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REJOINDER: SYNTHESIS AND THE UNIFICATION OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

Dr. Singer is to be commended for presenting an ingenuous “slice of life” typical of a certain segment of modern Orthodoxy as it exists on the contemporary American scene. The question of leisure indeed offers a window—and a particularly helpful one—on the modern Orthodox Jew, his/her religious identity and intellectual perplexities: as the Rabbis have taught, one of the ways by which a man is known is “bi-s’hoko,” by his “play.”¹ Singer’s treatment displays the thinking process of that population articulately and self-consciously, enabling us to examine its strengths, weaknesses and the common assumptions more often thought than publicly expressed.

My remarks will focus on Singer’s concepts of synthesis, tradition and authority. My questioning his assumptions here leads, perforce, to the formulation of an alternative matrix for examining the problem of leisure and the vacation, as features of modern culture.

I

Singer defines “synthesis” as “the creative blending of the best elements of Jewish tradition and modern culture.” Now this formulation suggests, incorrectly, that Torah (for which “best elements of Jewish tradition” is apparently a euphemism) is somehow to be “improved” by the application of a Western standard of value, thus creating the magic “synthesis.”² But let us ignore for the moment this disguised judgment of the “tradition” and call attention instead to a syntactic ambiguity in the definition: does the adjective “best” define a selection from Jewish tradition or does it also imply a critical stance toward modern culture? Whether one can be “modern” and at the same time criticize modern culture I am not sure; I am certain, however, that one

cannot be intellectually rigorous without subjecting modern culture to searching analysis. It is the nature of "modern Orthodoxy," as I see it, to spare no effort in the attempt to understand, evaluate and ultimately judge, Western culture.

The critical character of modern Orthodox thinking at its most authentic can be illustrated from an essay, one excerpt from which is quoted by Singer, R. Norman Lamm's "A Jewish Ethic of Leisure." The starting point of Lamm's analysis is the crisis of American culture: people don't know what to do with their spare time. In trying to get a better grip on the malaise of modern man, Lamm draws upon a variety of sources, from philosophy to poetry to sociology. He applies insights culled from these areas, from the length and breadth of halakhah, Jewish philosophy and Biblical exegesis, in order to answer the question: how can people make their leisure meaningful? The existence of leisure, in its contemporary dimensions, is taken as a situation to be confronted and redeemed, rather than as a norm to which the Torah is to be adapted.

A recent article by R. Emanuel Rackman, for whom Singer displays admiration, defines the central thrust of the "movement" (if that term is indeed applicable) as follows: "Coping with modernity calls more for meeting intellectual challenges rather than yielding to demands for easing the Jew's burden. Nonetheless, it [modern Orthodoxy] has engaged in halachic creativity in both interpretation and innovation."³

It is surprising that Singer, in his quest for synthesis and rejection of compartmentalization, places so much stress on adaptation and so little on confrontation. Twice he addresses the possibility of an unbridgeable gap between Judaism and Club Medding: at the outset, where he confesses his conservative social outlook, and midway through his essay, when he claims that modern Orthodoxy's acceptance of the pleasures of the flesh eliminates a major reason for guilt. At no point, however, does Singer present a critique, from a Torah viewpoint, of the modern cultural values he is interested in assimilating. Are we to assume that he has none?

This philosophical docility, at least within the confines of the present article, seems to be connected with Singer's apprehension of what he calls "the tradition." Reading Singer, one gets the impression that the tradition is, in modern man's daily contact with it, essentially an obstacle course of do's and don't's. Once one has satisfied these demands, the wide and wonderful world of modernity beckons with open arms. Difficulties in the synthesis of tradition and modernity are to be solved, or rather dissolved, by the appropriate halakhic rulings, if at all possible. Where such rulings are unavailable, and the modern Orthodox Jew is convinced that there is nothing wrong with what

he/she is doing, the attendant guilt can be assuaged by postulating that “if there were *gedolim* with a modern sensibility, they would not hesitate to legitimate his behavioral patterns.”

