Editor's Note

ARE WE ALL SEMINARY MEN? AND THE FOLIAGE OF OLD VILNA

A charismatic Conservative rabbi publishes a book on Jewish philosophy which Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, then in his heyday as Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, compares to Maimonides' *Guide*. Whereupon a prominent congregant defects to Orthodoxy, saying: I may not know much about Judaism, but I know my rabbi, with all due respect, is no Maimonides.

How could Finkelstein have been so casual, I ask my mentor Rabbi Walter Wurzburger, my source for the anecdote? His answer: Finkelstein's field was rabbinic scholarship, as he and his confreres defined it: in their minds, they were running a yeshiva. Indifferent to Jewish thought, he indulged a nonchalance not to be brooked in assessing scholarly editions of primary texts.

Finkelstein was hardly unaware of the divisions within Conservative Judaism on fundamental questions of belief but he didn't care much about them. He made this clear in a programmatic 1927 address. Regarding God, Torah, legal change, the people Israel, the country Palestine, and the importance of the Hebrew language, he averred, there are "wide differences of opinion as to the exact meaning of some of them, and the relative emphasis to be placed on each of them" but these were "slight in comparison with our basic agreement in essentials."

At that moment Finkelstein knew that the institution he would later head had, from time immemorial, excluded the Torah from its curriculum in order to avoid taking a position on *Torah mi-Sinai*. Even as he spoke, he knew that Mordechai Kaplan, one of the most powerful stars on his faculty, had definitively and authoritatively jettisoned traditional belief in God and all the doctrines it entailed.

Finkelstein allowed that even staunch movement loyalists might falter when told to believe that such deviations from tradition are insignificant. Faith, he explained, requires a visible symbol, and Finkelstein had one to offer: "Our unity is symbolized for us by the Seminary, that institution of which we are all either the natural or adopted children." Through shared affiliation to their Alma Mater, Conservative rabbis become "not only

TRADITION 47:2 / © 2014
Rabbinical Council of America

comrades in arms, but also brothers." "We are all of us 'Seminary men,'" climaxes Finkelstein's peroration.[1]

Our Modern Orthodox public square is agitated: On one side, it is fashionable to accuse theological or halakhic liberals of emulating Conservative Judaism. Leniency, it is feared, precipitates a slippery slide to Conservative Judaism. The other side responds that Conservative Judaism is no longer the denominational threat to Orthodoxy that it was fifty years ago, thus accommodation is a "switch in time" that will keep valuable resources under the "big tent" of the Modern Orthodox movement. Listening to these arguments, even when they are presented sincerely, gives the impression that the debate is largely about competitive denominational salesmanship. Is this one area where the old Conservative approach of ignoring theological substance in favor of practical advantage is accepted almost unconsciously?

Unconsciously, I say, because at first blush, the inclusiveness about Jewish belief that Finkelstein advocated, one that papers over ostensibly enormous divisions in theology, defies the conscious Orthodox mind. Unconsciously – because allegiance to an institution, to an edifice of wood and stone, cannot override bedrock commitment to God and to the integrity of the Torah. And yet, before you laugh away the classic JTS outlook, think about its genuine subconscious attraction.

On a day to day basis, we cannot live our lives, not even our religious lives, as isolated individuals (even assuming that one can separate the religious from the rest of existence). Willy nilly, we live in association. We constantly think along with others just as we work along with them. Our convictions are animated by the images and human realities we share with our fellows. Only under extraordinary pressures, and with difficulty, do we stand back from identification with our fellows, only under crisis do we confront, and sometimes embrace, the necessity, not only of thinking for ourselves, but of charting our path without the support and solidarity of the community we identify with. Rabbi Finkelstein was right: The vast majority of us, except when bitterly and radically estranged, recall our schooling and socialization fondly and formatively—be it one yeshiva, an accumulation of crucial encounters, a shul, or a place of work. We cherish the friendships forged in those years of awakening and discovery: the

[1] Louis Finkelstein, "The Things that Unite Us—an Address," in Mordechai Waxman, *Tradition and Change: the Development of Conservative Judaism* (New York, 1958), 313-326. For the historical background, see Michael R. Cohen, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement* (Columbia University Press, 2012), chapter 4.

memory and example of our teachers; even the place itself, in all its physical particularity, possess an indelible charm.

