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## IS CLUB MED KOSHER? REFLECTIONS ON SYNTHESIS AND COMPARTMENTALIZATION\*

### I.

It all started when I told my friend Larry Grossman that I was planning to take my wife Judy to Club Med for a winter vacation. On December 22, 1983, you see, Judy and I passed the twenty-year mark in our marriage, and it seemed to me that a marathon achievement of that order merited some kind of special celebration. What then could be nicer than to escape the cold of winter for a few days by going to a Caribbean island—the Dominican Republic, for example—where we could soak up the sun, loll on the beach, and maybe down a pina colada or two under the swaying palms?

Please don't misunderstand—Judy and I are hardly swingers. Indeed, it is fair to say that my own social outlook is quite conservative. (I once refused to appear on a radio program because the host—a rabbi—was a known adulterer.) So why Club Med, you will ask, which has a well-deserved reputation as a swinger's paradise? The answer, quite simply, is that I was interested in the paradise and not in the swinging. Forget the gorgeous-looking girls in bikinis, forget the all-night disco parties, forget Club Med's "let loose" philosophy. All I wanted was a crack at some sunshine, a quiet stretch of beach, and those swaying palms—all this at a guaranteed first-class resort. Innocent enough, no?

Larry, however, would have none of it. He expressed amazement that an Orthodox Jew could even contemplate going to Club Med, citing it as a classic example of Orthodox "compartmentalization," i.e., the process whereby modern Orthodox Jews—those deeply enmeshed in modern secular culture—separate out the Jewish from the non-Jewish aspects of their lives. Compartmentalization has both its defenders and detractors, and I have always been counted among the latter. Indeed, in a Spring 1982 symposium in *Tradition*,<sup>1</sup> I went

so far as to label compartmentalization the “Frankenstein” of modern Orthodoxy, arguing instead for “synthesis,” the creative blending of the best elements of Jewish tradition and modern culture. To me, an Orthodox Jew vacationing at Club Med—taking care not to violate the *kashrut* laws, saying the afternoon prayers on a wind-swept beach, etc., etc.—represented the epitome of synthesis. Yet here was Larry accusing me—*me* of all people—of being a compartmentalized modern Orthodox type. You can imagine my chagrin.

What does an Orthodox Jew do when he is confronted by a *novum*, by a new and disturbing situation that requires clarification? He, of course, consults the *sefarim*, the authoritative sources, and that is just what I did. Knowing that compartmentalization is a sociological concept, I turned to the literature of sociology, and particularly American Jewish sociology, in search of an answer to my *she’elah*: did my choice of Club Med as a vacation spot bespeak compartmentalization or synthesis? Sad to say, however, I quickly discovered that compartmentalization had barely begun to be analyzed by sociologists; there were fewer than half a dozen articles which made even a stab in this direction. If, then, there was to be an answer to my *she’elah*—a sociological *teshuvah*, so to speak—there was no choice but for me to get directly into the act. Having posed the question, I would have to seek to answer it. While a full answer still eludes me, the following reflections may at least suggest a framework within which it can be developed.

## II.

Let me begin by making certain we know which group of Orthodox Jews we are talking about when we refer to compartmentalization. Over the years various labeling schemes have been used in connection with the Orthodox community, and at times things can get quite confusing.

In his pioneering study of American Orthodoxy in the 1965 *American Jewish Year Book*,<sup>2</sup> Charles Liebman distinguished between “sectarian” and “church” or “modern” Orthodoxy. The sectarian Orthodox, he argued, assume an adversarial stance vis à vis general society, and prefer isolation to compromise. The modern Orthodox, on the other hand, desire to enter the social mainstream, and stress the viability of Halakhah for contemporary life. In the sectarian camp, Liebman placed the various Hasidic groups and that element which today is dubbed the “yeshiva world,” i.e., the “black hatters.” Modern Orthodoxy was seen by him as centering around Yeshiva University and its graduates.

Liebman's scheme, in essence, is reproduced in chapter 3 of William Helmreich's *The World of the Yeshiva*,<sup>3</sup> which was published in 1982. Here again we find the "modern" Orthodox, about whom we are told:

They participate fully in the larger society. Many are professionals: doctors, lawyers, accountants, professors, and the like. They are observant in that they eat kosher food, abstain from work on the Sabbath, pray every day, and celebrate Jewish holidays as prescribed by Jewish law. At the same time, they maintain a delicate balance between the outside world and their own community, which at times results in a watering down of various observances. . . .

