

Communications

Tradition welcomes and encourages letters to the editor. Letters, which should be brief and to the point, should not ordinarily exceed 1000 words. They should be e-mailed to tradition-letters@rabbis.org. Letters may be edited.

ON THE IRRELEVANCE OF RELIGIOUS-ZIONISM

TO THE EDITOR:

Yoel Finkelman's insightful article "On the Irrelevance of Religious-Zionism" (*Tradition* 39:1, Spring 2005) is important in mapping out one of the fault lines dividing the religious-Zionist community in Israel. This may be especially important for readers in the United States.

However, I find a number of points lacking in Finkelman's thesis and presentation. Besides the fact that his description of the "religious-Zionist left" is quite problematic (it includes organizations and institutions that do not define themselves as Orthodox or as religious at all), he fails to clearly explain which phenomena he is describing are typical of Orthodox Judaism as such, and which are unique to religious-Zionism. Readers of *Tradition* will, I assume, not be surprised to discover debates within Orthodoxy as to the appreciation of modernity or regarding attitudes towards other Jewish groups and are also familiar with the fact that, all too often, openness towards modernity and the community at large tends to be at the expense of the intensity of religious commitment. If this is the case, Finkelman does not clarify what is unique about the predicament of the *dati-le'umi* community in Israel.

The title of the article, and perhaps its major thrust, focuses on the attempt of religious-Zionism to influence the State of Israel, or more exactly, the Jewish community living in Israel. While describing the strategies supported by the two trends he describes, he does not deal with a crucial variable: how that non-Orthodox majority is perceived by the *dati-le'umi* community. The prevalent view that secular Jews in Israel have undergone attenuation in their commitment to Jewish heritage (even if understood in secular terms), to the Jewish people, and to the land of Israel inevitably impacts on the feasibility of dialogue.

Finally, Finkelman leaves *ba-ikar haser min ha-sefer*. Any article on religious-Zionism in Israel submitted in the spring of 2005 and published in the following year cannot ignore what may be the most significant event for religious-Zionism in a generation. For close to thirty years, the great majority of the public forces in religious-Zionism have

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been committed to unconditional support for Israel's control over all the territories conquered/liberated in 1967. This stance, seen by the great majority of religious-Zionist rabbinic leadership as a religious obligation, as well as the large number of religious-Zionists who live in the territories, has created a situation where commitment to this political position has become the most important common denominator of the *dati-le'umi* community. Those who have dissented have been marginalized. Thus, the political issue cannot be "bracketed," as Finkelman suggests.

Not surprisingly, the withdrawal/expulsion/disengagement from Gaza (and its possible sequel, if we are to believe Prime Minister Olmert) has been criticized by the religious-Zionist rabbinic leadership not as a controversial strategic move but as a frontal attack on religious-Zionism. This has radicalized much of religious-Zionist youth with enormous implications for the future. Since last summer, the tension within religious-Zionism has not been over the questions of religious modernism versus *haredi-le'umi* separatism that Finkelman has highlighted by rather over defining the post-*hitnalkut* (disengagement) relationship between the religious community and the State of Israel and its institutions. There are those who think that in light of the withdrawal from Zionist values and the attempt to destroy religious-Zionism there must be a new realignment, while others think that the basic situation of religious-Zionism is unchanged and that despite the setbacks, there is no room for disengagement from the *medina*. This debate is carried on in various guises and may lead to a total fragmentation of religious-Zionism as we know it.

Tradition should continue to present the questions facing Israeli Orthodoxy in a timely and authentic manner and in doing so will make an important contribution to the Orthodox community in the United States.

KALMAN NEUMAN
Jerusalem

YOEL FINKELMAN RESPONDS:

I thank Kalman Neuman for his insightful comments on my article. I find little in his letter to disagree with. He has raised important questions, and a book-length study of contemporary religious-Zionism, its relationship to secular Israel and Israelis, and its similarities to and differences from American Orthodoxy is certainly in order. While none of the

issues he has raised can get the treatment they warrant in an exchange of letters, two points, I think, deserve clarification.

