

I COULD HAVE USED SOME RABBINIC AUTHORITY

I

Rabbinic Authority; Da'at Torah; Lo Tasur; Emunat Hakhamim; Ruah ha-Kodesh; Divine Will; Personal Autonomy: the concepts leap in scholarly pirouettes off the pages of this special issue of Tradition. Such has been the remarkable development of halakhic Judaism in our times that these ideas, once considered arcane, are of great moment for anyone who wishes to understand the norms which guide classical Jewish life today. But it wasn't always thus . . .

II

No one sat me down before I came to Atlanta as a young rabbi and said: "Remember, you have rabbinic authority. What you say about God, Torah, and life in general is going to be listened to, because you are the living embodiment of Torah, and you represent the holy Jewish tradition. What you say is *da'at Torah*, the Torah position. Your community will have *emunat hakhamim* in you, trusting you as they trust the words of the Sages. Your opinion on any subject is, in a way, the word of God filtered through our wise men, our Rishonim and Aharonim, through your own piety and fear of heaven, your profound learning, your thought processes refined by years of exposure to the purifying atmosphere of the eternal wisdom of the Torah. And while you do not have literal *ruah ha-kodesh*, what you say is a distillation of the divine will."

No one told me these things, nor even hinted at them. Perhaps it's just as well they didn't. For one thing, my community, thoughtful and kind as they were, never heard of *da'at Torah* or *emunat hakhamim*. (Uncannily, however, they had an instinctive understanding of the concept of personal autonomy. One Federation leader, upon being informed by me that a certain contemplated action was against Torah law, responded: "Listen, rabbi, we need to do our own thing, so let's keep the Torah out of this. No one understands it anyway.")

I did have rabbinic authority when I answered questions about the time for Yizkor, or the date for next year's Seder, which answers they accepted fully and unreservedly, no doubt sensing that I represented four thousand years of Jewish tradition. And when they wanted to know the Jewish names for Cleo and Rosemarie and Butch and JoAnn, and I unhesitatingly replied Kalman and Rivkah and Barukh and Yocheved Chana, they knew that this brilliance was not only the culmination of a superb rabbinic education, but were convinced that I was reflecting the divine will. But when, thus encouraged, I tentatively suggested to a father that he buy tefillin for his bar mitzvah boy, I was informed: "I got a set for my own bar mitzvah and they're brand new, so why do I need to buy new ones?" And when a fine lady told me that she "didn't practice ritual but only lived by the Ten Commandments," and I made bold to inform her that

Shabbat was the fourth of the ten, she was mildly surprised and said politely but firmly, "Are you absolutely sure?"

No one really suspected I had *ruah ha-kodesh* except Joe the chronic gambler, who called me one Erev Yom Kippur with his own awesome concern: the World Series was approaching and would I please pick the winner for him? "But Joe," I would protest, "you're risking hundreds of dollars on the word of someone who is not an expert in these things." Joe, overcome by genuine *emunat hakhamim* and convinced that I had a direct line, would insist: "Listen, rabbi, whatever you pick, I'm ready to lay money on it." For four years running, in an amazing display of rabbinic *mazal*, I picked winners, and Joe would happily give ten percent of his earnings to the Shul, informing one and all that his rabbi truly possessed the divine spirit. For him I was the very model of a modern rabbinic authority, wrapped in a mantle of *da'at Torah* and crowned by the divine will. During those years, in ecstatic fulfillment of the Biblical *lo tasur*, he would do anything I asked of him. But *vayehi hayom* and the fifth year rolled around, and because of a big rally by the wrong team in the bottom of the ninth inning of the seventh game, my Shul lost its ten percent and I lost my *ruah ha-kodesh*.

At births, bar mitzvahs, weddings, and funerals, mine was the unquestioned *da'at Torah*. In sickness and domestic crisis I was their pipeline to the Holy One. But when it came to life's major decisions—how to raise the children, how much tzedakah to give and where to give it, where to send a child to school, how to live life as a Jew—it was, "Rabbi, we love you, but the Torah was for then, and this is now."

When I spoke about anti-Semitism, I was their halakhic decisor, but when I asked why black athletes are called Isaiah and Jewish children are called Lucas, I was their very young rabbi who would some day mature.

When I taught about our glorious past, they had faith in my every word, but when I suggested that without Torah living we may not have a future, I was out of touch with the present.

When I supported the State of Israel in its tribulations, I was the voice of Jewish authority, but when, one Pesach, I inquired from the pulpit why the church across the street was overflowing on that Easter Sunday while we had fifteen people for our Yom Tov davening, I was being impractical and Utopian.

I could have used some rabbinic authority in those days.

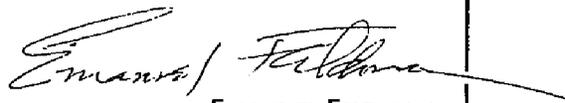
III

That was a long time ago, the fifties and sixties, and many things have changed since then: the community today is more serious, more learned, more Jewishly sophisticated; their questions deal with *mikveh* and *niddah* and *eruv* and *muktzeh* and business ethics and birth control and even questions about the meaning of talmudic passages; they inquire about yeshivot to which to send their children who are now named Yosef and Rachel and Meir and Leah; and I no longer have to complain about Easter Sundays, because there are four hundred people in Shul every Shabbos; and there are day schools, plus a high-school, plus a kollel. But certain things remain the same. They are still not concerned

with *da'at Torah* or *emunat hakhamim* (confession: because in all this time I never brought it up), and every since that fateful ninth inning no one ever again suspected that I had a direct line to God. And despite their sweet willingness to listen respectfully, and even occasionally to follow, age has not withered nor custom staled their infinite attraction to personal autonomy—although today's version of P.A. frequently leads to decisions for and not against a Torah oriented life.

IV

As we devote this entire issue to the subject of rabbinic authority and its rich history, it occurs to me that many rabbis a generation ago could have used some of this rabbinic authority talk—if not a special issue, at least a symposium or just an article now and then. As a matter of fact, if, after all the dissection it undergoes in this special issue there are some extra portions of rabbinic authority left over, many of them, including the undersigned, could still use some today.


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