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MODERN ORTHODOXY: CRISIS AND SOLUTION

There can be no doubt that the emergence of Orthodoxy as a major force on the American Jewish scene in recent years has been a most significant and far-reaching development. Within a relatively short period of time it has grown from the faith of the poorest and least respected portion of the community to one that commands the allegiance of an increasingly wealthy and influential element of American Jewry. Young people in growing numbers continue to be attracted to its beliefs and practices. This development provides testimony of the strong role Orthodox Jews will continue to play on the communal stage for the foreseeable future.

This success story has, however, not affected all parts of the Orthodox community evenly. Surprisingly enough, this unprecedented growth has placed the Modern Orthodox party very much on the defensive. Major accretions, in both numbers and financial resources, have been experienced by the right wing of Orthodoxy rather than by the modernists. Thirty years ago the latter element seemed to represent the only hope for Orthodoxy in this country. Today the reverse seems increasingly to be true.

Grave self-doubts and an increasing lack of confidence, among both the leaders and followers of Modern Orthodoxy, are all too noticeable. Articles in *Tradition* and addresses at conventions of the Rabbinical Council of America—major forums for Modern Orthodoxy—spend a significant amount of time and energy defending the modernist position while the drift of influence seems to continue towards the right-wing. Many speeches and articles authored by those associated with the modernist position are filled with grim assessments of contemporary Modern Orthodoxy and its future. No such pessimistic analysis of the state of the right wing appears.¹

This loss of self-confidence and nerve on the part of Modern Orthodoxy is not due, in this writer's opinion, to external factors. It

is rather the result of failure by that group to develop a coherent ideology to express in religious terms the basis for its ideals and practices. The right wing has clearly proclaimed that many elements of the Modern Orthodox lifestyle are contrary to authentic Halakha and Jewish thought, but by and large there has been no serious response by the leaders of Modern Orthodoxy. This absence is partly due to the fact that many of the rabbis and teachers in Modern Orthodox institutions are themselves products of the right wing and sympathize with the ideas of that group. It is also the product of fear by others of getting involved in a bloody fight with the zealots of the right. Whatever its causes, the result has been a drift to the right by much of the youth seriously committed to living a truly halakhic lifestyle.

Since Modern Orthodoxy has never coherently articulated its views on how its ideals and practices conform to religious requirements, its individual followers are forced to find religious guidance elsewhere. They generally take this guidance from pronouncements of the right wing leaders, who almost always condemn the positions of Modern Orthodoxy. This leads to the development of a very unhealthy self-image for contemporary Modern Orthodox Jews. On the psychological level they are forced to concede that the right wing indeed represents a more authentic and religious form of Judaism, and that they in effect are not fully living up to the requirements of Judaism by persisting in a Modern Orthodox lifestyle.²

The Modern Orthodox world suffers from an enormous inferiority complex regarding the true value of its religious practices and views. As Lawrence Kaplan has noted, there is virtually no attempt on the part of the average Modern Orthodox Jew to justify his actions or his identity on religious grounds. If the thought of such an undertaking ever arises, it is almost always certain to be brushed aside and ignored.³ Can it be surprising that so many serious young people faced with a choice between such a picture of Modern Orthodoxy and a right wing vocal about its principles and proud of its faithfulness to its beliefs choose the latter over the former?

We need to abandon this posture of defensiveness and go over to the offensive. A message must be conveyed to the general community that Modern Orthodoxy stands for values that are every bit as authentic and halakhically sound as those espoused by the right wing. These values are not open to challenge as violating Jewish law and thought. Indeed they are in many cases more faithful to Torah-true Judaism than is the behavior of the rightists. If the right wing's ideology were opposed on such halakhic and religious grounds, there would be much greater success in attracting youth who are serious about Torah and Halakha to our ranks. There would also be a

greater degree of respect on the part of the right wing for a group which they now view as a party of weak-kneed compromisers.

There are a number of areas in which Modern Orthodoxy fulfills halakhic imperatives more intensively than its opponents. The right wing has paradoxically succeeded in transforming just those subjects into grounds for attacking the modernists as having deviated from Jewish law. They have been able to succeed in this by foisting a version of Jewish history on the community which is wildly distorted and calculated to provide justification for their stand and a total indictment of any other approach to halakhic Judaism.

One such area, that of secular knowledge and openness to non-Jewish culture, provides an excellent example of this trend. The idea of a firm commitment to Torah on one hand and to the values of world culture on the other is certainly a basic principle of Modern Orthodoxy. This concept has been savagely attacked by the right wing as non-halakhic and heretical. As one right wing spokesman has written: "The basic premise of accepting aspects of world culture outside of Torah and then proceeding to synthesize them with Torah *hashkofa* is the root of all departures from accepted Torah norms."⁴ This writer goes on to tell us that such anti-halakhic synthesis was never permitted by the Torah leaders of past generations.

