observer,” the object of his criticism is actually me. I am the person who wrote the major article in The Jewish
Observer responding to the Reform movement’s semi-acceptance of mitzvot. I analyzed the Reform move as I saw it and did not indulge in “public relations.” My long and extensive record as a straightforward and civil critic of non-Orthodox Judaism is well known. Therefore, I am writing to correct this inaccuracy for the record.

(RABBI) HILLEL GOLDBERG
Denver, CO

MARVIN SCHICK RESPONDS:

It is in the nature of these exchanges that the focus is nearly entirely on disagreements, which is all the more reason why I would like to begin my reply to Rabbi Wolpin by expressing appreciation for his kind words and, more important, for his valuable contributions to Jewish life.

My critical view of Agudath Israel’s costly but ineffective Am Echad campaign was developed over several years. At one point early on, in the course of a conversation about other matters with one of Agudah’s leading Rashbei Yeshiva, I mentioned that I intended to criticize the project in a forthcoming speech. His response was, “I am not a hasid of Am Echad.”

Neither Rabbi Wolpin nor I can know how R. Hirsch would react to certain contemporary American Jewish developments, although I believe that I have by far the better part of the argument in doubting that he can be enlisted in the Am Echad cause. There is much in his published writings that suggests otherwise. Interestingly, though, if Rabbi Wolpin is correct, the central thesis of my essay would be bolstered: the American ethos of tolerance and pluralism determines to a great extent how the Orthodox respond to massive Judaic loss and how they interact with non-observant secular Jews, including many who have intermarried.

In my view, there is no way to reconcile R. Hirsch’s activities and writings with the notion that he would embrace David Ben-Gurion in the fashion that Agudath Israel has embraced him with Am Echad. If there is any doubt, however, it should be resolved by consulting the writings of “our generation’s prime spokesman for Hirschian ideology,” Rabbi Shimon Schwab. I refer especially to his extraordinary comment on Parashat Vayishlah (Ma’ayan Bet ha-Shoeva, Bereshit 32:25).
In addition to being a dud, except perhaps for fundraising and public relations, Am Echad is doing a disservice to history, including Agudah's, by invoking the policies of Ben-Gurion and other secularists. While it is often forgotten, Agudah joined the Israeli government shortly after the establishment of the State, when Ben-Gurion was Prime Minister, only to leave it in the early 1950's when Ben-Gurion insisted on merging the four independent educational streams, including Agudah's Zerem Revi'i, into a single state system with a separate religious track. This led directly to the historic effort inspired and directed from a great distance by the great Rosh Yeshiva of Lakewood, Rav Aharon Kotler, to create Chinuch Atzmai, an independent network of religious schools.

A more serious crisis, one that left permanent scars, erupted in 1953 when Ben-Gurion imposed the draft/national service requirement on young women, despite the pleas and emotional opposition of Torah leaders, including the Hazon Ish, who with others ruled that the imposition of women's service would put religious girls in a situation of yehareg ve-al ya'avor. This episode shattered the unity of the Jewish people and it cannot be repaired by the slogan of Am Echad.

Mindful of my obligation to show respect and obedience toward Torah leaders, the standard that I have attempted to be faithful to over the course of fifty years of intensive and uninterrupted communal activity, I respectfully disagree with Rabbi Perlow's brief article on the Reform movement that appeared in Jewish Observer. There is devastating demographic data and much else in recent Reform policies that undermine much of what was contained in that statement.

It is, I think, charming to characterize R. Hirsch as an outreach worker. While some of his activity may have produced outreach results, the way he went about it bears little resemblance to the current efforts. His outstanding achievements provide a lesson on how best to strengthen the religious community in the face of powerful assimilatory forces.

There is disagreement about the size and strength of Frankfurt's Orthodoxy at the time that R. Hirsch became the community's rabbi. Likely, several factors contributed to Orthodox population growth, including some hozirim bi-teshuva, internal growth, and religious Jews who lived outside of Frankfurt being attracted to the community because of Rav Hirsch's leadership. It must be underscored that the Hirschian model is of an integrated community, or kehillah, of the synagogue, schools, hesed activities, and all else in organized Jewish life being united under a common institutional infrastructure. This factor
and R. Hirsch’s integrity, intellectual stature, and clarity of vision served as powerful magnets, bringing about salutary Judaic outcomes.

