

## REWIND AND FAST FORWARD: A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

In a nostalgic mood of late, I have been leafing through the past thirteen years of *Tradition*. It has been, as they say in today's jargon, an instructive read.

To begin with the Editor's Notebook (to which, for some reason, I always turn first): it is apparent that, although ours is not a journal of current Jewish events, this column has often discussed seminal events and significant trends—from the assassination of Rabin to the fantasies and self-delusions of the Oslo process, and from the secular/religious divide to the vagaries of living in an Israel which can be comic, maddening, and uplifting.

It has also focused on the changing nature of Orthodox Judaism; the ambiguities of American Jewish life as reflected in our life-cycle events and our habits of prayer; and the non-Orthodox community's dawning awareness of the spiritual abyss that yawns beneath them, and its paradoxical desire to hold on to the banner of Jewish continuity while refusing to let go of whatever shibboleths of the day happen to be in vogue.

And, contra the solemn traditions of *Tradition*, this column has never joined Philip Roth's famous "Rabbinical Society For the Suppression of Laughter in the Interests of Loftier Values." Instead, and encouraged by Psalm 2:4 that that even "He Who sits in the heavens laughs," it has permitted itself the occasional luxury of laughing—at ourselves and at others—while viewing curiosities like baseball and repentance, flying first class, and how it feels not to win the Nobel Prize year after year.

But despite this column's intermittent meanderings from the straight and narrow, *Tradition* as a journal has faithfully maintained its character as a journal of Jewish thought—but without being imprisoned in an Orthodox ivory tower. To be sure, it has dealt with recondite themes such as divine revelation, rabbinic authority, and the nature of biblical sacrifice. But the changing rhythms of Jewish life and of the world around us are insistent and refuse to be ignored. Thus *Tradition* has examined subjects such as the halakhic status of women's prayer groups; the implications of translating the Talmud into English; *in vitro* fertilization; homosexuality; and the applicability of the norms of traditional *tshenit* to today's world.

That even a journal of ideas can touch sensitive nerves is apparent in our *Communications* section, which has regularly offered spirited exchanges of opinions. And that we have not been ideologically monolithic is evidenced by the fact that we have been criticized by the Right for our obvious Leftist tendencies, and by the Left for our equally obvious Rightist predilections.

Scanning through these back issues, it is clear that while Orthodox Judaism still enjoys its remarkable resurgence around the Jewish world, there remain many unresolved issues. Despite the binding nature of our adherence to a divine Torah and an eternal halakhic system, we are a group still in flux, and our various constituencies are still debating as to how best to address modernity through the vocabulary of our ancient faith. Some of us refrain from anything but limited contact with the outside world, concerned that such interaction—whether practical or intellectual—will dilute the essential holiness of the Torah. Others among us are less concerned with such risks and, convinced that the Creator's imprint is visible throughout His world, see a positive good in recognizing the divine element inherent in art, music, science, and mathematics.

But it is evident that, with all of its new-found vitality, none of the groups within contemporary Orthodoxy here or in Israel—neither those bedecked with black hats nor those with knitted yarmulkes, neither the yeshiva world nor the Modern Orthodox—has (so far) had a significant impact on the boundless Jewish ignorance and assimilation that continue to plague Jewish life—even factoring in the impressive *ba'al teshuva* phenomenon.

The anomalies within Orthodoxy are very much the result of the absence of an authoritative, universally recognized spiritual leadership. The death of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *zekher tsaddik livrakha*, has left a vacuum within Modern Orthodoxy that remains unfilled, and finds it in danger of spinning off in various directions—just as the earlier death of Rav Moshe Feinstein, *zekher tsaddik livrakha*, marked the end of an era and left the yeshiva world similarly rudderless and bereft. A number of issues of this journal, for example, were devoted to what Rav Soloveitchik said or did not say, what he meant and did not mean—eloquent testimony to the impact of his presence when he was alive, and to the implications of his absence now that he is gone. Rav Moshe was for the most part spared such disputations, because many of his halakhic decisions were codified in his voluminous published responsa. But even in his case there arose disagreements as to what he really meant to say and

what he would have said today about this-and-that and such-and-such were he still alive.

We are today a *dor yatom* / an orphaned generation. Although we are blessed with masterful *posekim* throughout the Jewish world and especially in Israel, what we sorely miss are the overarching, world-straddling halakhic figures like Rav Joseph Dov and Rav Moshe who, colossus-like, bestrode the sea of Torah in unchallenged dominion of all its rivers and tributaries. But we are comforted by a different metaphor of loss, for Jeremiah reminds us that *lo alman Yisrael*—"Israel is not a widower." We have faith that such leadership will yet arise in the time to come.