But surely Jewish history argues against this! It was just such an attempt at synthesis which the medieval Spanish community and its Torah leaders created. These values similarly motivated the Gaonim of Babylonia and their generations. This philosophy set the tone for the spiritual life of Italian Jewry and its Torah leaders throughout the ages. And it was such a world-view which was advocated by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and his Neo-Orthodox followers in Germany and by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and his students in twentieth-century Erets Yisrael. In short this principle represents one of the main streams of Jewish thought throughout the centuries.

Were R. Saadia Gaon and R. Hai Gaon heretics when they attempted to synthesize Judaism with the ideas of Plato and harmonize philosophical rationalism with Torah thought? Was Maimonides a disbeliever when he wrote the *Moreh* and insisted that it is the religious duty of the Jew to study the wisdom and culture of the secular world? Was R. Abraham ibn Ezra outside the pale because he insisted that one can only truly know God by intensive study of the sciences? Was R. Menachem Meiri worthy of rejection because he championed the study of Greek philosophy as a religious obligation? Were R. Samson R. Hirsch and R. Abraham I. Kook non-Orthodox in their views? The answer to all these questions is clearly "No." We are in very good company.

At the same time Modern Orthodoxy cannot deny that there exists another more restrictive position on this question. That ideology, illustrated by medieval France and Germany and much of modern Eastern Europe, rejected this liberal approach. However, neither of these approaches has a monopoly on legitimacy. Modern Orthodoxy can make a good halakhic case of following solid sources in both *rishonim* and *aharonim* in its openness to the secular world. Indeed, it could well be upholding the majority view on this matter. All of the previously mentioned Torah giants would not recognize this ideal of the right wing, cloaked in its mask of monolithic authenticity, as representing the fulfillment of halakhic Judaism. They would rather award that positive certification to the so-called "misguided ideas and policies of Modern Orthodoxy."⁵ We should be reminding our students and congregants that ours is a policy of Torah, not compromise.

Responsibility for *kelal Yisrael*, the Jewish people in general, is another area in which Modern Orthodoxy is more faithful to the dictates of Halakha than are its opponents. Since the general Jewish community is secular in orientation and lacks any understanding of Halakha, the right wing sees little reason to associate with the broad organizations of American Jewry. Adherents of this view also fear that close connections with secular Jews may bring spiritual contamination to the strictly observant. They have therefore retreated into a ghettoized position and have little to do with the broader community's attempts to express its Jewish identity and concerns. The right wing does not only oppose joint religious services with, or spiritual recognition of, the non-Orthodox clergy. That is certainly a defensible halakhic position, with which many in the Modern Orthodox world agree. They also are separatist in relation to communal charitable, social and political activities. When they engage in such enterprises, it is almost always through organizations of their own, rather than through joint efforts with other Jews.

But this policy also has great negative effects. The masses of American Jewry learn to view the Orthodox as narrow separatists, only willing to work with like-thinking Jews. This perception is especially harmful at the present time, when the general community is more open than ever before to a return to tradition. Only the Modern Orthodox seem to be aware of their responsibility at this juncture in history, and we have taken our position under the guidance of *gedolei Torah*.

The right wing must again be asked to justify this stand on halakhic grounds. Is there precedent anywhere for religious Jews to qualify their interest in the problems of fellow-Jews according to the degree of faithfulness by such Jews to the detailed observance of

mitsvot? Where can justification be found for turning away from ninety percent of American Jewry and not attempting to meet them on the grounds of their interests? If the spiritual destruction of these millions of souls occurs, who will be responsible for their loss? Will it be the Modern Orthodox who attempted to deal with them in respect and brotherhood, or those who self-righteously held themselves above and apart from the battle? We have no reason to apologize for our position.