With a few exceptions—such as Rabbi Emanuel Feldman’s congregation in Atlanta—contemporary outreach is not within the framework of an integrated community. This has severely curtailed its effectiveness. There may be reasons for this, including the dispersal of American Jews across a vast geographic landscape and the lack of sufficient resources, such as funds and personnel. Regardless, the issue has not been tackled by the kiruv world, which is substantially bereft of the capacity for introspection.

This is not meant to deny the sincerity or accomplishments of the kiruv movement, which must be acknowledged if only because of the transcendent principle of “ha-matsil nefesh ahat.” But there must be the corollary acknowledgment among kiruv votaries that there is a tendency toward exaggeration and that too much of what is called outreach is hit-and-run and, therefore, attenuated. This is another kiruv issue that deserves introspection. There needs to be an examination of whether there are better ways to go about this activity.

Rabbi Wolpin refers to outreach efforts that “do not waffle in the least in terms of denominational integrity and ideological purity.” Sadly, this isn’t always true. For space and other reasons, I shall limit myself to a single example. Three years ago, I attended a dinner in Jerusalem sponsored by an affiliate of one of the organizations mentioned by Rabbi Wolpin. Among the honorees were several men who were intermarried, a circumstance that was clearly indicated at the event.

There is a measure of denial among supporters of outreach. Outreach activities, like any other aspect of American Jewish life, cannot escape the realities of the world in which they are conducted.

THE JEWISH STATE: THE STRUGGLE FOR ISRAEL’S SOUL

To the Editor:

Hillel Goldberg’s response (Tradition 35:2, Summer 2001) to Yoram Hazony’s The Jewish State reflects the spiritual space that our community inhabits. Hazony finds that the non-Zionist Buberian intellectuals are still trying to undermine the Jewish character of the Jewish state,
so that it become, to use Hanan Ashrawi’s words, a “state of its citizens.” Israel is a religion, not a nation, and to this view, not worthy of a land, especially if a “real” nation, the Arab nation or the nation of Islam, wants it.

Hazony maintains and Goldberg laments the secularization of modern Israel. Now bereft of its founding ideology and unwilling or unable to become Orthodox, the Leftist intellectual finds in the secular cosmopolitan intellectual left a spiritual “address” that replaces Labor Zionism.

Hazony finds the ideologues of this new, secular and cosmopolitan left in the secular university, in the media and the arts, and on the Israeli Supreme Court. In an oral communication, Prof. Norit Govrin of Tel Aviv University’s Hebrew literature department told me that her intellectual community is ideologically secular. The university has become the bet midrash not for disinterested scholarship in the search for knowledge and truth; it has emerged the political coffee house for the new Leftist elite.

While there is much truth in Hazony’s descriptions, we have been a tad too uncritical in our reading of his criticisms. Herzl was not the tsadik that Hazony presents. For Hazony, he was a European version of an Israeli mesorati traditionally-minded secular person. In Der Judenstadt, religion provides a decorous civil culture, but it is not even permitted to be an intellectual force. I am not minimizing Herzl’s contribution, but Orthodox Zionists have a tendency to romanticize non-Orthodox heroes. We also confuse Bialik’s attempt to recover humanistic virtue in religious texts, a mission that he inherited from Ahad ha-Am. Ahad ha-Am and Bialik advocated a humanistic Jewish culture, and were ideologically disinclined to both Orthodoxy and Reform.

Hazony’s reading of Amos Oz is also problematic. Now Oz is a secular, liberal Labor-oriented intellectual. He would happily make territorial compromise. But he writes that he is not prepared to commit suicide. If we misstate the real position of the opposition, we forfeit our chance to convince the unconvinced, because we will have impugned our credibility.

Orthodox intellectuals have been highly critical of the Israel Supreme Court, which is led by Dr. Aharon Barak. The Israel Supreme Court believes in “the rights of man,” not Torah law. Since I do not believe that the Orthodox community will dislodge the Barak court, Orthodoxy must understand and use the court to its advantage. While the Barak court will not privilege Orthodoxy, it will not permit dis-
discrimination against Orthodoxy. If the court is addressed for rights, Orthodoxy will find an open ear. If Orthodoxy wants to retain power that interferes, justly or otherwise, with the rights of citizens, the court will most likely not be sympathetic to the Orthodox position.

(RABBI) ALAN J. YUTER
Springfield, NJ

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