Of the places we remember, some have changed "forever not for better." Or it is we, or our cohorts, who have changed and who confess in our hearts, if not with our lips, that the habitations of our youth no longer know us nor we them. Few of us, even those who are not hopeless conformists, contemplate cheerfully the prospect of turning away from the institutional community that we have come to think of as our patrimony and to part ways with the fraternity that means so much to us every single day of our lives. These are the roots to which we are attached, the romance of youth, the great long-lived friendships, often blended into family connections; without which we are liable to wither like waterless plants. As rabbis and as educators, our ability to function reliably in our professional roles, and not incidentally the living it generates, depends on the predictability and familiarity of our social and institutional identities. Left entirely to our own isolated resources, we simply do not know how to proceed.

Complicit in a relentlessly other-directed culture that is rife with relativism, many find it unthinkable to withdraw to the wilderness, there to offer ourselves up to intense self-examination. We are taught to want truth enough to sacrifice social convenience on the altar of our religious doctrine, but our society and its exigencies induce us to desire comfort and continuity and security. Easier to cling uneasily or defiantly to our routine and to our institutional affiliations, like sleepwalkers, as if nothing has changed. It is tempting, then, to mistake the nurturing atmosphere of the institutional club for the truth that it must safeguard and the practice it must enhance and to cling to the former at the expense of the latter, or to dissimulate by hiding behind the mantra that, in the final analysis, we are all Seminary men, that institutional sticks and stones are sufficient to sustain the denominational brand name, and that brandishing the label is sufficient to justify one's way of life.

How many years did John Henry Newman devote to seeking a viable way to preserve the Anglicanism he espoused at Oxford? Already in his forties when he perceived that his Anglican belief was "on its deathbed," he withdrew from public activity until, after several more years of soul-searching, he found his harbor in the Roman Catholic Church. One may safely confess that few of our associates are as robust spiritually, rigorous intellectually and committed wholeheartedly to the search for truth as Newman. For all that, he was not indifferent to the attachments he left behind. Twenty years later, in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, he wrote:

> I left Oxford for good on Monday, February 23, 1846. On the Saturday and Sunday before, I was in my house at Littlemore simply by myself... I slept on Sunday night at my dear friend's, Mr. Johnson's… Various friends came to see the last of me… and I called on Dr. Ogle, one of my very oldest friends, for he was my private tutor when I was an undergraduate. In him I took leave of my first college, Trinity, which was so dear to me, and which held on its foundation so many who have been kind to me both when I was a boy, and all through my Oxford life. Trinity had never been unkind to me. There used to be much snapdragon growing on the walls opposite my freshman's rooms there, and I had for years taken it as the emblem of my own perpetual residence even unto death in my University. On the morning of the 23rd I left the observatory. I have never seen Oxford since, excepting its spires, as they are seen from the railway.

II

The image of snapdragon and the glimpse of Oxford from the train window make vivid the pain of Newman's voluntary separation from Oxford. The deeper moral tragedy, however, was not his protracted nostalgia for Oxford, but rather the curtailment of long-standing, profound friendships. In 1840's England, Newman's conversion effectively closed off his face to face contact with the Anglican world that nurtured him. What about us?

One model is provided by R. Samson Raphael Hirsch. When he came of age, the division between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox had not yet become institutionalized; you could not infer a colleague's credo merely by checking his *semikha*. In fact, Hirsch was invited to the first conference of Reform rabbis: as he was attuned to modern culture, in the minds of the inclusive conveners it was not at all self-evident that he had nothing in common with their venture. At university R. Hirsch had befriended Abraham Geiger, later a fairly militant leader of Reform; in later life for many years he and Hirsch both officiated as adversaries in Frankfurt. The young Heinrich Graetz was so impressed by the publication of the *Nineteen Letters* that he sought out the author and lived in his home for three years, sharing R. Hirsch's table and his intellectual life, both his Torah study and general studies. When at last Graetz came to appreciate the tenacity of R. Hirsch's Orthodoxy he chose to depart, becoming an eminent historian and Bible critic at the Breslau Rabbinical Seminary.