Thus there are two kinds of *gedolim* inhabiting Singer’s halakhic universe: the real-life scholars and the hypothetical ones. Singer apparently prefers the non-existent sort: these are quite effective in palliating the guilt of the modern Orthodox Jew, exhibiting their limitations only when it comes to allaying his frustration at their intractable non-existence. In addition to these, however, Singer refers, albeit tongue in cheek, to a different kind of authority for the modern Orthodox Jew:

What does an Orthodox Jew do when he is confronted by a *novum*, by a new and disturbing situation which requires clarification? He consults the *sefarim*, the authoritative sources, of course, 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?

Now it is, of course, quite appropriate for a sociological query to be given a sociological *teshuvah*. It is interesting, however, that the title of Singer’s essay bespeaks a different concern: Is Club Med Kosher? Most readers would be forgiven for assuming, like me, that the term “kosher,” if not intended literally, i.e., to an essay in applied *Yoreh De’ah* (an interpretation belied by the subtitle: Reflections on Orthodox Compartmentalization), was being used as a cute synonym for “right, halakhic” and so forth. To equate this with a sociological question is to say that spiritual authenticity is a matter of figuring out what—if anything—modern Orthodox Jews really believe, and then instantiating oneself as one of them. As there is no gap between the value system of the modern Orthodox Jew and the Medding vacation, Medding can, according to Singer, qualify as a “synthetic experience.” Is it good; is it worthwhile?—the question seems beside the point.

It would seem that this resembles nothing so much as a certain kind of rightist Orthodox ideology. The common denominator between Singer’s conception of modern Orthodoxy, as presented in this article, and the piety of his right-wing counterpart would be precisely the willingness to let “the tradition” (for which read: Torah) exhaust its contribution in the rulings of some authority structure(s), rather than through seeking God in the struggle to serve Him. The dual source of authority for Singer corresponds to that of his right-wing counterpart: on the one hand, the halakhah, as interpreted by *gedolim*; on the other hand, sociology, as expressed by the behavior of the group to which one belongs. In either case (though, to be sure, the rightist is

unlikely to admit it, certainly not in the pages of this journal) the conviction that one is conforming to the accepted norms observed by one's neighbors will outweigh any embarrassment at the absence of endorsement by the halakhic authorities, dead or living. To be sure, there will be noticeable differences: For the "right-wing" Orthodox, the dissonance between sociology and theology is most likely to become publicly manifest in the realm of business ethics, personal relationships, etc.; among the modern Orthodox, the tendency to other-directedness within one's group often affects *bein adam lamakom* (between man and God) as well. The rightist will tend to extend the kingdom of the obligatory and the prohibited to a great number of choices which Singer would regard as purely voluntary (e.g., where to spend one's vacation). Moreover, Singer would insist that, if only we pursue them without guilt, without "dimming the lights," we can succeed in giving religious meaning to the secular experience, thus overcoming the "Frankenstein monster of compartmentalization," whereas the rightist would be suspicious about this. But both groups, if Singer's analysis of modern Orthodoxy is correct, can be defined without recourse to a third basis of authority, one who, in my humble opinion, is crucial to the prosecution of any authentic intercourse between the Torah Jew and secular culture: the mediating authority,⁴ the *gadol*, of whom I speak, is the human individual himself.

II

Before explaining the unique role of the individual for an authentic modern Orthodoxy, I would like to offer my own account of that shibboleth of modern Orthodoxy: the word "synthesis." If synthesis implies an integration of life-experiences, thoughts and deeds, and not merely a synthetic mixture of disparate elements, then, tautologically, the life of synthesis is an integrated life, i.e., it displays unity.⁵ A life that does not tell a unified story, that does not manifest Kierkegaard's "purity of heart is to will one thing," is, to that degree, not a life of synthesis; it is rather a life of duplicity.

Of course, we must recognize at the outset that the absolutely integrated life is an unrealized ideal for those of us who are human beings. To posit synthesis as an ideal is, therefore, to strive for an existence that, to the extent of one's ability, increasingly manifests the unity of the personality.

