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OF EAGLE'S FLIGHT AND SNAIL'S PACE

One of the Rav's* best-loved discourses explores the distinction between two aspects of the leadership exemplified by *Bet Din haGadol*. One function of *Bet Din* is to transmit the oral tradition of Torah; the other is to represent the Jewish people, to speak for the *kelal* as an organic entity¹. One might say that the Rav himself *has* fulfilled both roles. He is, first and foremost, our teacher: for those of us who are his disciples, or the students of his disciples, the study of Torah is forever marked by his accent, the entire fabric of religious life is permeated by his spirit, and our own students, in turn, are haunted by his presence. He has also been called upon to chart a new course for the Orthodox community and has thus spoken for many who are not immediately and intimately affected by his discourses and dissertations. R. Wurzburger's paper identifies, and distills, the inner logic of the Rav's approach to halakhic decision and public policy, emphasizing his response to the unprecedented condition of the Jewish people in our times. I shall turn to a no less important aspect of the Rav's teaching and leadership: his constant and determined effort to draw the individual Jew to a life of intellectual adventure and religious excellence. Can the Rav's vision satisfy the needs, requirements and capacities of the modern Orthodox Jew?

PROBLEMS OF MODERNITY

Of the delineations of modernity and post-modernity in academic literature there is no end, and I am free of the desire to increase them. I am satisfied to borrow the characterization of modern man

*When the essay was first circulated at the Fifth Orthodox Forum, *maran haRav zt"l* was still alive. I have chosen to retain present tense references to him in the published version.

advanced by Charles Taylor, a major philosopher of religious bent, in his influential recent book *Sources of the Self*. Taylor picks out three facets of modern consciousness: inwardness; the affirmation of ordinary life; the expressivist ideal.² We shall supplement his list by noting two other factors commanding the particular attention of contemporary Jews.

1) "What might have risen to an eagle's flight has been reduced to a snail's pace by law. Never yet has law formed a great man; 'tis liberty that breeds giants and heroes," proclaimed Friedrich Schiller two centuries ago.³ Opponents of Halakhic Judaism have echoed Schiller's spiritual rejection of law: the objective, externally categorized religious act, in their opinion, is incompatible with the cultivation of inward depth; excellence comes from following the law of the heart. Many Orthodox Jews have implicitly conceded the contradiction between Halakha and inwardness, ignoring the latter to the detriment of their own, and others' spiritual lives. Even so, emancipation from the law has not bred "giants and heroes" but, at best, mediocrity; not the Nietzschean *übermensch*, but the blinking "last man," the hollow person of the therapist's couch, and the drab eccentric crowned by a halo of exclamation points.

The appearance of *Halakhic Man* made it impossible to deny or misunderstand the singular profundity of the eagles whose lives are sacred to the discipline of "the law." At the same time, the Rav's appreciation of inwardness, and his integration of external performance and inward experience of many *mitsvot* (e.g. prayer, repentance, fasting, mourning, honoring and taking delight in the Sabbath, the joy of holidays), are a hallmark of his approach to the corpus of Halakha. Most ambitiously, he undertook, in *uBikkashtem miSham*, to map the phenomenology of man's encounter with God, with his starting point the fundamental datum of man who is confronted by revealed law, and in the course of which he also achieved a revolutionary reformulation of the venerable faith/reason dichotomy. Moreover, in his writings and lectures he has evoked, time and again, in the manner commonly associated with religious existentialism, the dimension of human depth and the consciousness of loneliness and singularity.⁴ More than any other Jewish thinker, his memorable and sometimes brutal honesty has taught us what both conventional piety and fashionable liberalism often seem intent to conceal: that religion is no escape from conflict, but the ultimate encounter with reality.