First, the relationship between what I have termed the “religious-Zionist left” to Orthodoxy may, indeed, be more complex than I suggested. Some of the figures I refer to are straddling the fence between Orthodoxy and a post-denominational Judaism, and, presumably for both political and substantive reasons, have not spelled out solutions to this tension. While this requires further elaboration, I believe that even those who have moved closest to a post-denominationalism remain in orbit around Orthodoxy. If so, this supports my claim that the religious-Zionist left has distanced itself from mainstream observant Jewry. Perhaps they will find a sizeable following among non-Orthodox religious movements (still quite small in Israel) or among secular Israelis, but as of now this has not materialized.

More importantly, the disengagement/expulsion from Gaza, and the violence in the Amona settlement, have indeed been watershed events in religious-Zionism. A note to the Internet edition of the article (that did not appear in the print edition) pointed out that this article was written prior to the disengagement plan and its implementation. Since then, the religious-Zionist right has itself split into the “*mamlakhti*” (angry but still nationalistic) and “*milhamti*” (battle-ready) camps, and these groups are fighting a verbal and educational battle within religious-Zionism, and with the State and what it represents to them. Things are changing and developing faster than any writer or publisher can keep track of (and I admit to being distinctly pessimistic). If issues of land and security might once have been “bracketed” for the sake of conversation, this is most certainly no longer the case.

NEGATIVE THEOLOGY AND THE MEANING OF THE COMMANDMENTS

TO THE EDITOR:

Thank you for Daniel Statman’s insightful essay (*Tradition* 39:1, Spring 2005), which explored a possible underlying connection between Yeshayahu Leibowitz’s extreme “negative theology” and some contemporary phenomena within Orthodoxy. Since Leibowitz maintains that no knowledge of God is possible, Orthodoxy is reduced to “nothing

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other than the acceptance of the yoke (*ol mitsvot*).” With this, Statman presents a philosophical backdrop for contemporary Orthodoxy’s strict loyalty to halakha, as outlined by Haym Soloveitchik’s now classic “Rupture and Reconstruction.”

However, there is a corollary to Leibowitz’s negative theology which does not seem to resonate with observant Jews in our day (and is therefore unexplained by Statman’s analysis)—namely, his severe rejection of emotions in *avodat Hashem*. As I mentioned in these pages (“Letters on Religion Without Theology,” *Tradition* 34:3, Fall 2000), most Orthodox Jews find Leibowitz off-putting because they find meaning in other aspects of religion, which he (at best) belittled or (at worst) claimed were idolatrous. Many people who feel comfortable with a broader conception of halakhic Judaism feel that he is (at best) irritating or (at worst) un-Jewish. As a friend of mine once told me, “I tried to read Leibowitz once, but after ten pages I was tired of being yelled at, so I put the book down.”

(RABBI) JEFFREY SAKS
Efrat, Israel

DANIEL STATMAN RESPONDS:

When I suggested that Leibowitz might be expressing the *zeitgeist* of modern Orthodoxy, I wasn’t, of course, implying that all Orthodox Jews today knowingly adopt his philosophy, and I was certainly not suggesting that they adopt all of his ideas. The suggestion was that in their most profound views on God and on the meaning of mitzvot, contemporary Orthodox Jews are surprisingly close to that “irritating” Jerusalem philosopher. Against this suggestion, Rabbi Saks argues that many Orthodox Jews “find meaning in other aspects of religion.” However, following the insightful observations of Haym Soloveitchik, I have serious doubts concerning the depth of the commitment to these “other aspects” of Judaism. While it is true that many Orthodox Jews flirt with all kind of ideas, interpretations, and “*worts*,” when pressed to give an account of the fundamental aspects of their worldview, what comes out is remarkably close to Leibowitz.

ERRATA

The notes to Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein's article "Of Marriage: Relationship and Relations" (*Tradition* 39:2, Summer 2005) should have included the fact that the paper was first delivered April 3, 2005 at the Seventeenth Conference of the Orthodox Forum: Gender Relationships—In Marriage and Out.