What constitutes unity is also a matter of subjective judgment. For some people, the idea of a kosher Chinese restaurant involves an irremediable inconsistency; for others, it is an aging *yeshiva bahur* quoting Kierkegaard who exhibits dis-integration; to others, it is a

Torah personality who furtively opens his students' mail. If we are to eliminate, as much as possible, the aspect of arbitrariness in evaluating the degree of integration in our own and in others' lives, we must postulate certain basic ideals and principles with regard to which the individual's life is to be judged. A life is integrated if it tells a coherent story in the light of those principles and ideals; it is dis-integrated to the degree that the individual's experience, thoughts and deeds fail to cohere with them, or insofar as the principles and ideals are internally inconsistent.

For the Orthodox Jew, of whatever stripe, there is, of course, a basic reality around which his life is organized, and, ideally, unified, namely, his/her commitment to God—"with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your worth." It is a reality that is all too often honored in the breach, sinners that we are; moreover, our strivings to enhance our service of God are constantly impaled on the horns of experiential antinomies and axiological dilemmas. But no doubt about it: if you are an Orthodox Jew, you have committed yourself to this "purity of heart, to will one thing"; if you cannot offer allegiance to the quest for this commitment, you may be synthetic, compartmentalized, modern, benighted, but you are not a committed Orthodox Jew.

From this point of view, the task of synthesis = integration is not the voluntary undertaking of some group within Orthodoxy, but the vocation thrust upon the Jew by the Torah. A large part of this vocation is fulfilled and structured through the performance of halakhic do's and don't's (what Kant called "perfect duties"). A great deal of the committed Jew's existence is, however, governed by "imperfect" duties, which, as the well-known opening mishnah in *Pe'ah* puts it, "have no measure."

The role of these *mitsvot* in the life of the authentic Jew is described quite clearly by R. Meir Simha, commenting on the *mitsvah* of Torah-study:⁶

Indeed, regarding all the *mitsvot* there is equality between the lowest person and Moshe Rabbenu. . . . And the obligation has a limit, like taking the *etrog*, where waving it suffices. . . . Therefore, the Torah did not deal explicitly with character (*middot*), only obliquely: e.g., vengefulness . . . is not a specific law, identical for all Jews, but rather for each one according to his level of attainment; only vengefulness regarding money is prohibited to all. So too arrogance, etc. . . . So, too, regarding the obligation to study Torah: surely if he seeks a livelihood, he is not interfering with the commandment to study Torah . . . or [if he is] a person of weak determination, each [is to act] according to the compulsions of his habit and the purity of his soul. One cannot compare the man whose soul is sensitive to its intellectual subtlety and is tied by bonds of love to *Talmud Torah*, to him whose spiritual powers are lax and indolent. Therefore, God did not impose a uniform obligation but placed the responsibility upon each one; it is impossible for man to calculate the precise measure here. . . .

In the light of our discussion, our judgment about the relationship between the Orthodox Jew and secular culture can be formulated as follows: If one's involvement in secular culture contributes to the integration of one's life, i.e., if it coheres well with one's basic commitment to God, one can speak of synthesis. If, to the contrary, one's activities do not contribute to the integration of one's existence as a God-serving personality, then those activities are not synthesis-enhancing. Such activities can be viewed as part of an authentic religious existence only by "dimming the lights," by treating them as peripheral to one's meaningful life.

Is Club Med kosher? Because my concern is with the problematic of leisure and vacation rather than the halakhic status of mixed swimming, proper attire, etc., I will let Singer's remarks on the subject speak for themselves. Any halakhic analysis I could offer would, by the very nature of the enterprise, be heavily biased in favor of the *gedolim* who actually exist, and would tend to downplay those who do not exist. Thus one could not properly respond to the burden of Singer's argument. Let me also pass over his blanket rejection of asceticism as a value in Judaism, a matter more complex than Singer's glib dismissal would imply.⁷ Assuming that it isn't *tref*, i.e., that there is nothing halakhically prohibited about the activities in which the modern Orthodox Jew engages at Club Med, and about which Singer testifies that "there is no shortage of laws in the *Shulhan Arukh* which are fully relevant to the situation," then, presumably, it's kosher.