They swim in a pool together with members of the opposite sex, often attend movies, plays, and other entertainments, and, in increasing numbers, live in the suburbs. . . . The women do not as a rule cover their hair except in synagogue, and parents place a good deal of importance on securing a good secular as well as religious education for their children.

Liebman's sectarian Orthodox appear in Helmreich's volume under two headings: "ultra-" Orthodox, a term reserved for the Hasidim, and "strictly" Orthodox, Helmreich's appellation for the yeshiva world.

Still another labeling scheme, this one employing a broad array of terms, is found in Samuel Heilman's "The Many Faces of Orthodoxy,"<sup>4</sup> an essay in historical sociology which appeared in the February and May 1982 numbers of *Modern Judaism*. Heilman categorizes the leading Orthodox rabbinic figures of the 19th and 20th centuries in terms of their varying responses to modernity, and comes up with four basic types, plus a number of sub-types. The four basic types are "rejectionist," "neo-rejectionist," "tolerator," and "syncretist." Rejectionists and neo-rejectionists, who "remain within the shelter of the traditional Orthodox world," assigning an "inferior ontological status" to everything outside Orthodoxy, immediately call to mind Liebman's sectarians. Syncretists, on the other hand, are very much akin to Liebman's modernists, in that they seek to "uncover and retrieve [the] valuable elements of modernity and fit them into the framework of traditional Orthodoxy"; they see the Jewish way as "essentially harmonious with life in . . . modern, secular society." Tolerators, whom Heilman subdivides into "quasi-" tolerators, "passive" tolerators, and "transitional" tolerators, are in fact—in terms of Liebman's scheme—sectarians who either wish to maintain dialogue with modernists or are themselves on the way to becoming modernists.

Having begun with Charles Liebman, I want to turn to him again, since he has just recently put forward yet another labeling scheme. This one, set forth in the essay "Religion and the Chaos of Modernity,"<sup>5</sup> in *Take Judaism, for Example*, is particularly noteworthy because it brings compartmentalization directly into the picture. As Liebman develops his theme of the crisis which modernity has brought

to Judaism and the Jewish people, a theme, by the way, that is quite similar to Heilman's in "The Many Faces of Orthodoxy," "compartmentalization"—and that is the term that Liebman uses—emerges as one of three "modern" Orthodox responses. A fourth response, which Liebman labels "neo-traditionalism," is, in fact, the sectarian option.

What, aside from compartmentalization, are the variants of modern Orthodoxy that Liebman discerns? The terms he introduces here are "adaptationism" and "expansionism." These two modern Orthodox trends have a great deal in common in that they both look toward some form of synthesis. Thus, Liebman states about adaptationism:

[It] affirm[s] that the basic values of the modern world are not only compatible with Judaism but partake of its essence. Freedom, individual autonomy, equality of man, rationalism, science, rule of law, etc. are all found to be inherent in the Jewish tradition. Secular study is affirmed as a positive religious value—an instrument whereby man might learn more of God's creation. Not least important, adaptationism includes an effort to reinterpret the tradition, including those aspects of the law which seem to stand in opposition to modern values.

A leading proponent of adaptationism, identified by Liebman, is Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, who for many years was associated with New York's Yeshiva University, and who now serves as president of Bar Ilan University in Israel.

Expansionism, which might well be dubbed adaptationism for the Israelis, involves a bold attempt to advance religious claims on behalf of the ostensibly secular workings of the reborn Jewish state. By identifying modern Israel with the messianic promise of the return to the land, Orthodox Zionists are able to justify close cooperation with their secular counterparts, as well as active participation in all areas of Israeli society. The pioneer of the expansionist viewpoint, of course, was Abraham Isaac Kuk, the first chief rabbi of modern Palestine.

What about compartmentalization, which is our special concern? Liebman devotes a mere page and a half to the subject, and one would wish for a great deal more. Still, he does have some very important things to say. First and foremost, he stresses that compartmentalization is specifically associated with modern Orthodox Jews, i.e., those who seek some form of engagement with modern secular culture. Second, Liebman argues that compartmentalization is properly to be regarded as a psychological process rather than an intellectual outlook or ideological stance, and that it comes to the fore in situations of conflict. Third, he maintains that compartmentalization can function smoothly only when it manifests itself in an

“unselfconscious” manner, i.e., when the individual is oblivious to what is happening. Fourth and finally, Liebman offers a formal definition of compartmentalization: it is the attempt to “distinguish between aspects of life or conduct which are Jewishly relevant and aspects which have nothing to do with Judaism”; it involves “multiple identities through which [modern Orthodox Jews] relate to different aspects of life.”