2) The tendency of conventional religion to edit reality is not limited to the soft-peddling of existential conflict. It includes the

suppression of large portions of human experience. An influential strand in Western culture confines “the religious” to the unworldly and the disembodied, disregarding those weekday activities that take place outside the church, repudiating those, like eating and sex, that are performed by limbs of which one prefers to feign obliviousness. This leads us to the heart of Taylor’s second conviction about the modern identity: its affirmation of the everyday life of everyday people.

Though it requires neither great ingenuity nor extraordinary erudition to demonstrate Halakhic Judaism’s commitment to the redemption of corporeal life and its striving to encompass all domains of human activity, it is not out of place to recall the Rav’s consistent, and often sensitive, probing of these areas.⁵ The Rav’s contribution deserves mention, in part, because there is a vast difference between recognizing everyday life as a principal theater of moral crisis, and the thoughtless, hence meaningless, sanctification of the everyday without qualification. In “Catharsis,” for example, the Rav asserted the value of our common everyday desires and aspirations, even while he clear-headedly and uncompromisingly defined the theological perspective from which Judaism evaluates their significance.

3) It is neither easy nor necessary to define the precise parameters of “expressivism,” which embraces assorted epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic doctrines. It is sufficient to think of the various “romantic” or “existentialist” movements for whom the most admirable realization of the individual human being is less a matter of conforming to the laws set down for human nature than of imitating the originating power of nature’s Author.⁶ For such thinkers creativity is the key concept, allied to a strong regard for individuality expressing itself, whether that expression is the uniqueness of the solitary, perhaps anonymous, hero or the singularity attributable to the genius of the nation.

Despite his unwavering rejection of subjective philosophy, meaning one that would make truth (including, of course, religious and moral truth) dependent on the measure of man, the Rav offers enormous amplitude for the expression of man’s creative potential. His celebration of *hiddush*, the creativity exhibited by masters of Torah in developing their novel insights, is the most famous example, but not the one with the most far-reaching implications.⁷ For the Rav goes on to explain the fundamental notion of Divine Providence bestowed upon individual human beings on the basis of man’s uniqueness, which is, in turn, tied to his/her creative vocation. And when the Rav identifies the penitential act with the work

of self-creation, the theme of creativity has become part and parcel of the moral challenge appointed to each existing individual.⁸

4) Modernity is the enemy of Jewish particularity. The democratic affirmation of the everyday goes together with a hostility to morally or spiritually significant distinctions between individuals and groups. The antagonism has a moral face, rooted in principles of ethical universalism. It also has a realistic force: the "Protestant" tradition deriving from Weber, and represented today by the likes of Peter Berger, saw the shift to universal otherhood as the inevitable consequence of the modern world and its socioeconomic institutions.⁹ In any event, Jewish thinkers confronting modernity have been forced to explain why "their customs differ from those of other peoples."

Three strategies of response can be extrapolated from the Rav's teaching. One approach draws on the "expressivist" elements in the Rav's thought and specifically on his affinities with Karl Barth and Kierkegaard. In "Confrontation" he insists that authentic religious experience is ineluctably intimate, hence incommunicable. This insight not only justifies limits on the possibility of interfaith dialogue; by the same token it vigorously counters the assumption that Jewish destiny can be fused indistinguishably with that of humanity. At a different level, the Rav stresses the organic character of the Jewish people, manifest both in our religious destiny and national fate, that transcends all considerations that might incline the modern Jew to assimilate his or her identity.¹⁰

The third strategy, the most subtle, pervades the Rav's oeuvre without ever becoming overt. The dilemma of modern Jewish thought can be summed up as follows: If Judaism is presented as consonant with the current temper, it is superfluous; if it fails to address the contemporary situation of man, it is irrelevant. Thus the would-be Jewish philosopher, to adopt the Rav's anatomy of a parallel problem, must either opt for an apologetic approach that rationalizes religion, or despair agnostically of any solution, or take flight into the mystical; none of these choices is satisfactory.¹¹ The Rav "calmly but persistently" pursues another path: he proposes to furnish a philosophical anthropology inextricably bound to the fact of revelation in which it is grounded absolutely. Take one instance: in *Lonely Man of Faith*, the "covenantal community" dominates the framework within which the experience of loneliness is to be comprehended. Now when the Rav describes ontological loneliness, it is a predicament familiar to all of us, Jew or Gentile. Yet the central concept of the covenantal community is unmistakably that posited by the Torah as the portion of *Knesset Israel* alone.