But is *kashrut* (= permissibility) the only criterion of synthesis? In the light of our discussion the answer is clearly "No." What matters is whether the activity being judged contributes towards the realization of the "purity of heart is to will one thing." It is simply insufficient to insist that "where there is no guilt, there is no compartmentalization." We must also inquire whether there is synthesis, in terms of the principles without which the service of God loses its most fundamental meaning.

III

We noted before that the quest for synthesis does not belong to any particular "sect" in Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, there are significant differences in the way that synthesis is to be prosecuted, depending on one's ideological orientation. Perhaps the most important of these has to do with the role of the individual.

Modern Orthodoxy at its best takes synthesis very seriously. The disposition of the individual's religious life is of such transcendent magnitude that it must become the focus of "no-holds barred" atten-

tion. To abdicate it to the dictates and fashions of social conformity is to misunderstand its very nature. It is a vocation that cannot devolve upon any authority figure, however revered and necessary. Because we—each and every man and woman—bear such responsibility, we must fully understand, and grapple with, the world within us and the world around us. *Gedolim* are indispensable when they offer us *pesak halakhah*, when they teach Torah; and the individual who has found the teacher who can give him/her guidance along the highways and byways of life, who can create a “frame of reference” for his students (the term is that of *maran haRav* J. B. Soloveitchik) can hardly overestimate his good fortune. Yet they cannot live and die for us; they cannot study Torah, or pray, or give of themselves in loving our fellows, in our stead. The Orthodox Jew who seeks after genuine integration in his life will examine all aspects of his existence, and utilize all intellectual tools at his disposal, in his quest for synthesis.

The Orthodoxy which rejects the modern version of synthesis may do so for several reasons. While some of these betray cowardice or bad faith, others are worthy of the most weighty consideration by the modern Orthodox. It may be argued that the “synthesized” modern Orthodox are often lacking in initial knowledge and commitment; that synthesis is often a cover for uncritical acceptance of Western culture; that the benefits ascribed by the modern Orthodox to their confrontation with the world are exaggerated at best, specious at worst; that life is short, and there are more important things to do if one is serious about the quest for God.

The modern Orthodox integrationist ignores such caveats at his spiritual peril; his work of self-criticism requires that he ask himself the same question that his right-wing antagonist poses. If, however, he is usually able to dismiss such attacks, it is because he is convinced that the unexamined life is not worth living, that the seeker after God must venture forth on his own, as a lonely man of faith, and because he believes that, with the help of God and the assistance of the Torah community, he is capable of honorably acquitting himself of his awesome responsibility.

He has an additional—less heroic, because altogether inescapable—reason to confront the world within him and the world without him: I mean the simple awareness that, willy-nilly, the modern world is here to confront us, and we have no secure refuge from its influence. It seems to me that the attempts, on the part of many “right wing” Orthodox Jews, to pretend that we can ignore the broad cultural context of the age which we inhabit, reflect a large measure of self-deception. The circumstances of contemporary Judaism make religious commitment a matter of conscious choice. Our Eastern European fathers and mothers could survive as *am ha'aratsim*, innocently

committing themselves to a pattern of behavior hallowed by the generations, oblivious to the cultural impact of the alien environment, their “simple *frumkeit*” (to use R. Hutner’s phrase) intact. We cannot copy them blindly. We know too much about ourselves and about our world. We cannot willfully anesthetize all inwardness and remain committed to Torah; without anesthetizing all inwardness, we cannot avoid thinking about the questions of our relation to modern culture.

Thus Singer fails to do justice to modern Orthodoxy at its potential best, because he puts so little pressure on the individual, staking so much on the behavior of his social bedfellows. Where there are no hard and fast guidelines, there is room for creative synthesis, but the individual must shoulder the burden and create the synthesis. The absence of guilt is no guarantee that synthesis has been effortlessly achieved, any more than the absence of argument between two people indicates agreement. It may simply be the case that the two men who exist within each one of us, the God-seeking man and the man of Western culture, do not speak to one another.

