SYMPOSIUM ON ORTHODOXY:
AN ADDENDUM

The respondents were asked these five questions:

1. The program of the February, 1956, conference of the Rabbinical Council of America lists Rav Moshe Feinstein, z"l, and Rav Mordechai Gifter among the speakers. Rav Aharon Kotler, z"l, also addressed the RCA in those days. It is fair to say that today such invitations to luminaries of the Yeshiva world would neither be issued nor accepted. What has happened to effect this sea change in relationships?

2. a) What were the epochal events that shaped Jewry in the last sixty years, and how would you evaluate the response of Orthodoxy to these events? b) Related to this, what have been the greatest successes of Orthodoxy, and its greatest failures?

3. Which presents the more serious challenge to Orthodoxy: the deviationist religious movements, or secularism? Have our past strategies in relating to either of them been effective? If not, how should the strategies be changed?

4. Which of the various groupings within Orthodoxy—Centrist, Rightist, Hasidic, Yeshiva, Haredi or others—do you consider the most vital in the long term, and which the weakest? Why? Do you see further splits between them, or greater cooperation?

5. As a believing Jew, what facets of Torah life give you the most personal strength to thrive spiritually as an Orthodox Jew in a hedonistic environment that is not conducive to Torah values?

SHALOM CARMY

Each day brings with it the prospect of discovering a new facet of Torah or a new way of communicating to others what I have already gained. Each day brings with it the possibility that my Torah study, to a lesser extent my other reading, and my interaction with talmidim will help to make me a different person for the better. The excitement of learning, the shudder of insight, the awareness of commitment to my students, and the inspiration I draw from them (including those whose path is not always smooth)—these driving feelings often seem palpable: as if the Torah were nourishment, and its transmission electric. I am regularly accompanied, and motivated by, thoughts of my father, his steadfast faithfulness to a life of Torah u-mitsvot under unpropitious conditions, his stubborn moral integrity, and of the dedication and religious-intellectual wholesomeness of my teachers. The climactic recurrence of Yom Kippur with its promise of regeneration serves to concentrate these thoughts, and is thus the high point of the year. All this may not amount to the “spiritual thriving” mentioned in the questionnaire, but
it gives one a good reason to set the alarm clock early and to awake before it rings.

I have not found the vaunted hedonism of our society seductive, mainly because the votaries of pleasure get so little enjoyment out of it. Dining among people of modern sensibility, I usually feel like Babe Ruth at a conclave of Kafkas. Contrasting the frankness of my enjoyment with the painful, laborious, premeditated fussiness of theirs, I cannot help inferring that they are either deficient in the capacity for pleasure or investing their pleasures with an exorbitant, disproportionate significance that can only end in disappointment. Their relentless hopefulness in the pursuit of momentary pleasure, their wistful perseverance in the quest for contentment, I sometimes find moving, but rarely distracting.

I wish the same could be said about some of the unattractive phenomena that bedevil our communities. Both in the Yeshiva velt and in the corridors of academic scholarship, the two groups with which I have contact, religion is too frequently exploited in the service of self-indulgent moral standards; cynicism parades prominently as pious cleverness; ill-disguised envy and lust for personal self-aggrandizement eclipse the virtues of humility and simple intellectual and psychological honesty; invective blockades the slightest self-criticism. When these vices are shrugged off as normal, and even more so, when those guilty of them possess virtues (or power) by dint of which I am compelled to devise excuses on their behalf, I feel tainted by worldliness and disheartened in my vocation.

Any success I have had in maintaining a critical perspective on secular society and a critical detachment towards the anti-Torah aspects of the Orthodox world is due, in no mean measure, to a liberal arts education conjoined to the primacy of Torah. Thus simple gratitude would make me wish that this type of education be available to the children of my talmidim. No religious community can genuinely thrive without a vigorous commitment to Torah and the intellectual vocabulary to engage in rigorous self-examination and self-understanding. Wisdom, the Mishna teaches, is the willingness to learn from all human beings. It is an exigent quality, and one in short supply.

In practical terms, the non-Orthodox groups are a syncretism of Torah and secularism. What is pernicious in them is due mostly to the secularism. Most of their adherents are interested in enriching what is fundamentally a secular outlook with the psychological or ethnic comforts they associate with the rituals and language of religious culture. Thus the true enemy is secularism. An intellectually honest Jew ready to cast off the yoke of secularism, would, other things being equal, look
for God within what is presumably the most authentic framework—namely Orthodoxy. Such an individual may end up dissatisfied with what we are offering, or may not give us a fair chance. Perhaps the searching individual is still enslaved to the regnant culture. But it may be our fault too, as when it is perceived, rightly or wrongly, that the Orthodox teachers whom they encounter are obtusely arrogant or militantly ignorant in responding to their questions. (Humble confession of intellectual limitations may not be enough to deter honest seekers.)