Additional insight into compartmentalization is to be had by examining Samuel Heilman’s essay “Constructing Orthodoxy,”<sup>6</sup> which appeared in the May/June 1978 number of *Society*. Heilman’s comments on the subject are quite brief—several paragraphs, at most—but they parallel Liebman’s to a remarkable degree, and thus serve to deepen our understanding of compartmentalization. Like Liebman, Heilman is concerned with “modern” Orthodox Jews, i.e., those who “identify themselves through their commitment to adhere faithfully to the beliefs, principles, and traditions of Jewish law and observance without being either remote from or untroubled by life in the contemporary secular world.” These Jews, Heilman argues, are engaged in a perpetual juggling act, seeking to bring about a situation of “stabilized dualism.” One way of accomplishing this is through “synthesis,” a process in which “reciprocal fusion between past and present dialectically generates a third path—either a traditioned modernity or a contemporized tradition.” The alternative to synthesis is “compartmentalization,” which involves “conceptual liquidation or nihilation.” In this connection, Heilman acutely observes:

While the effort is made to bring about a harmonic blend of tradition and the contemporary world, there are nevertheless some areas of strain where no amount of reinterpretation seems able to overcome certain dissonances. In such cases, the discordant matters are either made peripheral, inattended; or they are actively repressed and forgotten, disattended. Such nihilistic correlates of reinterpretation neutralize threats to what are considered appropriate social definitions of reality. . . .

Modern Orthodox Jews may either ignore those laws and observances which do not fit into the modern world or actively blot them out. Such action does not presume an ideological repudiation whereby the inappropriate is wiped off the books, as it were . . . it simply means that such matters are left in the background.

Compartmentalization, then, as Heilman sees it—and here, of course, he is strongly seconding Liebman—is a psychological process, a process whose essence is captured in Erving Goffman’s lovely shorthand phrase, “dimming the lights.”

III.

Having achieved a degree of clarity about the nature of compartmentalization, we can now turn to the question that is of direct concern to us: is the Orthodox Jew who chooses to vacation at Club Med exhibiting compartmentalization, as my friend Larry contended, or rather manifesting synthesis, as I maintained? A useful way of proceeding here would be to come up with a normative model of a Jewish vacation, a vacation that is, so to speak, “Torah-true.” With this model in hand, we could take the measure of the Orthodox Club Med’er, determining what exactly—if anything—is problematic about his behavior. Certainly this would make it easier to decide whether we are dealing with compartmentalization or synthesis.

It is precisely at this juncture, however, that we encounter a seemingly insurmountable problem. The model that we are looking for—the model of a normative Jewish vacation—simply does not exist. To be sure, we know something about how Orthodox Jews spend their vacation time. One need only glance at the advertisements which appear in New York’s *Jewish Press* to get a feel for the range of possibilities that are currently available—everything from Hasidic bungalow colonies in the Catskills to glatt kosher cruises to nowhere. As for the way things were in the past, there are tidbits of information contained in a variety of sources, including faded photographs from the early 20th century showing outstanding rabbinic personalities gathered at Central European spas to take the cure. What we cannot put our finger on, however, is the ideational element, a halakhic conception of vacationing that might explain all these activities. Vacationing presupposes leisure, and leisure, both as a palpable social reality and as an acknowledged cultural norm, is too new, too modern, to be addressed in the halakhic sources. As Yeshiva University president Norman Lamm has noted:<sup>7</sup> “. . . one cannot speak of *the* Jewish view of leisure. The situation has simply never presented itself in just those terms to allow the most authoritative expositors of Judaism to pronounce on it and allow a consensus—or several of them—to develop.” Lamm makes no bones about the fact that the Halakhah has yet to catch up with the modern leisure explosion, with a society in which “leisure is gradually replacing work as the basis of culture.” What Lamm calls a “Jewish ethic of leisure” is still not on the drawing boards, let alone off it.

