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## **OFF AND ON THE MIMETIC DEREKH**

I vividly remember reading Professor Haym Soloveitchik's "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy" when it first appeared twenty-five years ago. As a young rabbi, I was captivated by each example Professor Soloveitchik adduced to demonstrate that the "mimetic tradition," in which students often learned from example, had been replaced with a "text-based authority."

When I read the essay, however, I had no idea how foretelling and relevant it would be a quarter of a century later. At the time, it resonated with many in our community because of the popular focus on new *humrot*, results of the "text-based authority." The cynical comment was that stringencies were proliferating at such speed that we were all members in a "*Humra* of the Week Club."

In retrospect, I realize that the emphasis on *humra* had two damaging outcomes. The boundaries between halakha proper and *humra* became obscured, to a point where people confused the two. Halakhic observance was negatively impacted, particularly for younger segments of the Modern Orthodox community.

The following incident occurred about the same time that "Rupture and Reconstruction" appeared and demonstrates how seriously halakha and *humra* had become confused. I was teaching a class on "Responsa Literature and Hilkhot Shabbat," when a member challenged a fundamental principle in the laws of Sabbath observance, "Rabbi, I think you should rethink your position. This isn't halakha. This is just a *humra*." At that time, I found it difficult to present any halakhic matter without being challenged to prove I was not teaching "just *humrot*."

The same occurred when kosher organizations announced that insecticides were no longer effective, requiring the cleaning and inspecting of vegetables and fruits to be free from insects. Until this very day people complain, "When I was growing up no one checked fruit and vegetables; since when did fruits and vegetables become *treif*?" The sense that halakha had been "taken hostage" by those who were interested in stricter observance was part and parcel of our lives, and Soloveitchik correctly

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associated this development with our move from “mimetic tradition” to “text-based authority.”

There was a second response as well. Not long after “Rupture and Reconstruction” appeared, a prominent rabbi confided to me in a prophetic tone, “We have arrived at the ‘tipping point’—one more *humra* and we’re going to overwhelm the *ba’alebatim*—the entire halakhic edifice is going to implode!” Twenty-five years later, we are seeing the realization of that rabbi’s gloomy prediction.

The warning signs were already discernable in Soloveitchik’s 1959 personal account of his travels to Israel to celebrate the High Holidays in a Bnei Brak haredi yeshiva. He describes how powerful and intense the prayers were:

...certainly far more powerful than anything I had previously experienced. And yet there was something missing, something that I had experienced before, something, perhaps, I had taken for granted... I grew up in a Jewishly non-observant community and prayed in a synagogue where most of the older congregants neither observed Shabbat nor even ate Kosher. They all hailed from Eastern Europe... Most of their religious observance, however, had been washed away in the sea-change, and the little left had further eroded in the ‘new country.’ Indeed, the only time the synagogue was ever full was during the High Holidays. Even then the service was hardly edifying. Most didn’t know what they were saying, and bored, wandered in and out. Yet, at the closing service of Yom Kippur, the *Ne’ila*, the synagogue was filled, and a hush set in upon the crowd. The tension was palpable, and tears were shed. What had been instilled in these people in their earliest childhood, and which they never quite shook off, was that every person was judged on Yom Kippur... These people did not cry from religiosity but from self-interest, from an instinctive fear for their lives...What was absent among the thronged students in Bnei Brak and in other contemporary services – and, lest I be thought to be exempting myself from this assessment, absent in my own religious life too – was that primal fear of Divine judgment, simple and direct (98–99).

Today, we are not just missing tears at *ne’ila*; we are missing people, too. In my own community, I have witnessed numerous young people leave Torah observance. From discussions with colleagues across the country and in Israel, the same situation is being duplicated in their communities. The problem is so concerning that we have given it a name: “going off the *derekh*,” or in shorthand, OTD. The 2017 Nishma Research Profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews concluded that

there were several factors leading to the abandonment of religious observance.<sup>1</sup> Among these, particularly for men, is the issue of extensive focus on halakhic minutiae and a lack of spirituality.