5) The Rav's tenacious commitment to freedom of methodology sheds light on the dismissal of Bible criticism and the distaste for many features of academic Jewish studies, to which R. Wurzburger refers. That the Rav was avowedly untroubled by, and manifestly not preoccupied with, the methods and conclusions of these university disciplines, does not signify lack of curiosity. Even in his old age, I can testify, the Rav could allude casually to specific textual issues raised by the Critics. Truly the comments on Biblical subjects that form a subsidiary current alongside his primary concerns, have contributed more towards refurbishing serious literary modern Orthodox study than the hand-wringing over "correct" methodology typical of the more "open-minded" Orthodox.¹² In *Lonely Man*, for example, he proffered, with the back of his hand, as it were, an interpretation of the two creation stories in Genesis that provided a powerful alternative to the regnant documentary hypothesis. Similarly, in the course of his halakhic discussion of the Yom Kippur ritual,¹³ he submits, without mentioning the critical approach, an analysis of the difficulties apparent in the account of the *avoda* recorded in Humash; his treatment overlaps considerably with ideas developed by R. David Zvi Hoffmann and R. Mordechai Breuer.

If there is an air of paradox to the last paragraph, it is a paradox easily resolved. For the Rav's creative vigor is an outgrowth of his intellectual faith in Torah; it is but another expression of his insistence on the autonomy of the theological enterprise. A letter, dated August 11, 1953, conveys the Rav's judgment that the RCA should refrain from any involvement in the planned JPS Bible translation. The text is instructive, and as it is not readily accessible, I feel justified in quoting two passages from it:

After all, we live in an age which admires the expert and which expects him to tell how things are and how they ought to be done. The expert, on the other hand, does not tolerate any opposition; all we ought to do is listen to him and swallow his ideas. I am not ready to swallow the ideas of the modern expert and scholar on our Tanakh. . . .

I noticed in your letter that you are a bit disturbed about the probability of being left out. Let me tell you that this attitude of fear is responsible for many commissions and omissions, compromises and fallacies on our part which have contributed greatly to the prevailing confusion within the Jewish community and to the loss of our self-esteem, our experience of ourselves as independent entities committed to a unique philosophy and way of life.¹⁴

These few lines contain a rich legacy: the fierce individual integrity that is not cowed by the authority of experts, the calm and persistent commitment to the truth and uniqueness of Judaism, the unwillingness to attenuate that awareness for the sake of inauthentic displays of recognition, the self-respect that makes superficial approbation no longer needed or desired. It has been maintained that “[a]nyone who has seen Soloveitchik participating in the afternoon prayers with his students (in the classroom!) following one of his Talmud lectures, knows how comical it is to think of him as a modern academic type.”¹⁵ If that is the case, then the Rav is indeed deficient in “modernity,” and, for that very reason, an inspiration for every believing Jew. Few can benefit more from his example than those of us who interact with the academic world. To be a *talmid* of the Rav is to be emancipated from the burden and the temptation of becoming an intellectual Marrano.

CHALLENGE OF A LEGACY

My next remarks are not directed to those who disagree with the elements of the Rav’s approach to the modern predicament adumbrated above. Instead we must consider the criticism raised within our own camp: the Rav is a giant, but we are pygmies; his standard defies all emulation, however pale; his banner is too exalted, and his trumpet summons none but the elite. We are modern Jews, hence faint of heart and weak of spirit, and we require a system of living and thinking and feeling suitable to our weakness. Such complaints focus on two features of the Rav’s outlook: the intellectual and the existential.