As far as we can tell, these intimate relationships left no imprint on their later collisions. From R. Hirsch's negative reactions to Geiger and from his extremely thorough attack on Graetz's theories about *Torah she-be-Al Peh*, one would not detect the sediment of early friendship, of shared intellectual adventure and personal kindness. If R. Hirsch continued to feel fellowship with these men, no memory of snapdragon at the University of Bonn or the ambitious young rabbi's house in Oldenberg captures and transmits that legacy.

As an alternative, consider the example of R. Yehiel Weinberg, last head of the Hildesheimer Seminary in Berlin. His student Samuel Atlas ended up a rabbinic authority and historian of Jewish philosophy at the Jewish Institute of Religion (the Reform seminary in New York). They continued cordial and frank correspondence on scholarly and other subjects throughout the post-war years when R. Weinberg lived in Montreux, Switzerland. The Hazon Ish likewise maintained friendly relations with the atheistic Yiddish writer Hayyim Grade, once a member of his household, as well as with as other renegades from Orthodoxy.

III

A former student of mine deplores the fact that recent controversies about *Torah mi-Sinai* and other issues invariably focus on clarifications about the boundaries of Orthodoxy instead of taking us deeper into the service of God. He echoes my unhappiness about the reduction of theology to sociology and godliness to sales technique. But is he right to imply that asserting the bounds of Orthodoxy is irrelevant to our legitimate concerns?

The differing postures of R. Hirsch, on the one hand, and R. Yehiel Weinberg and the Hazon Ish on the other hand, probably reflect their distinctive personalities. Let us not, however, ignore situational factors. Surely it matters that these lives and friendships unfolded in the shadow of the Holocaust. At the same time, it is salient that neither R. Yehiel Weinberg nor Hazon Ish was forced to confront their former disciples face to face as colleagues. The former's relationship with his old student was epistolary; the latter's meetings with past intimates were episodic. In any event, neither Professor Atlas nor Grade deemed themselves apostles of some remediated version of Orthodoxy towards which they presumed to steer faithful Judaism and their contact with their erstwhile mentors a means towards gaining an advantage in that direction. They confronted their teachers as scholars, as creative writers, above all as human beings

who deserved to be taken seriously, not as competing purveyors of a religious consumer commodity, who aim to enlarge their niche. They did not feign obliviousness to the gulf between them and their past by humming a Hildesheimer anthem; nor did they behave as if nostalgia for the Lithuanian foliage of yesteryear rendered disagreement about fundamental beliefs and spiritual destiny trivial by comparison.

That honesty means a lot and that is why taking the Orthodox label in vain is not only misleading intellectually but also harmful to the maintenance of human intimacy. If Newman's parting from his Oxford friends is so touching, it is precisely because they understood the gravity and momentousness of his decision. When social or institutional solidarity and the warmth of shared memories are evoked glibly in order to circumvent unbridgeable differences of religious and practical orientation, and when religious and ethical convictions are treated as subsidiary to seeking communal or commercial benefit, not only is our spiritual life cheapened. Quibbling and squabbling over marketing rights to the coveted Orthodox brand name addles our discourse. When that happens, as at Babel, one can still engage in the small talk of the wedding table or exchange pleasant recollections at an alumni dinner, but religious language is no longer the vessel of religious meaning.

Where does this leave me? All I know is that, to the extent that I am faced by the challenge that faced these role models, I ardently wish to respond in the manner of R. Weinberg and the Hazon Ish. I am not sure how I would argue persuasively for my attitude, let alone how I would sway a person who disagrees with it. At least for me, it all goes back to being an individual, the intuition that human honesty is not insignificant, not least because the human relationships that require it and that, where honesty reigns, may survive disagreement and even division, are themselves not insignificant.

Yet the foregoing meditation brings home to me that such ongoing fellowship does not come at a discount. We are human beings before we are "seminary men," and our distinctive theological commitments to God ought to precede, and must override, old and new institutional affiliations. The dialogical fellowship of human beings transcends the perpetuation of institutions and organizations, as the quest for God and the service of God transcend the secular self-seeking of the market mentality. Such fellowship requires honesty and clarity on both sides. Hence the sobering thought: whether, if called upon, I can emulate R. Weinberg and the Hazon Ish does not depend entirely on me.