Although the study indicated that this last issue is a concern only for 10% of respondents, in my rabbinic work, I have often found this to be the core of the problem. Recently at a wedding, a young man told me that he brought *tefillin* along, because he knew many of those men present would not have put on *tefillin* that morning. With pride, he informed me that at the late afternoon reception he had encouraged nine young men to lay *tefillin* and recite *shema*. At first, I shared his sense of accomplishment and was delighted to hear that he was so successful. When I looked around, however, I realized that many of those he encouraged were not young men raised in non-observant homes and communities, who had never been exposed to this *mitzva*; rather they were graduates of yeshiva high schools and some had even attended yeshivot in Israel.

Unfortunately, this story is not an isolated experience. At that same wedding, a prominent professor of Jewish education recounted that she hears such stories all the time, in all segments of the Orthodox Jewish community. She noted that today our problem is not that our kids have been exposed to the difficulty of being religious. That was yesteryear, when one honestly had to sacrifice to be a Shabbat observer or to eat kosher. She recalled Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's heartbroken observation that so many European immigrants lost their children to Torah observance because the younger generation heard nothing except their parents' Yiddish complaint that it was "difficult to be an observant Jew." Clearly, this is no longer our reality, this professor suggested. (It is true that, today, many find living an Orthodox life to be *financially* challenging, often attributed to tuition costs—as Nishma's study finds. Still, that is not a difficulty in observance itself, but in providing Jewish education for their children.) Today, the professor continued, the challenge is that we are blessed with a very good life and we still complain. She noted that one often hears people bemoan a "three-day Yom Tov" or grumble something like, "Can you believe it? I have to attend way too many *semahot* this month." She concluded, "Our kids haven't been inspired to perform *mitzvot*. They are being taught the details of observance but not its underlining beauty and consequently abandon a Torah life."

With this realization, we can understand that many of our youth, who were never exposed to hasidut in the past, have become interested in neo-hasidut. Our youth perceive something missing in their lives, and they believe the contemporary iteration of this spiritualist movement will provide them the inspiration that they seek. They view the teachers and

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leaders of this movement as the personification of a “mimetic tradition,” who can transform their lives much more than any “text-based authority” which they encountered in yeshiva. Of course, neo-hasidut is often rooted in text, as well; still, it advocates for meaningful “big picture” Torah learning over focus on halakhic minutia. In an interview that took place in 2014 with one of the most popular leaders of the neo-hasidic movement, Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, founding rabbi of Congregation Aish Kodesh in Woodmere, New York, and the past Mashpia at Yeshiva University, addressed why he felt the movement attracts Modern Orthodox Jews.

I find that people have heard thousands of sermons proving how one *pasuk* and another can [be reconciled] and explaining whether or not we can eat from disposable tin pans without *toiveling* them. These are all very important issues. I’m not, God forbid, making light of any of these things. Every detail of halachah is significant. However, there was a feeling that the broader picture of all of these details was not coming together. How do they coalesce? How do they come together to bring me to a greater, more effusive and more intense relationship with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*? As Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook wrote many times, the last generation, before Mashiach comes, will no longer be satisfied with just the details, with just the trees. They will want to be able to see the forest. And whether it’s the teachings of *Chassidus*, or the teachings of the Ramchal or the Vilna Gaon, when a Jew gets a peek at the breathtaking panoramic view of what it means to be a Jew, he’s very excited and he wants to have a part of it (*Jewish Action*, Winter 2014).

Twenty-five years after Soloveitchik wrote “Rupture and Reconstruction,” we must assess how to proceed in educating our communities in our schools, synagogues, and homes. There has been an unprecedented and inspiring growth in Torah observance. Although this is laudable, rabbis must focus not only on teaching the letter of the law, they must also instill the spirit of the halakha by preserving all that was positive in the mimetic approach. This starts with teachers and rabbis modeling an emotional commitment to Judaism and observance. Students must see it in the classroom and hear it from the pulpit. As Dr. Jay Goldmintz writes regarding the state of Orthodox belief today, “We need to be proactive and intentional in educating our children about passion and connection.”<sup>2</sup> Our children will then appreciate the beauty of a life of *mitzva* observance.

Time will tell what the next quarter century has in store for us, but Professor Soloveitchik’s essay will continue to reverberate, as it has proven

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prophetic during the twenty-five years since it first appeared in the pages of this journal.

<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.nishmaresearch.com/social-research.html](http://www.nishmaresearch.com/social-research.html)

<sup>2</sup> Jay Goldmintz, "The State of Orthodox Belief," *Jewish Action* (Summer 2019), 68.