Sincere individuals may also go elsewhere if they are repelled by unethical character traits and behavior ascribed to us by our adversaries. We know too well that such accusations are not entirely baseless, especially when it comes to our attitudes toward non-Jews and other outsiders: we are paying dearly for not keeping our house in order. Women’s issues present a special challenge. Halakhic Judaism is surely in a position to criticize the unstable synthesis and distortions of liberal secularism, but has not yet realized a viable model that would encompass the legitimate but conflicting tug of individual growth, on the one hand, with family obligation, on the other hand.

That wise man, Rabbi Norman Frimer, once chided me, a fire-eating student, for my impatience with Jews. Do not forget, he said, that the community to which you must minister is a community of cripples. He did not mean only, or primarily, the effects of the Holocaust. He was referring to the total dislocation that affected Jewish life early in the century, the unprecedented allure of social mobility, the bottomless dream of acquisitiveness. No generation needed more desperately an inner-directed sense of spiritual conviction, and no generation was more lacking in spiritual resources. Broken by old country hatred, bereft of knowledge and confidence in Judaism, prostrate before the glittering altar of American-style status and success, the immigrant society could only submit wistfully to the high tide of secular civilization, clinging to ragged fragments of the past, as an orphaned child clutches helplessly a familiar toy.

A generation of cripples, in which my father’s shemirat Shabbat and Torah study made him a virtual freak of nature, gave birth to one in which an individual can aspire to the most rigorous standard of religious observance, to the greatest sophistication in Torah study, limited only by his, or her, ability and will. Nor are such individuals isolated. It is usually within their power to choose friends and teachers whose influence will guide them where they wish to be led, towards a richer fulfillment of the life of Torah, in their intellect, in their emotions, in their relations with other human beings.
Yet American Orthodoxy hasn’t really beaten back the encroachments of secularism. Our culture remains fixated on external status and material baubles, among which educational achievement has its allotted place of pride as do Jewish accomplishments. The number of leisure activities and socioeconomic goals, all prominently featuring money, that typically, and unthinkingly, cut to the head of the line in front of training in Torah and yirat Shamayim, help explain why schooling as prolonged as it is expensive often yields inexplicably thin results. And as in the host culture, the popularity of divorce is symptomatic of a weakened responsibility to that which makes for family stability. When the teacher awakens “too” many hours before his appointed time, it is usually to agonize over such tragedies, and to contemplate the vain task of reversing by words and will alone what has long been inculcated by habit.

Having started with the last question, I have worked my way back to the beginning. For me, and others similarly occupied in America or Israel, who attends conventions and who doesn’t is not a matter of earth-shaking import. There is too much work to be done and too little cause for self-satisfaction on the part of any segment of Orthodoxy. On any given day, that work engenders both intractable frustration and transcendent joy.

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TZVI HERSH WEINREB

I approach the task of responding to Tradition’s questions from a dual perspective. I have been a pulpit rabbi for nearly ten years, of a large diverse metropolitan synagogue. I came to the pulpit after more than twenty years of experience as a psychotherapist, with a concentration upon members of the Orthodox community. These two vantage points have allowed me a view of what we might call the underside of that community: its deep frustrations, its anxieties and depressions, its feelings of bitterness, disappointment, and anger; it flight into drugs and alcohol; its family discords; its disruptive classroom behaviors; and its aggression and violence. I am familiar and proud of its growth and many successes, but I cannot turn a blind eye to the severe community mental health problems which I observe daily, and which are corroborated by the many mental health professionals who work in our frum
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communities, and who consult with me as I travel to lecture across the United States.

I will not use this forum to describe in detail the ugly and frightening picture which I discern. I think that the picture is glimpsed by all who function in the rabbinate, in Jewish education, and in Jewish social services. I will merely speculate on two factors which lie behind the picture.

The first of these factors is a sociological one. It is the tendency for cultural sub-groups to differentiate themselves from similar sub-groups, perceiving the others as competitively threatening. As time goes on, this process of differentiation accelerates in the direction of increased separation and insulation, with the concurrent rejection and even demonization of the perceived competition. The second factor is a psycho-spiritual one. There is a tendency for members of religious groups to become increasingly attached to the external forms and rituals of religion, and increasingly alienated from its central philosophical message and spiritual emotions. This process is one which is already alluded to in the Torah. It was the profound concern of our prophets, and plagued gedolei Yisrael throughout the centuries from Bahaya Ibn Paquda to the founders of Hasidism and to the leaders of the Musar Movement. I refer to this process as spiritual alienation.

And now to the questions:

1) In the 1950’s, Orthodox Jewry saw itself as one sub-group with common beliefs and practices: a common Holocaust survivor status, and a common destiny. This sub-group saw the non-Orthodox as the only competition and struggled to distance itself from them. As time has marched on, however, sub-groups within Orthodoxy have proliferated, boundaries between these sub-groups have hardened, common beliefs and practices are obscured by superficial differences, the Holocaust is a haunting memory, and we no longer experience ourselves as traveling towards the same objective. Rashei yeshiva of the type who spoke to the RCA audiences in the 50’s are members of sub-groups that have sharply differentiated themselves from such a potential audience, much the same as the RCA has gone through a similar process of self-definition. This is sad, indeed tragic, but such is the reality of the sociological vectors which have determined our current reality. On an encouraging note, however, the most recent convention of the RCA, held in Washington, D.C. in May of 1998, did include a visit by the rabbis attending the convention to Yeshivas Ner Israel. During this visit, the convention was addressed by the rosh yeshiva and by its menahel. While not without its moments of tension, this visit can be seen as a harbinger of possible dialogue.