In what follows, I will attempt to sketch some of the factors that are likely to come up when the integration-seeking personality considers a vacation. We will then ask how Club Med serves, or fails to serve, the needs and goals of the integrated Orthodox vacationer.

IV

Why do people go on vacations? Broadly speaking, there are three possibilities: to get away from something or somebody; to do something one wants to do, but cannot do without going away to do it; or for some reason extraneous to the value of the vacation itself.

Let’s get the last option out of the way. It is very common for people to do something they don’t want to do because they think they have to do it. You may want to keep up with the Kaplans, and so seek out a lush resort, there dutifully to extricate, with immense labour and immense patience, the grain of pleasure beneath the blinding Veblenian sun. More likely, you will rent a place in the mountains instead. (I am told that a well-known *yeshiva ketanna* requires, on its application forms, the name of parents’ bungalow colony; my informant adds that “parents do not go to bungalow colony” is not considered an acceptable answer.)

Clearly there are situations in which the integrated Orthodox personality will submit to such social pressures and arrange his vacation so as to enhance his own, or his family’s, worthwhile goals. As far as this essay is concerned, however, we are interested in that which the

vacation accomplishes *qua* vacation. Hence our discussion will ignore such situations.

Let us now consider the vacation as a getting away from certain aspects of our daily lives, as a “leisure *from*” (if I may borrow Fromm’s locution). We often think of leisure as exemption from particular demands. The vacation, which involves getting away from one’s normal routine and location, is a temporary escape from many of the demands made upon us by the everyday. That which we escape from need not be inherently unpleasant or devoid of value. Married people may love their children, yet wish to escape for a few days from the aggravations which constant and repetitive parental responsibilities entail (e.g., “whining and dining”⁸). I may enjoy my work, yet reach the point of saturation when it seems needful to withdraw for a while. It may happen that, like Jeremiah⁹ (though not always with the prophet’s moral passion), one wearies of an entire social setting and feels the desire to remove oneself to a Jew-free “inn in the desert.”

Obviously, the integrated individual will seek to increase his or her moral stamina as much as possible. Insofar as his life is dedicated to worthwhile activity, he is less likely than others to desire a change in his regular way of life. Nonetheless, the fact that an individual aims at integration along the lines adumbrated above does not render him or her immune to these pressures. Quite apart from any intention of redeeming one’s existence, there is a simple desire to get some rest.¹⁰

Please note that in treating the vacation from the standpoint of rest, of “leisure *from*,” the positive content of the leisure activity is irrelevant. As Hannah Arendt has put it: “*Panis et circenses* truly belong together, both are necessary for life, for its preservation and recuperation. . . . The truth is we all stand in need of entertainment and amusement in some form or other, because we are all subject to life’s great cycle, and it is sheer hypocrisy or social snobbery to deny that we can be amused and entertained by exactly the same things which amuse and entertain the masses of our fellow men.”¹¹ If this is the case, then all that matters, as regards rest and recreation, is success at attaining respite from whatever it is that one has had enough of, and “pushpin is the same as poetry.” What is not *tref* is kosher.

Does this mean that the integrationist has no criteria, other than halakhic prohibition, by which to criticize a vacation choice? Not necessarily. Perhaps people need recreation as they need sleep, i.e., as a natural function. But does this imply that we ought to devote time to activities that have no significance other than that they afford us rest, when alternate activities, which further a richer variety of worthwhile purposes, are available? And just as it would be inconsistent for the seeker after a unified existence to commit a disproportionate

amount of time to a natural function, such as sleep, so it would be absurd to schedule more time than necessary for pure recreation.

Leisure, however, is not always, or primarily, leisure from; it is also “leisure to” pursue activities of uncontested value that cannot be undertaken, or not undertaken as well, as part of one’s everyday regimen. Not all human goods are compossible; hence it is wrong for the individual to maintain the identical routine without any variety, even if it is the best organization of time one can devise. To some degree, it is possible to overcome this problem by introducing elements of flexibility and variety into one’s schedule, thus obviating the need for a formal vacation; but it is difficult to encompass all dimensions of one’s life in this way, particularly when other people are involved, and often impossible to come close. In fact, most people have cause to be dissatisfied with the disposition of the days of their lives; all the more reason to delight in an occasional change.

