

Rabbi Grunblatt is Spiritual Leader of the Queens Jewish Center in Forest Hills, N.Y., and Adjunct Professor of Jewish Studies at Touro College.

CONFRONTING DISBELIEVERS

The dangerous tension between the extremists of a religious minority and the extremists of a secular majority in Israel only serves to underline what has taken place in Jewish life over the past two centuries. The “renaissance” began for Western European Jewry only several decades before the French Revolution and the subsequent emancipation process. For Eastern European Jews the process began about a century later with the inroads of the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) which triggered the progressive secularization of Jewish life. We have a tendency to romanticize that which is past and that which is lost. We only remember the yeshivot, the *gedolim*, the Hasidic courts, and the *shtetlach* of Eastern Europe. We tend to overlook the secularist organizations, the literature, and all that emerged from the *Haskalah* ferment. If we complain about the virulent secularism in Israel today, let us remember that these foundations were laid by people from the same part of the world that gave us Roshei Yeshiva and Rabbanim.

At this point in history we must face the fact that the large majority of Jews are secular. That includes, I believe, the majority of the memberships of Reform and Conservative synagogues, and to be sure, some members of Orthodox synagogues.

What do we mean by “secular Jews”? The first definition that comes to mind is the behavioral criteria. It means more than not keeping Shabbat or *kashrut*. It means that religious practices and events play no role in the structuring of one’s life, whether we deal with career, living quarters, marriage, or vacation plans. Even when such a practice is occasionally and casually observed or such an event is occasionally and casually recognized, it is essentially ethnic, but has no bearing on one’s outlook on life, its goals, ambitions and quality. So, for instance, in a recently held discussion on Jewish unity, a Conservative rabbi conceded that there is not a single family belonging to his Temple (membership 600 families) that would give a

second thought about their vacation plans so as not to drive off on Shabbat.¹

But secularization goes beyond practice to what may be more dangerous in the long run. It goes to beliefs and the basic ideological assumptions that underlie every culture, whether or not they are fully understood and articulated. This includes the idea, in some meaningful form, of a personal God who is involved in some way with history and our lives; the reality of some form of revelation; the *sui generis* character of the Bible; and the uniqueness of Jewish peoplehood. All these essentials of being Jewishly religious, which are occasionally given lip service, do not intrude into the thinking and decision-making of most of our people. We might say that the two poles of reality interpretation are to be found in the Psalms: "God is before me always,"² and "The *naval* (base man) says in his heart: there is no God."³ There has probably never been a time (with the exception of Sinai) when the majority of our people clung to one pole or the other. When most are close to the latter, we have a secular society. Simply put, the question to be faced is: Should we still consider the person who says "There is no God" to be, by definition, a *naval*? We believe that the predominant thinking in the "Yeshiva World" past and present would be to answer the question affirmatively.

For example, Rav Elchanan Wasserman, z"l, famed Rosh Yeshiva of Baranovitch and leading disciple of the Hafets Hayyim, z"l, followed the classical reasoning which formulated the various proofs for the existence of God. He raised a series of poignant questions about faith which, according to the Rambam, is a biblical commandment, disbelief being a serious transgression. He questioned how belief could be legislated one way or the other when it is seemingly contingent on intellectual comprehension and not on willful action or inaction? It would seem that either one already believes or one does not. To R. Wasserman, intellectual comprehension was no problem: God's existence is self-evident. He quoted the well-known passage from "Duties of the Heart" which compared an atheistic interpretation of the existence of the world to that of one who is prepared to believe that a well-thought-out document is the result of an accidental spill of ink on blank paper.⁴ Faith in revelation should likewise follow logically, as God, like man, would like His subjects to follow his wishes; thus we must have Revelation, or *Torah min ha-shamayim*. He therefore concluded:

The principles of faith in themselves are simple and self-evident to every normal person, and cannot be doubted as to their truth. But this can only be on condition that the person is not biased, that he is free from the lusts of this world and his desires. The cause, therefore for atheism and heresy is not to be found in the perversion of the intellect itself but rather as a result of desire for lusts that twist and blind reason.⁵

He has no reservations in categorizing all non-theistic philosophers as people misled by their passions.

