

## TEFILLIN IN A BROWN PAPER BAG

The idea first struck me on a recent trans-Atlantic flight. On my seat I found a copy of the London *Economist*. Though not a devotee of the dismal science, I am a hopelessly compulsive reader and so I browsed through it. I soon found myself reveling in its felicitous style, its elegant phrasing, its precision, its supple prose and keen sense of language. Here, as we say in the South, is English is she is truly spoke—or writ.

And then I picked up the Orthodox Jewish periodical which I had brought with me (whether it was a daily, weekly, monthly, or quarterly shall not be revealed in order to protect the innocent) and the sudden change in atmosphere gave me the literary bends. The alphabet and the words were English, but the sentence structure, the rhythm, the syntax, the tone, were of another language altogether. It dawned on me that what I was reading was not language at all but a jargon.

This is not an isolated case. With some admirable exceptions—such as many of the translations and compilations of classic Jewish texts which clearly are significant contributions to the understanding of major Jewish sources—the lamentable fact is that in much of today's American Torah Judaica in English, be they periodicals or books, one experiences that same bends-inducing jargon that, like some sleight of hand, appears to be English but is not.

You may ask: so what? If it informs and occasionally even uplifts, then who cares if the phrasing is inelegant or the words inappropriate? What difference does it make as long as it does the job?

The point, however, is that poor language cannot do the job, cannot inform or uplift in any lasting way. When language is inadequate, simplistic and one-dimensional, then ideas that are potentially sophisticated, profound, and subtle will, in the reader's mind, be reduced to simplistic and one-dimensional proportions. Impoverished language cannot accurately reflect the wealth of great concepts. Furthermore, since language is the handmaiden of thought, careless and imprecise language exercises both cause and effect on the mind: careless thinking results in careless expression, and careless expression has a deleterious effect on thinking. A chronic inability to express ideas ultimately results in a chronic dearth of ideas. When language is inappropriate, thought is stillborn.

Beyond theory, the use of deficient language has practical negative consequences as well, for it prevents us from preaching to anyone but the Orthodox choir. Intelligent, educated non-Orthodox Jews will surely be put off by the argot which passes for much of Torah Judaica today. By and large, we do not, quite literally (or illiterally), write or speak their language. For jargon by definition is a simple elemental form of communication which includes

only the initiated and eliminates everyone else from the discussion. It is hard to imagine that any thinking individual can be persuaded of the depths of Torah when—quite beyond grating misusages such as “being that” instead of “since”; “comes to tell us” instead of “informs us”; “brings down” instead of “cites”—the ideas of Torah are presented in jejune and puerile language. This is a pity, for Torah is precious enough to deserve elegance, grace, sophistication, and precision. After all, we don’t wrap our tefillin in brown paper bags, or bind our *sifrei Torah* with coarse, ugly ropes. A world-view which is inadequately articulated not only fails to communicate, but repels those whom it would reach.

The dolorous condition of Orthodox writing may not have come about by design, but it was certainly predictable. It is the price we are paying for the benign (sometimes not so benign) neglect with which non-sacred studies have been treated in Jewish schools. It is a price paid in a lack of communication skills, an inability to articulate ideas, and the resultant unwitting conspiracy of illiteracy between writer, reader, editor, and publisher. For if writers cannot write and readers cannot read, can editors and publishers be far behind? It is no wonder that we are today confronted with a plethora of biographies and histories of great thinkers and important epochs which are nothing more than loosely strung together anecdotes, mostly hagiographic and interchangeable.

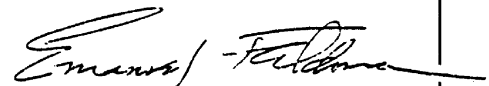
In this inability to write in English we are, of course, not alone. It is a phenomenon we share with the wider American community, the result, among other things, of inadequate education and mass addiction to sources of entertainment which have stupefied the American mind. What is curious is the fact that the Orthodox community produces fine *talmidei hakhamim* who are at home in the profound and labyrinthine subtleties of Talmudic dialectic, who have first-class minds, and who surely can think quite well. Clearly, the difficulties they find in expression are more a failure of writing skills than a failure of mind.

The fact is that yeshivot rarely force students to articulate ideas and to express them in writing. This need not be a permanent condition. Our contemporary Torah *she-b'al peh* needs to become more of a *bikhetav*. It should be possible—even in the context of the most intensive Torah study—to develop at least basic English writing skills. Advanced yeshivot—even those which in principle reject any studies which are not sacred—could require more written work; e.g., research papers on issues of halakhah or Jewish thought; examinations which include written essay questions; written “*haburos*” in addition to oral “*haburos*” on halakhic themes, which are now required in many advanced yeshivot; in-house scholarly publications—now occasionally found in Hebrew in some yeshivot—expanded to English when possible. Granted, this limited stress on writing will not create poets, but it does have the potential of identifying and drawing out individuals who have the minimal tools with which to write lucidly in English. And, not incidentally, a new emphasis on the written word can only enhance Torah study, for writing crystallizes thinking and transforms amorphous concepts into order and logic.

We have made real progress in outreach and *kiruv*. But if we wish to reach the mind of the secularly educated Jew—that Jew who is most alienated from tradition—we will have to work towards developing at least a small

group of learned, committed Jews who can write English. Speeches, lectures, weekend retreats all play vital and significant roles in introducing Torah to the wider community. But in the long-term struggle to establish Torah values within American Jewry—a struggle in which Orthodoxy has made remarkable strides—we are neglecting the potent weapon of the effective written word. When the Midrash informs us that “the scroll and the sword descended intertwined from heaven” (Lev. R. 35:5), we are perhaps being reminded that the written word is a powerful instrument of battle, for it has a staying power and an impact which cannot be matched. As Maimonides writes in his *Iggeret Ha-Shemad*, a person should review “two or three or four times that which he desires to say, and should learn it exceedingly well” before he speaks in public. However, when it comes to writing, “it would be proper for the writer to go over his words one thousand times if at all possible.” According to many students, Rambam’s influence was in no small measure a result of his “golden pen,” his crystalline, pellucid style, and his appreciation of written language. He fully understood the lasting significance of the written word, which does not evaporate and disappear like the spoken word, but remains forever on the page where it can be read and reread.

There are no easy answers—not even difficult ones—to the questions raised here, but some attention needs to be given to this matter. Otherwise, we will continue to be locked in a macabre dance with ourselves alone, encapsulated by a choreography which, instead of including others, creates walls which exclude, isolate, and turn away.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Emanuel Feldman". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

EMANUEL FELDMAN