What are some of the areas in which the integrated Orthodox personality may benefit from going on vacation? He may gain freshness by adopting a more relaxed, less harried, attitude to his work, an attitude that is often conducive to heightened creativity. He may enrich his understanding of the created universe around him, discovering a breadth and beauty hidden from his circumscribed perspective.¹² He can enhance his pleasure and enjoyment of the world.¹³ More important, he is granted the opportunity to deepen his connections to significant human beings, often abandoned in hours of busyness, misunderstood amid the distractions and the static of the quotidian. And last, but certainly not least, he can hungrily employ his leisure to study, to think, to pray, to perform *mitsvot*. When Dr. Lamm, for example, offers guidance to those of us who have more leisure than they know how to deal with, he does so precisely by calling attention to the possibilities of “leisure to” inherent in such *mitsvot* as *Shabbat*, *Talmud Torah*, etc.

V

Once again: what about Club Med? Is it good for synthesis or bad for synthesis? Let’s review what we’ve said above about vacationing in general, and compare Club Med with other options:

In terms of “leisure from” Club Med differs in one outstanding way from “Jewish” resorts. No Jews; at least no visible Jewish presence. I suspect that many readers of Singer’s essay feel that the mere desire to get away from Jews is unhealthy. I lead too sheltered a life to share such a desire: the majority of Jews who constitute “some of my best friends” are my students (the minority, colleagues) and I didn’t get

where I am today by wanting to escape them. Other people, however, may experience such a desire with the force of a need, and I can imagine circumstances (e.g., too many committee meetings) under which I'd be one of them. Nonetheless, it's hard to view such a desire as a virtue, certainly not as something which enhances the unity of one's existence as a Jew.

Now you may argue that avoiding Jews is not a matter of "leisure from" but is rather "leisure to" explore the world in all its richness. Did we not maintain that man's quest for knowledge involves not only theoretical understanding but concrete experience as well? Is not Club Med part of the world, thus calling for our cognitive solicitude? True, but it is also the case that, taken to its logical conclusion, such a "principle of plenitude"¹⁴ would compel us to be everywhere all the time, committed to being (as someone once said of Teddy Roosevelt) "the bridegroom at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral." It is the challenge of human temporality that we must, in choosing a certain life, negate numerous alternative existences; and a life that would attain unity must do so by virtue of so choosing.¹⁵

What other values could be realized at Club Med better than anywhere else? Pleasure? At the outset, Singer tells us, he just wanted a crack at some sun (that, and those swaying palms). Not having been to Club Med, I must limit myself to recording Singer's argument, leaving it to authorities in the field to determine the special pleasures, if any, afforded by the Club Med sun, compared with those available at more "Jewish" resorts. But from the hedonic point of view, I must demur, Club Med has its drawbacks, some of which it shares with more conventional places of Jewish recreation. For many of us modern Orthodox, welcoming as we do the pleasures of the flesh, food is as great a value as sun, and, as Singer admits, the culinary burden of fruit cup and salad, however fetching when freely elected, becomes onerous indeed when we are condemned to it, and, like Oscar Madison at the fat farm, reduced to remembrance of pastrami past.¹⁶ If you add to this the time consumed in arrangements for the journey, the absence of a Torah library, and other sundry frustrations, you will understand why those swaying palms lose some of their fascination for the Orthodox Jew who is out for pleasure pure and simple.

At the end of his discussion, Singer offers another argument for the synthesis character of Club Med: the performance of *mitsvot* in an alien setting increases their significance. It is not clear why this is so. Several possibilities: the greater effort required to maintain observance in strange surroundings; the dissipation of staleness and routine through the performance of a familiar act in a novel environment, etc. How important these factors are must be left to the individual's judgment. The ultimate criterion is, as we have seen above, the