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2) The epochal event of the past fifty years was the Holocaust, and the almost total destruction of traditional Ashkenazic Torah culture. In this country, that culture had already been weakened by the dislocations common to all migration, but especially by the specific nature of the American experience. The contemporary American scene can largely be understood in terms of the differential responses to the Holocaust by the various sub-groups within our people, and the differential impact that Holocaust survivors with leadership capabilities had upon those sub-groups. Certainly the twenty years immediately subsequent to the Holocaust can be seen as years of ferment and transition toward our current condition, and our current condition can only be understood in terms of those twenty years.

The simple most obvious manifestation of this process has been in the area of Torah study. The proliferation of Torah institutions, Torah students, new sefarim written and old sefarim published is revolutionary and unprecedented. Those leaders whose response to the Holocaust emphasized serious Torah study have proven successful. This is clearly the area of greatest success.

Less successful, however, have been attempts to recreate other cultural and social aspects of the lost traditions, and much less successful have been the attempts to recapture the sincere piety and inner religiosity of times past. We have not succeeded in recreating the societal forms which were traditionally ours, hence, the family disarray, hence the unbridled materialism, hence the assimilation of numerous alien values. We have certainly failed to regenerate the spirituality of our tradition—we have our talmudists, our halakhists, but where are our poets, philosophers, mystics, ethicists, or new charismatic rebbeim?

3) Secularism is an alternative, in our free society, to religion. It is an option, and to an extent, a tempting one, and as such it is a challenge. But if what we are trying to “market” is spirituality and inwardness, meaningfulness and relevance, we must wake up to the challenge of the Conservative and Reform movements. There is a great danger that our sense of triumphalism, stimulated by the successes in recent decades of recruited multitudes of non-Orthodox to our camp in their search for spirituality, will lull us into a false security. We must study the competition and realize that the other streams promise a spirituality of their own, and are producing innovative methodologies and stimulating literature of their own which threaten not only to attract that population from which we have been drawing our “ba’alei teshuva”, but which even threaten to attract those within our ranks who are searching for a
spiritual component which they do not find in the Orthodox domain. This is a new phenomenon, indeed, but one that I have begun to observe, and with the growing assertiveness of the non-Orthodox denominations, we will have to seek new strategies of coping with this invigorated competition. Our past strategies will not be effective for those who find both tradition and meaningfulness in the other denominations. We will have to intelligently present our position in contrast to the liberal streams, pointing out clearly why we feel that they are invalid and inauthentic. We must also find methods within our tradition to address some of the emotional and psychological needs which the non-Orthodox streams are attempting to address head-on.

4) Having outlined the two-factor nexus above, one would predict that the various groupings within Orthodoxy will further splinter and will draw farther apart as time goes on. As each group succumbs to its objective of differentiated self-definition, it will define its boundaries more and more firmly. The degree to which each group can meet the inward needs of its constituents will determine its vitality. Ironically, those groups which the lay observer would certainly consider most vital are often seen by the mental health practitioner as suffering the greatest psychological malaise. They also suffer the most from the fallacy that a group’s spirituality can thrive when it projects hostility toward other sub-groups.

The lesson to be learned is that spirituality is not diminished by openness to other components of Orthodoxy; quite the contrary, Spirituality is fostered by such openness. To this end, it is encouraging to see that certain elements in the hasidic and Haredi worlds which typically eschewed outreach, have now begun to embrace it with the resultant invigoration of their own spirituality.

5) On a personal level, the facets of Torah life which give me the strength to keep struggling spiritually, if not thrive, include daily Torah study, particularly Daf Yomi, careful Parsha study, and the study of musar and hasidut. Doing this study in a social context, be-rabbim and with chaverim, offers special spiritual benefits. Breslover style “hitbodedut”, solitary meditation, and prayer is important, especially when done with simplicity and persistence. An occasional “tish” with nigunim and atmosphere is essential. Participation in earnest, self-examining dialogue with a spouse, friend, or therapist, if necessary, is another important ingredient. Finally, a relationship with a rebbe, or mentor, is an absolute must.
The future success of the Orthodox community lies in (1) its ability to stop the process of frantic differentiation of its various sub-groups, and start a reverse process of mutual respect and learning from each other, and (2) an invigoration of our inner experience, an openness to those aspects of our heritage which can touch our emotional lives and heal our souls.

The successful redirection of the process I have outlined will help change the troublesome picture of our community’s mental health, and will transform our entire prospect, from our deepest inner life to our public institutions and organizations.

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