Where does this leave us then? Are we to assume that without a normative Jewish vacation model, we cannot proceed any further in analyzing the Orthodox Club Med’er; that we have reached a dead end in terms of deciding whether he is a compartmentalizer or a

synthesizer? My own answer here would be an emphatic “No!” As I see it, the absence of a normative model, far from constituting a stumbling block, is a telltale sign, a sign that we are dealing with synthesis and not compartmentalization. For how, in the absence of a normative pattern of behavior, can one even begin to talk about compartmentalization? Compartmentalization, as Liebman and Heilman explain, is an avoidance mechanism, a psychological process which serves to block out conflict in a situation in which the demands of tradition are at odds with the promptings of modernity. But what possible relevance could this have to vacationing, which is an area in which no normative pattern exists? Why, from the very outset, should stress, tension, conflict—call it what you will—enter into the picture here? What room is there for a gnawing sense of guilt in a situation in which an authoritative norm is lacking? Certainly I—and here let me bear personal witness—did not feel guilty in any way about planning a Club Med vacation.

But what about Larry’s reaction? If what I am saying is correct, if compartmentalization has no bearing on the situation of the Orthodox Jew who wishes to vacation at Club Med, why was Larry so quick to label me a compartmentalizer? Why did it seem to him—and he did not hesitate for a moment in speaking—that compartmentalization was the appropriate term to invoke? Two possibilities suggest themselves here, one involving style, the other substance. Style-wise, it may have seemed to Larry that a Club Med vacation was just too physical, too fleshy, too openly indulgent of the senses to be fitting for an Orthodox Jew. That, most certainly, is the way that an Orthodox sectarian would regard the matter, since his outlook is characterized by a pervasive asceticism. As Irving Greenberg has observed:<sup>8</sup> “Much of . . . [sectarian] ideology is saturated with an ascetic flavor which seems to be a product of a one-sided development through centuries of suffering combined with the medieval antagonism to the realm of the flesh.” What is important in our context, however, is the fact that modern Orthodox Jews, including the modern Orthodox rabbinic elite, do not share this ascetic bias; they are openly accepting of the pleasures of the senses. This, of course, is indicative of the extent of their modernization, but it also means that modern Orthodox Jews function in this area without a sense of guilt. And where there is no guilt, we have seen, there can be no compartmentalization.

Turning from style to substance, one can again see how, at first blush, the Orthodox Club Med’er might appear to be a compartmentalizer. After all, there is no shortage of laws in the *Shulhan Arukh* which are fully relevant to the situation of an Orthodox Jew going to Club Med—laws pertaining to such things as personal modesty, proper attire, socializing between men and women, sexual

arousal, etc. With regard to all of these laws, it needs to be honestly acknowledged, modern Orthodox Jews function without formal halakhic authorization. As Charles Liebman has noted:<sup>9</sup> modern Orthodox Jews “cannot find any *halakhic* authorities who will publicly defend their permissiveness even when it falls within the framework of the permissible.” Certainly then, there is a strong presumptive basis for the claim that the Orthodox Club Med’er—who, there is no denying, does engage in mixed swimming, does sit on a beach where there are scantily-clad women, etc.—is, indeed, a compartmentalizer, someone who closes his eyes—“dims the lights,” as Goffman would have it—to what the Law requires.

The modern Orthodox Jew, however, brings an entirely different perspective to bear on this whole matter, and it is his subjective assessment, I would contend, which is the key consideration here. From the standpoint of the modern Orthodox Jew, the problematic element is not his behavior, which he regards as fully appropriate, but rather the authority structure of Orthodoxy, which requires him to pose questions to *gedolim* (recognized halakhic authorities) who are distinctively unmodern in their outlook. (Why modern Orthodoxy has failed to produce its own *gedolim* is a separate and quite fascinating question. It is much too complex a matter, however, to enter into here.) Virtually to a man, the contemporary *gedolim* are Orthodox sectarians, who are either unattuned to the modern experience or actively hostile toward it. How, then, could they be expected to endorse any aspect of an Orthodox Jew’s behavior that smacks of modernity, particularly when it involves something as radically new as leisure activity? At the same time, the modern Orthodox Jew is firmly convinced that if there were *gedolim* with a modern sensibility, they would not hesitate to legitimate his behavioral patterns. This view is strengthened by the knowledge that the modern Orthodox rabbinic elite engages in very much the same activities as the laity. The modern Orthodox Jew, then, may experience a measure of frustration in this area, but he certainly does not nurse a sense of guilt. And again, where there is no guilt, there can be no compartmentalization.