• • •

Why this sudden burst of nostalgia on my part, and why have I chosen to look only at the past thirteen years of this journal? The reason is that this issue marks my last as editor of *Tradition*. Thirteen years ago, the RCA asked me to take over this journal from then retiring editor Rabbi Walter S. Wurzbarger, who in turn had succeeded our founding editor, Rabbi Norman Lamm. To step into the large and distinguished shoes of these two predecessors was indeed a daunting assignment, but I agreed to try it for two years. Before I realized it, the two years somehow mushroomed into thirteen. But just as the *gimatriot* of *ahava* and *ehad* are each thirteen, so have the years seemed like one year because of the singular love I had for the task.

Throughout, I have been privileged to work with highly talented consulting and associate editors who have shared generously of their wisdom and insight. I thank each of them for the enormous contributions of time and energy they have given to this journal—especially since all the editors at *Tradition* are unpaid volunteers.

To be an editor involves not only pen-holding but hand holding. The procreator of an article is very much like the parent of a newborn baby. The article's author conceives an idea, experiences the pangs of gestation, and, certain of its perfection, finally submits his product. And along come total strangers who call themselves editors and tactlessly point out defects and inadequacies. The reaction of the mother/father is not always agreeable.

Obviously, not every article can be accepted, for not every author is able to live up to the Rambam's suggestions about writing. In his *Iggeret ha-Shemad* he states that

while it is advisable, before speaking in public, to review several

times “that which one wants to say, and learn it exceedingly well,” when it comes to writing “it would be proper to go over one’s words one thousand times if at all possible.”

(Rambam’s pellucid and crystalline style, and the breathtaking precision of his words, demonstrate that he practiced what he preached.)

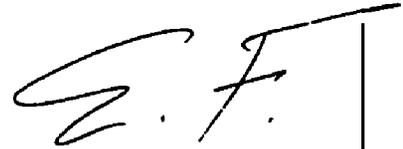
To rewrite and refine so frequently is not possible for most writers; nevertheless, we respect the creative process, and we take seriously everything submitted to us. Every article, even before it is specifically edited, goes through a critical vetting process: does it contribute to the understanding of Torah and Jewish tradition? Does it offer an original thesis? Is it within the broad ideological parameters of our journal? Is it articulate? Does it need heavy editing? My colleagues—and especially our Consulting Editor—as well as the occasional outside specialists we have called in, have been of inestimable value in this painstaking and—when we must reject—painful process. To them, as well as to our administrative assistants and copy editors—and particularly to the writers of our regular features: the learned *Survey of Recent Halakhic Periodical Literature*; the fascinating *From the Pages of Tradition*; and the wide ranging *Important Books*—I express my appreciation for their manifold contributions.

Although the experience has been exciting and gratifying, the time has come to move on, and so some time ago I asked the RCA to find a successor. This search has now come to a successful conclusion with the appointment of a new editor: Rabbi Michael Shmidman, rabbi in Teaneck, NJ, professor of Jewish History and dean of the Touro College Graduate School of Jewish Studies. A fine scholar, he is much beloved and respected by both his community and his colleagues. As editor he is entitled to the blessing that is forthcoming to everyone who is engaged *be-tsorkhei tsibbur be-emuna*.

The more things change, the more they remain the same. Jewish life is still in need of deeper commitment to intensive Jewish learning, to authentic halakhic thinking and living, and to the ideals of holiness and *mentschlichkeit* in daily life. *Tradition*, since its founding almost 45 years ago, has attempted to be a vehicle for the expression of these ideals. On the surface, we are an academic journal with a traditional Jewish bent. But we are more than this. Academia claims to search for truth, and in the process, no one truth, paradoxically, has a greater claim on one’s loyalty than any other. In the context of Torah, however, there is only one Truth—

albeit a Truth with many facets—that supersedes all others, and this is how we differ from an ordinary academic journal.

Editors come and go, but our long-term ideal remains the same: *le-hagdil Torah u-le-ha'adira*, to magnify the Torah and to exalt it. May we be worthy of continuing to pursue this lofty ideal.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized initials 'E.F.' with a long horizontal stroke extending from the top of the 'F'.

EMANUEL FELDMAN