In that vein, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, z"l, explained the evolution of idolatry from the original monotheism of earlier biblical man as resulting from lust and greed which is more readily confirmed and justified in a polytheistic system of divine authority.⁶

Another great yeshiva thinker, Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, z"l, of the Musar tradition, dealt with the same issue in a somewhat different manner. He felt that awareness of God is natural because it is part of our instinctual survival apparatus. Quoting the prophet: "The ox knows his owner, the donkey the trough of his master, but my people do not know me,"⁷ R. Lopian noted that animals respond to built-in instincts, but faith, theological principles, are apparently related to comprehension, to intellectual understanding. Obviously, what the prophet is suggesting is that the realization of God's presence is as instinctively built-in as the recognition the animal has of its owner or its source of food.

But if awareness of the Divine is natural and instinctive, how is defection possible? The answer lies in the traditional teaching that the soul acts and reacts parallel to the body, but in a spiritual way. Just as the body needs food, the soul needs food (*mazon ha-nefesh*). The body may be healthy or ill, and so may the soul (*holi ha-nefesh*). Just as excessive deprivation of food or prolonged illness may cause a stupor or coma during which a person will not recognize someone near and dear, so a soul that is excessively starved or severely ill will be subject to a "coma" and will not recognize God who should be close and dear to it. A severe and persistent disregard of Torah and *mitsvot* leads to *neshama* starvation and illness and consequently to atheism or agnosticism.⁸

To these thinkers, faith is either rationally or existentially self-evident, and man is in some measure culpable for deliberately dispelling and distorting the Divine signals that would be readily perceptible without his own intervention. All non-believers, therefore, are to a greater or lesser degree, immoral or at best weak of character. To put it another way, there is no legitimate disbelief, only chosen lifestyles that jam the wavelength of faith.

With all due respect and in all humility, I find it difficult to maintain such a position. So much has happened since the "renaissance" that we now can explain the reality of the decline of faith and religious dominance in general and in Jewish life in strictly cultural terms. To be sure, we have seen a concomitant decline in moral values and accelerated degeneracy of society and its formerly cherished institutions. But it is the old "chicken and egg" problem: did increasing prosperity and materialism in the Western world bring

about the decline of faith or did the decline of faith engendered by new knowledge and skepticism shift the focus of the Western world towards materialism? Either way, at this point enough has been written, spoken, taught, and ingrained in the educational processes of Western man to raise genuine atheists and agnostics. Modern philosophy—particularly the philosophical Copernican Revolution through the “Hume-Kant axis”—has seriously challenged the traditional cosmological and teleological arguments. The majestic and overpowering dominance of science and the scientific method has for several centuries now impressed upon intellectuals that all reality can be explained in terms of natural cause and effect relationships. Science, carried away by its successes, has been bold enough to explain the origin of our world and all there is on its own terms. Evolution, astronomy, and geological theories are to be found in every science textbook beginning with grade 1. Biblical criticism and the documentary hypothesis are unquestioningly accepted in prestigious academia. The Jewish claims of chosenness and of national revelation, what contemporary theologians call the “scandal of particularism,” have not been treated sympathetically, to say the least.

The greatest challenge to religion has probably come from the behavioral sciences as they have come of age. They challenge the phenomenology of religion and the religious experience itself. Anthropology and psychology have totally different interpretations of the feelings and the quest for religion of which R. Lopian spoke. Orthodoxy has taken up the challenge, and over the past several decades much has been written and said—much of it very convincingly—to respond to these questions, assumptions, and criticisms. Orthodoxy need not run scared and hide from the facts in order to validate its positions. The secular disciplines have had to moderate their arrogant “know-it-all” posture.