Throughout his career, the Rav has championed the predominance of the intellectual gesture, and not only because *talmud Torah* is cherished within the hierarchy of Halakha in general, and in the Brisker tradition in particular. With keen sensitivity to the malaise of commitment affecting contemporary Jewry, the Rav concluded that religious engagement of the intellect is essential to the cure. First of all, on the Rav’s view, a full experiential involvement with *mitsvot* is impossible without understanding their meaning and significance, whence the necessity of learning. But the Rav also deemed our time propitious for the intellectual quest:

[T]he young American generation.. is not totally engrossed in the pragmatic, utilitarian outlook.. To the degree that average people in our society attain higher levels of knowledge and general intelligence,

we cannot imbue them with a Jewish standpoint that relies primarily on sentiment and ceremony.¹⁶

If R. Kook witnessed the alienation of Jews from traditional religious commitment and decided that his generation needed exposure to a comprehensive Jewish philosophy deriving from the sources of Kabbala, the Rav offered a simpler, more startling solution: renew the covenant with the exoteric sources that confront directly our concrete experience.

Bereft the vivid fusion of external act and inner appropriation, absent the astonishingly simple yet profound acknowledgement of the human condition, the Rav's thought loses much of its power to galvanize and make existence coherent. Recall, for a moment, his exposition of the *hovot ha-levavot*, those commandments whose very nature requires inwardness; think of the classic essay on the commandment of daily prayer, highlighting the distinction between the "surface crisis" that is felt even by a non-reflective being, and the "depth crisis" that is experienced only by the reflective consciousness. Hundreds of pages in the Rav's published work simply fail to make sense to any reader for whom Judaism and/or life is a matter of surface behavior, lacking the dimension of depth which the Rav never tires of exploring.

There is yet a further face to the Rav's quest for reality in man's relationship to himself. It is not much in evidence in *Halakhic Man*, with its exaltation of intellectual assurance; nor does it play a major role in the "existential" Rav, where the *mi-maamakim* themes take the foreground.¹⁷ On almost every occasion that I was privileged to consult the Rav on matters that touched upon life, whenever his attention settled on the real-life ramifications of his guidance, he invariably reminded me to act and to speak "with dignity and humility, as befits a *ben Torah*." Such advice appears obvious to the point of triviality, but what immense reserves of self-knowledge and commitment are required to take it seriously!

Can the Rav's approach, rooted in the majesty of intellect and linked to an intense, hence essentially lonely,¹⁸ probing of human reality, survive our present circumstances? Or must religious education conform itself to a society that is not so much illiterate as post-literate, a society fascinated by psychology, but only so long as the insight is facile, flat and fit for a bumper sticker, a society obsessed with personality, but indifferent to character?

My answer, in brief, is that we have no choice. The Rav is right: no contemporary religious commitment can long stand without an

abiding cognitive element. How to sustain that component, and how to combine the intellectual orientation with other formative factors in our religious life, is our task, as individuals and as educators. The Rav has served us well: his production spans a multiplicity of disciplines and genres, and provides a variety of usable paradigms, ranging through Talmud and philosophy, Humash and liturgy, the formal lecture and the classroom laboratory, penetrating homilies and impromptu remarks. If, as we pursue our own growth and the benefit of others, we draw dividends on the riches he has put at our disposal, so much the better.¹⁹ But the responsibility is ours: for this were we created.