An even more important area on which the right wing should be challenged concerns the state of Israel. Despite the fact that many in the right wing identify emotionally with Israel and support it financially and morally, there still exists in that camp a noticeable degree of hostility to the *Medinah* and what it stands for. In its philosophical thinking the right wing has never been able to make peace with the establishment of a Zionist state. It claims that there is nothing of religious value in Jewish nationalism or military success. This type of thinking is the cause of the militant refusal by the rightists to commemorate Yom ha-Atsma'ut or Yom Yerushalayim in any form. A representative article in a right-wing journal tells us that such occasions are "neither sacred or profane, but rather mundane" and should therefore be "unmarked" in religious circles.⁶ It continues in this vein, explaining why prayers for the state and its soldiers should not be part of the Sabbath morning service. "An army is a necessity of the moment" we are told, "but the army as an institution, and the Jew as a soldier is not a permanent or intrinsic fixture of Klal Yisroel."⁷

But is it possible to assert that the state has no religious value when the classical sources clearly indicate otherwise? Do not the *nevi'im* stress again and again that the existence of a Jewish state, religious or not, is the highest form of *kiddush ha-Shem* in the world (e.g., Ezekiel 36)? Are there not ample quotes in Tanakh, more specifically in Tehillim, which glorify Jewish armies as having intrinsic spiritual value (e.g., Psalm 149)? Did not the Talmudic sages institute the festivals enumerated in *Megillat Ta'anit* to celebrate the "mundane" military victories of the anti-religious Hasmonean kings? Maimonides attributes the entire celebration of Hanukkah solely to the return of Jewish national independence under this particular dynasty (*Hilkhos Megillah ve-Hanukkah* 3:1). Finally, the right wing must explain how they deny the hand of God so visible in the creation and continued survival of the state of Israel. Did not Ramban, R. Yehuda Halevi and other major Jewish philosophers assert that the miraculous workings of God lie behind all natural events and that he who disputes this is to be considered a heretic? Only the Modern Orthodox have made attempts to incorporate the

facts of the existence of the State and the unification of Jerusalem into their religious observance and philosophy. Our position would seem to be the only one halakhically defensible in light of the previously mentioned sources. There is a rich contemporary halakhic literature in Hebrew arguing our position. But, again, we have not made our students and congregants aware of it.

Despite the many instances in which Modern Orthodoxy is more faithful than its opponents to the Halakha, there remain other situations in which the opposite is true. If the Modern Orthodox are to succeed in winning serious youth to their banner they must seek to rectify these problems. One of these areas concerns *mitsvah* observance. Modern Orthodoxy posits loyalty to Halakha as one of its guiding principles; however, all too often this observance is selective rather than all-embracing. Sabbath and *kashrut* are observed to a point where, with the exception of certain *humrot*, there is little difference throughout the Orthodox community. This is unfortunately not true of other basic *mitsvot*. The laws of *niddah* and *mikveh* are neglected in part or whole by many associated with the Modern Orthodox camp. The obligations of daily *tefilla be-tsibbur* and *tseiniut* are often not stressed. Some of the rabbinic leaders of Modern Orthodoxy exhibit readiness to accept pulpits in synagogues which violate even the most lenient halakhic standards of Sabbath observance and behavior during prayer. Many of these same rabbis participate in joint worship with non-Orthodox Jewish clergy or Christians, things for which there is little or no sanction in halakhic sources. These people are not following lenient rulings. We must be speaking out against non-halakhic trends in our community if we wish to be taken seriously.

Another area of Modern Orthodox life that must be strengthened is Torah learning. A serious commitment to the intensive lifelong study of Torah is one of our most basic halakhic requirements, but such devotion is too often lacking among the Modern Orthodox. We must teach our community that just as a Jew who violates the Sabbath cannot be considered Orthodox, a person who does not study Torah intensively cannot be designated as fully *mitsvah*-observant. Lack of widespread Torah learning activities among “modernists” gives the right wing justified ammunition with which to attack the former. Modern Orthodox synagogues should be centers of learning and campaigns for increased study. We must be more aggressive in encouraging our students and congregants to increase their Torah study.

Adoption of this general approach would go far towards solving Modern Orthodoxy’s contemporary crisis. It would give the movement pride in itself and self-confidence in meeting its opponents. A

century ago German Neo-Orthodoxy succeeded in holding its own and in winning the right wing's respect by the enthusiastic advocacy of its lifestyle on strict halakhic grounds. This can be true of American Modern Orthodoxy if it makes the effort to put its house in order and project itself as the positive Torah force it truly is.

NOTES

1. For example, see Reuven Bulka, ed., *Dimensions of Orthodox Judaism* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1983).
2. This point is made most cogently in Samuel Heilman, *Synagogue Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).
3. Lawrence Kaplan, "The Ambiguous Modern Orthodox Jew," *Judaism* 29, no. 4 (Fall, 1979), pp. 449-64.
4. Chaim Dov Keller, "Modern Orthodoxy: An Analysis and a Response," *Jewish Observer* 6, no. 8 (June 1970), p. 12.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
6. A. Scheinman, "In Search of Freedom and Independence," *Jewish Observer* 17, no. 2 (April 1984), p. 25.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 27.