A number of additional points need to be made here so as to round out the analysis. The first is that subjective feeling, by definition, cuts both ways. In other words, the very same act, depending on the attitudinal element which accompanies it, may signal compartmentalization no less so than synthesis. Thus, if an Orthodox Jew were to go to Club Med without having thought through the *gedolim* “problem” as I have defined it, if in the back of his mind there were an uneasy feeling that someone who was “really *frum*” would not be doing what he is doing, then his presence at Club Med would certainly constitute compartmentalization. I do think it fair to say that a good many

modern Orthodox Jews, regardless of whether they vacation at Grossinger's, on Cape Cod, in Hawaii, or on a beach in Far Rockaway, fall into the category of this type of compartmentalizer. For them, the great fear, the ultimate terror, is that someone—God forbid—will turn on the lights.

There is yet another sense in which one man's synthesis is another man's compartmentalization. In the foregoing discussion I have had very little to say about the Orthodox sectarian, since the object of my concern has been the modern Orthodox Jew. However, I do feel it important to note that if, by some mad fluke, a sectarian Orthodox Jew were to show up at Club Med—just try to imagine that!—his presence there, unlike mine, would clearly testify to the workings of compartmentalization. Yet further: even if the Orthodox sectarian were to arrange things at Club Med so that he had his own private beach area and thus avoided all the problems associated with mixed swimming, women in bikinis, etc., it would still add up to compartmentalization. Why? Because the impulse behind vacationing, let alone vacationing at a place like Club Med, is distinctly modern in nature, and that, in and of itself, should make it something alien to an Orthodox Jew with a traditionalist outlook. Here then is a consoling thought for the Orthodox modernist who compartmentalizes: every Orthodox sectarian who takes a vacation is also a compartmentalizer.

The fact that vacationing springs from a modern impulse also carries with it implications for the behavior of the modern Orthodox Jew. Thus, a truly modern Orthodox individual will not attach any special importance to vacationing with other Orthodox Jews. To be sure, on occasion he may end up going to a resort that caters to a largely Orthodox clientele, but this will be for reasons of sheer convenience, e.g., easy accessibility to kosher food (how many fruit cups and vegetable platters can a person be expected to eat in a lifetime?). Convenience aside, however, the modern Orthodox Jew, being aware that his desire to go on a vacation reflects the modern side of his personality, will take it for granted that vacationing is an experience to be shared with the general run of modern humanity, including non-Orthodox Jews and non-Jews. There is simply no place here for a narrow parochialism. Added to which is a positive consideration: halakhic observances carried out in a "non-Jewish" vacation environment such as Club Med speak far more directly and eloquently to synthesis than do the same observances put into practice in a "Jewish" vacation setting, e.g., an Orthodox bungalow colony or Grossinger's. Why then settle for half-measures?

On that sober note, I conclude my reflections. Hopefully, I have gone at least part of the way toward clarifying the compartmentalization-synthesis issue as it relates to vacationing. Heaven

knows, I have worked hard at the task. I'm tired; I have a headache. Come to think of it, I need a vacation.

NOTES

- \* This essay originated as a paper presented at the 15th annual conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, Boston, December 19, 1983.
- 1. David Singer, "The State of Orthodoxy," *Tradition* (Spring, 1982), pp. 69-72.
- 2. Charles Liebman, "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life," in Morris Fine and Milton Himmelfarb (eds.), *American Jewish Year Book*, 1965, pp. 21-98.
- 3. William Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva* (New York, 1982).
- 4. Samuel Heilman, "The Many Faces of Orthodoxy," *Modern Judaism*, February, 1982, pp. 23-51, and May, 1982, pp. 171-198.
- 5. Charles Liebman, "Religion and the Chaos of Modernity," in Jacob Neusner (ed.), *Take Judaism, For Example*. (Chicago, 1983), pp. 147-164.
- 6. Samuel Heilman, "Constructing Orthodoxy," *Society* (May-June, 1978), pp. 32-40.
- 7. Norman Lamm, "A Jewish Ethic of Leisure," in *Faith and Doubt* (New York, 1971), pp. 186-209.
- 8. Irving Greenberg, "Jewish Values and the Changing American Ethic," *Tradition* (Summer, 1968), pp. 42-74.
- 9. Charles Liebman, "Orthodox Judaism Today," *Midstream* (August-September, 1979), pp. 19-26.