The same is true with respect to modern man's capacity for authentic experience, which has been harmed by the inroads of secularism, misplaced in a fog of intellectual confusion, and undermined by the breakdown of the chain of living tradition. The Rav has not always been sanguine about the chances of communicating the lost connection to a more robust experiential past²⁰. As to the capacity to live and feel deeply, the Rav frequently relies on Torah and Halakha to provide the frame of reference within which the healthy emotional responses are to be cultivated. Writing about prayer, for example, he emphasizes that petition, praise and gratitude are not exotic feelings available only to the religious virtuoso, but natural experiences with which we should all be familiar.²¹

Unlike the titans of past eras, who expunged virtually all traces of inner autobiography from their writing, and unlike many contemporary *Gedolim*, whose public posture inspires admirers to romanticize them as a race apart, immune to the vicissitudes of the human condition, the Rav, reticent Brisker though he may be, has painfully, democratically, breached the wall of private solemnity, and acknowledged the vulnerability that he shares with all men: loneliness, grief, fear of death, old age with its attendant indignities, the delights of creativity and the anxiety of remorse, to mention a few of his recurrent themes.²² He has struggled to evoke, and provoke in his audience, the sense of radical crisis and sheer reality that nourishes the passionate spiritual life.

Once again, one may protest, there are modern men and women who find the task of recovering even the fundamental building blocks of religious existence too much for their frail endowments, and who therefore feel entitled to an easier way than that suggested by the Rav. And once again, it seems to me, we have no choice. What Iris Murdoch said about the task of contemporary literature is true of our duty as individuals and as educators: in the

“battle between real people and images,” what is “require[d] now is a much stronger and more complex conception of the former.”²³ No contemporary religious feeling can long endure that is unearned.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in his well-known diagnosis of modern Western culture, contrasts historians in aristocratic ages and historians in democratic ages.²⁴ The former concentrate on the “great personages who hold the front of the stage,” and the influence that one man can exercise. The latter discount the importance of individual action, seeking after general causes, and ascribing to these an inevitability that makes resistance to the *zeitgeist* pointless. Paradoxically, it is the egalitarian mentality that dangerously undermines the individual’s free will and responsibility.

Judaism teaches that each individual bears a unique destiny. It is not altogether surprising, then, that the modern Orthodox community has allied itself to the modern principle that every individual has equal worth. This would entail that each woman and each man be committed to a life of intellectual adventure and religious excellence, cultivating an authentic and passionate inner life, sanctifying his, or her, daily existence, bringing forth that “unique message . . . , [the] special color to add to the communal spectrum.”²⁵ Instead, we submit all too readily to the siren song of mediocrity. There is a type of basketball coach who promotes the illusion of democratic teamwork, while in reality the entire enterprise revolves around the superstar. In the same spirit (or lack of spirit), we expect the exceptional individual to contend one-on-one with the great problems of the day and the relentless challenges of eternity, while the rest of us are reduced to the role of spectators, cheering the *Gedolim* on. The Rav wants more *for* us, and consequently asks more *of* us. Reluctant and disappointed, we summon the popularizers, the politicians, the polemicists, who, with their unfailing affinity for the superficial and the halftrue, bravely try to make him do, and purvey many anecdotes.

Rather than blame the Rav for demanding too much of us, we would do well to rouse ourselves to take full advantage of what he offers us. R. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev explains that Israel first confessed the singular greatness of Moses at the parting of the sea, when even the maidservants saw what was denied the prophet Ezekiel. Only because they had reached great spiritual heights themselves, could they grasp that a mortal man like Moses might attain a higher level still.²⁶

Until we probe the limits of our own spiritual capacities, we will not appreciate the Rav’s, nor will we succeed in coming to terms with the good fortune that made him our mentor. If it is beyond us

to soar with the eagle, yet we are not condemned to creep with the snail. Like the eagle, albeit without the eagle's swiftness and sweep, we were made to experience, and act within, a three dimensional world. In other words, it is not beyond us to be men.