We have also developed the linguistic, hermeneutical, and critical skills to understand and explain our eternal verities without doing violence to what mankind has discovered from other sources. Nonetheless, we must admit that authentic and honest disbelief is possible and does exist; what is self-evident in the world of religious piety and uncritical acceptance may not seem as self-evident in the wide world out there. There are many people who are honest in their disbelief and who innocently view the religious interpretation of reality as false—even as a distortion of reality which may be obstructive in attempts to cope with the real world.

There were obvious and understandable differences between Western and Eastern European secularism. Israel’s secular culture is the outgrowth of Eastern secularism.⁹ Eastern Haskalah, confronting

the hostility and implacable animus of its gentile environment, turned nationalistic and attempted to maintain its "Jewish" character by preserving the "spiritual" and "cultural" values of Jewish tradition without the trappings of Jewish theology. "In the old country," wrote Sol L. Goodman, "Ahad Ha'am, the exponent of spiritual Zionism, and Simon Dubnow, the exponent of spiritual Nationalism, were the theoreticians of secular Jewishness."¹⁰ It may sound odd to us to speak of spirituality without religion, but it is simply the effort to retain the experience of *kedusha* which Jewish thought and practice gave the Jews, without being bound to doctrines of faith which to "emancipated" minds are no longer tenable. Many blended these cultural values with the aspirations of socialism and its attractive humanistic underpinning. Men like Aaron David Gordon and Martin Buber, each in his own way, may have brought some people back to God, but it was to very non-institutional and non-dogmatic systems. History may have confirmed that this secular spirituality is but a temporary phenomenon which cannot be transmitted to future generations. But the point we are trying to make is that the moral failures are a *result* of secularism but not the *cause* of secularism.

The state of affairs in America is more complex; here influences are more varied and complicated by heterodox Jewish systems that claim religious legitimacy. There are those in the "Torah World" who have always argued that we can achieve some *modus vivendi* with secular Jews but not with those who misinterpret our religion and deliberately mislead and intellectually deceive our people. While that may be true in individual cases, we must admit that historically, Conservatism and Reform were *responses* to secularism rather than an attempt to subvert Orthodoxy. While we have every right—indeed, a duty—to deny the validity of their interpretation of the faith, we must recognize their failings as rooted in the same process of secularization of thought and deed that is more patently evident in avowed secularism. In short a liberal religionist who does not believe in *Torah min ha-shamayim* is as much the victim of the intellectual rejection of the traditional notion of miracle and traditional ideas of Divine communication as is the outright atheist. He is the victim, not the *rasha* or *naval*.

We find in our own sources the idea that genuine disbelief must be treated as error and not as a form of malefaction. Nachmanides in his commentary on the Torah interprets the verse, "And when you shall err and not observe all these commandments which the Lord has spoken unto Moses, from the day that the Lord commanded and onward throughout your generations,"¹¹ as follows:

It seems to refer to a sacrifice to be brought by one who denied the whole Torah in error, for instance, one who joined another nation to be like them

and he did not want to be a Jew; and it could be in error by an individual who as a child became captive amongst the heathens; and a community who thought that the time of Torah obligation has passed and it was not to be observed forever; or they said as it is mentioned in the Sifrei, “Why did God command? So that we will do and receive reward. We will not do and will forgo the reward”; as the Jews confronted Ezekiel . . . “A servant (Jew) whose master (God) has sold him, he is no longer his master”; or [it could happen] that the Torah will be forgotten and it already happened unfortunately for in the days of the wicked kings of Israel like Yaravam that most people forgot Torah and *misvot* completely. . . .

Ramban recognizes three very real possibilities: that the eternal validity of Torah will be questioned; that Jews, as a result of their history of suffering, may renounce the covenant; or that Jews will forget the obligations of Torah.

