

OBSERVANT JEWS AND RELIGIOUS JEWS

That Orthodoxy in America is able to look at itself in candor, as indicated by the symposium in this issue, is a sign of a certain maturity, and it is in this spirit of candor that I make the following observations.

Orthodoxy's virtual resurrection from the dead in this last half of the twentieth century has been marked by impressive achievements in the great battles for Shabbat, kashrut, *mikveh*, synagogue standards, and serious Torah study. But I think it is fair to say that, beyond occasional islands here and there, we are still far short of being a truly spiritual community.

In a word, while we have created many observant Jews, we have not created many religious Jews. Mitzvah observance is clearly the *sine qua non* of Jewish living, but it is only the first step towards becoming a religious Jew. For many, however, it has become both the first and last step. When it is possible for a Jew to don tefillin, be rigorous in his kashrut, live a life marked by many *humrot*, and yet be lax in his *ben 'adam la-havero*, something is clearly not right (or left, or centrist). We tend to emphasize, for example, the *tzeni'ut* of the sleeve length, but, in our genius for compartmentalization, conveniently overlook the *hatznea' lekhet* which covers attitudes as well. A vivid example: across the spectrum of American Orthodoxy, things such as piety and materialism, mitzva observance and consumerism, being *frum* and throwing ostentatious *semahot*, are not seen as contradictions. *Ruhniyut* and *gashmiyut* maintain a peaceful co-existence among us, but wherever this happens, *ruhniyut* always finishes second.

The idea of *mistapek be-mu'at*, of living without luxuries, is non-existent among us, a forgotten casualty of the times, and, save for an esoteric *musar shmuess* in a yeshiva, not even on the Jewish agenda. The very invitations which, amidst a flurry of thanks to God, caution the uninitiated to eschew immodest clothing beckon us to participate in functions whose profligacy and waste fly in the teeth of *Mikha's* call for restraint, modesty, and understatement. Self-indulgence, even among the *frum*, has been raised to unprecedented levels. (In this regard, see Keli Yaqar to Ex. 13:17: the quality of being satisfied with minimal needs was a prerequisite before Israel could receive the Torah at Sinai, as indicated in 'Avot VI:4: *Kakh darkah shel Torah. . .*.)

Since even religion often mirrors the society around it, it is little wonder that much of Torah life has been brought down to the level of externals. It is not only that we are content to judge piety on the basis of the color of headgear, the material of *kippot*, the width of hat brims, or the length and color of men's jackets. Even our teaching of Torah is measured by surface standards. Students of Torah are considered to have "succeeded" when they know this or that Gemara and are expert in certain areas of halakha. But the noblest internal possibilities of the Jew—*bitahon*, awe, humility, courage, loyalty,

hesed, *'ahava*—are by and large not an integral part of the learning program—as if *middot* and general spiritual development will somehow take care of themselves. We seem content to stop at the basic level of Torah study and of mitzva observance, neglecting to push onward to that most challenging and fulfilling of all plateaus in the life of Torah: the inwardness which results from the deep awareness of the author of Torah and mitzvot. Without Torah study and practice, one cannot reach the basic level. But these alone are not the criteria of the religious personality.

There may be good historical reasons for the phenomenon of a resurrection of Orthodoxy that has not been accompanied by a parallel resurrection of genuine piety. Objective observers of the American Jewish scene of fifty years ago knew that Orthodox Judaism was dead, a casualty of the looseness, hedonism and *laissez-faire* of America. A *shomer Shabbat* was a rarity; a Jew who donned tefillin regularly was unheard of. Basic Jewish practices like *taharat hamishpaha* or regular Torah study were curious exotica—especially away from the major cities. As a result, Orthodox rabbinic leadership (those who had not surrendered altogether) stressed the performance of traditional ritual as the minimal first step in a return to Judaism. But people somehow gained the impression that this was the only step. And now, having achieved a modicum of mitzvah observance over the years, we are experiencing difficulty in moving on to higher levels. We have been concerned that Jewish men should don tefillin and observe Shabbat, but having achieved this, we seem unable to affect their behavior once they remove their tefillin and once Shabbat is over. *Mitzvat anashim melumadah*, soulless exercise in rote, is unfortunately not uncommon in contemporary American Orthodoxy. To our chagrin, it is not difficult to find strictly Orthodox synagogues with appropriately high *mehitzot* whose congregants converse more with each other than with God. Somehow, observance has been viewed so narrowly that *bein adam lamaqom* has come to mean action and not affect.

Fortunately, we are beginning to hear voices that stress concepts such as *hesed*, generosity of spirit, ethical and moral behavior, and the idea that a Shabbat meal whose main course consists of the denigration of others is not a holy meal. The emphasis on such things—it used to be called *musar*—represents the hope for an authentic Jewish future.

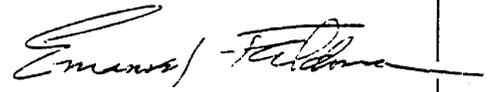
I began by saying that the Orthodox community has achieved a certain maturity. The qualifying “certain” is used advisedly. Full maturity implies self-confidence, serenity, a sense of self-worth and value. Orthodox internecine battles over exclusive turf-rights to piety or tolerance reflect an Orthodoxy still adolescent, unable to exercise civility and self-discipline.

What does it indicate when a worldly, sophisticated, observant Jew (a long time ago he was called “Modern Orthodox” and more recently “Centrist Orthodox”) is much more understanding of the non-observing, secularized, bare-headed Jew on his so-called left than of the black-hatted, black-suited Jew on his right? Or when the Jew on the so-called right can find no better target for his vitriol than a fully observant Jew who happens to wear a *kippa seruga*? I am not certain what such hostility means. But one thing it surely

does not mean: that *derakheha darkhe no'am* and *kol netivoteha shalom* are being taken seriously, or that *hatzne' lekhet* applies to anything beyond the material. Certainly, debate on major issues is healthy. But debate which is shrill and *ad hominem* is a reflection neither of genuine piety nor of full maturity.

Orthodoxy in the last decade of the twentieth century in America has demonstrated its ability to touch the minds of its adherents through the emphasis on learning and absorbing the classic religious and intellectual texts. Similarly, it has shown that it can affect the daily behavior of its adherents, as demonstrated in the upsurge of *mitzvot ma'asiot*. But if Orthodoxy is not to harden into a wall of self-congratulation, we must mount a serious assault on the most difficult barricade of all: the character of our people and the nature of our piety, and—if I may be innovative—our awareness of God. Otherwise we will become secular Jews with yarmulkes, de-religionized observant Jews, vacuous embodiments of the *naval bi-reshut ha-Torah* about which Nahmanides warns in Lev. 19:2.

Only if we move beyond our present condition can we speak of providing a serious alternative to the rest of the Jewish world which, in its heart of hearts, bears an inchoate yearning for the transcendental voice of Judaism, but has understandable difficulty hearing it amidst the cacophony which today passes for Orthodox Jewish life—Right, Left, or Center.


EMANUEL FELDMAN