NOTES

1. *Keviat Moadim al pi haReiya ve-al pi haHeshbon* (in *Kovets Hiddushei Torah*).
2. (Harvard University Press, 1989), Preface, x. The scope of these remarks precludes a detailed account of Taylor's complex analysis, or, for that matter, a thorough examination of the Rav's rich thought on these issues.
3. Preface to *The Robbers*, xiv.
4. See, for example, *Lonely Man of Faith*, "The Community," "Majesty and Humility," "Catharsis." For the tension between Halakhic Man and the Rav of "Shir haShirim," see A. Ravitzky, "Acquisition of Knowledge in His Thought" (in *Sefer Yovel liKhevod Morcinu haGaon R. Yosef Dov haLevi Soloveitchik*, ed. N. Lamm et al., Jerusalem 1984) 125ff.
5. See, for example, *U-Bikkashtem miSham*, 17:2 on the elevation of the body; "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah" criticizing indifference to the reality of suffering; *Lonely Man* on the importance of "dignity" for Adam I.
6. On romantic philosophy of language and its pertinence to the Rav's thought, see B. Ish-Shalom, "Language as a Religious Category in the Thought of Rabbi Y.D. Soloveitchik," in *Sefer haYovel la-Rav Mordekhai Breuer* (Jerusalem, 1992) 799-821.
7. See *Halakhic Man* and *Ma Dodekh miDod*.
8. See *Halakhic Man*, Part II and Yitzchak Blau, "Creative Repentance: On R. Soloveitchik's Concept of *Teshuva*" (*Tradition* 28:2, Winter 1994, 11-18).
9. See Berger et. al., *The Homeless Mind*. Since the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, Berger has conceded that his prediction of the inevitable triumph of modernity was mistaken.
10. See R. Wurzbarger's discussion.
11. Cf. *The Halakhic Mind* 4.
12. I deal more fully with this issue in "A Room with a View, But a Room of Our Own" (in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. S. Carmy [Jason Aronson, 1995]; an earlier version appeared in *Tradition* 28:3, Spring 1994).
13. *Kuntres al Avodat haYom*.
14. Copy in Louis Bernstein "The Emergence of the English Speaking Rabbinate" (YU Diss. 1977), 561f.
15. David Singer and Moshe Sokol, "Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith" (*Modern Judaism*, 2, 227-272) 255.
16. *Divre Hashkafa* 75-79; quotation on 78.
17. Note the unpublished lecture on *Peshara*, which deals with *Pesak* rather than *Lomdut*. I intend to discuss some implications of the literary aspect of

- the Rav's oeuvre, more fully in my work in progress on the "Category of the Ethical" in his thought.
18. On the tension between the Rav's conviction, which he inherited from his father, that intimate feelings are diminished when paraded before strangers, and the self-exposure that typifies some of his written and oral discourse, see below. On the connection between privacy, creativity and individuality, see, inter alia, the Rav's eulogy for R. Ze'ev Gold and my commentary "Anatomy of a *Hesped*: On Reading an Essay of the Rav" (*Bein Kotlei haYeshiva* 1988), 8-20.
 19. See R. Lamm, "Notes of an Unrepentant Darshan" (*RCA Sermon Anthology* 1986/5747, ed. B. Poupko), 1-12, for instructive insights on applying the Rav's approach to preaching in different situations.
 20. See, for example, *Al Limmud Torah uGeullat Nefesh haDor* (in *Be-Sod haYahid ve-haYahad*).
 21. Unpublished notebooks on prayer, circa 1953. See also my "Destiny, Freedom and the Logic of Petition" (*Festschrift* for Rabbi Walter Wurzburger, *Tradition*, 24:2, Winter 1989) 17-37.
 22. The Rav once remarked in my hearing that old-time *Gedolim* refrained from talking about themselves, but that the disconnection of modern man from living exemplars of religious existence has made self-revelation an educational necessity.
 23. "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch" (in *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy*, ed. S. Hauerwas and A. MacIntyre) 50.
 24. *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Book II, ch. 20.
 25. "The Community," *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring, 1978) 10. See also *Sanhedrin* 38a and *Bemidbar Rabba* 21.
 26. *Kedushat Levi*, B'shallah 39b.