Much more recently Hazon Ish—hardly a liberal!—wrote,

It seems that the law of ‘downing’ the heretic applies only to a time that God’s providence is evident, as in the times when there were open miracles and there was use of heavenly voices and the righteous of the generations were subject to special providence which could be seen by all; and those who denied were with special perversion through the motivation of the evil inclination to lust and licentiousness. . . . But in the time of obscurity when faith has been torn from the impoverished of the people, ‘downing’ does not constitute mending of the breach, rather adding to the breach, for it will appear to them like corruption and oppression, heaven forbid. Since the whole purpose is to repair, the law (of downing) does not apply when it is of no constructive value and it devolves upon us to bring them back with bonds of love and to place some in the ray of light as much as it is in our power.¹²

The conclusions of Hazon Ish are amazing. He actually reversed the halakhic decision of the Talmud and Rambam in the way we have to relate to “heretics”; he recommended effecting a change in their ways by a bond of love rather than by counterproductive harshness. Ideologically he concedes that given the modern milieu heresy need not be the result of moral aberration but a “genuinely” arrived-at “error.” His words should apply as much to leaders of Reform and Conservatism as they do to the secular Jew.

One of the tragedies of our time has been the persistence of the extreme right community to treat all non-believing, non-practicing Jews, or at least the educated and the intellectuals, as *resha'im*—wicked, immoral people—and not as the ideological children of their generation. Probably never before has such a high percentage of our people strayed from the Torah path, but concurrently, the pathway of *teshuvah* is wider and more accessible than ever. Because secularism has never been more successful than over the past 100 years, its results are also more devastating than ever before.

It is not surprising that *Hazal* spoke about the *ikveta di-meshiha* (footsteps of the Messiah) in terms of a society which is only too

familiar to us. They seem to be suggesting that the decadence created by the secular society contains the antithesis, the thrust towards the Messianic era (an almost Hegelian idea). But these goals can only be achieved with “the bonds of love,” not by fire and not with stones. In the words of Hillel, “Love people and bring them close to Torah.”¹³

I do not subscribe to the often well-intentioned but unfeasible and undesirable attempts at institutional integration with the heterodox “for the sake of Kelal Yisrael and in the name of Ahavat Yisrael.” I am, though, for dignity and dialogue both in Israel and America. This means talking initially with Reform and Conservative leaders—bonds of love cannot be created from afar. At the same time, Halakhah should not be ruthlessly manipulated to accommodate external humanistic goals; it is simply not true that “where there is a rabbinic will there is a halakhic way.”¹⁴ But we must come to terms with the fact that secularism and its effects are here to stay for a while, in spite of all the successes of the various *teshuva* efforts; that the people affected by these ideas are not *ipso facto* degenerates and derelicts; and that our response must be with dignity and dialogue. It may be frustrating and seemingly hopeless at times to achieve any *modus vivendi* or understanding, but the Tannaitic description of *ikveta di-meshiha* ends with the undaunted expression of faith: “And we have no one to lean on but our father in heaven.” That should be enough to keep us going!

NOTES

1. *The Jewish World*, January 24, 1986.
2. Psalms 16:8.
3. *Ibid.* 14:1.
4. *Kovets Ma'amarim*, Chapter 1, pp. 11–18, published in Jerusalem, 1963.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *The Nineteen Letters of ben Uzziel*, fifth letter.
7. Isaiah 1:3.
8. *Lev Eliyahu*, Vol. 1, Chapter 1.
9. Saadia, *Emunot ve-De'ot*, p. 15 (Leipzig ed.). This theme is most dramatically presented by Yehuda Halevi in the *Kuzari*, but he was essentially against philosophical speculation and built the faith structure on the historical experience.
10. Saul L. Goodman, ed., *The Faith of Secular Jews*, KTAV Publishing House, 1976, p. 8.
11. Numbers 15:22–23.
12. *Yoreh De'ah* 2:16.
13. *Avot* 1:12.
14. Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism*, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981, p. 44.