

FOCUS

Comment/Opinion/Insight

The political and moral risks of leadership

By NORMAN LAMM

THE QUESTION OF WHAT is the responsibility of leadership in the American Orthodox community has engaged and fascinated and worried me for a long time. And my conclusion can be summed up by saying that above all else, leadership requires the taking of risks — not only political and financial and social and psychological risks, but also moral risks.

There is a remarkable statement by our rabbis which is quoted by Maimonides: "One who is appointed to a position of leadership by the community here below, is regarded as wicked up above." A similar thought occurs in the Zohar. To the verse, "if a prince [i.e., a leader] sins," the Zohar adds these words: "He most certainly will sin!" You cannot be a community leader without being considered an evil-doer or a sinner.

What a strange thing to say — and what a deterrent to public service on behalf of the community!

Granted, some leaders abuse their positions and others may be neglectful of their duties; but is that a reason to say all leaders are regarded by Heaven as evil or sinful? Do we not bear enough burdens? Is there not enough to discourage us without this added onus placed upon us?

What the rabbis meant, I believe, is this: Leadership involves making hard decisions — or better — *dirty* decisions, choosing between alternatives, neither of which is perfect or clean or pure or desirable or even acceptable, but is the least evil and the least harmful.

Clean decisions between good and evil, right and wrong, helpful or injurious — these are risk-free decisions and do not require leadership. Any intelligent and reasonable person endowed with a modicum of moral judgment can make such decisions. A leader

must be willing to embrace the risk of being an evil-doer in the eyes of heaven, of being less than perfect in the abstract, of being accused of ideological error or moral turpitude, if by so doing he carries out his mission of protecting the interests of his community in the real world, of sparing them a greater hurt, a more serious injury, a worse moral blemish.

For Israeli leaders, there is no easy way out of the 'Who is a Jew' issue.

That is not an easy task, but that is what leadership is all about. There is no way out. Someone who wants to play it safe and appear on the side of the angels — even if in doing so he creates an opening for the demons who will surely take over later — such a person has no right to be a leader and had best go back to his own affairs.

We have at hand probably the best and most painful example, namely, the question of "Who is a Jew."

We Orthodox want to amend the Law of Return to read that a Jew is not only one born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism, but specifically converted "according to halacha."

The non-Orthodox here are opposed to this, because this delegitimizes their rabbis by denying them the right to perform conversions, and thus by implication, delegitimizes their congregations and their own selves as Jews. They then feel rejected by the State of Israel. For unaffiliated Jews, this is even more critical, because Israel is one of the only things holding them together as Jews.

It is clear to me that there is no easy way out. We are damned if we do and damned if we don't. It is a difficult and messy decision. Those who are unprepared to examine both sides and all alternatives, who are concerned only with how they appear in the eyes of their own constituencies, who are afraid of controversy, who are unwilling to make unpopular decisions by compromising their ideological purity now in order to avoid greater disaster for the community later — they are not proper leaders. Leadership demands sober analysis of the alternatives and a determination that is less



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Photo: Yeshiva University

damaging, and choosing that decisively, even if it means being an evil-doer in heaven's eyes.

Consider our issue. On the one hand, there is no doubt and there should be no question in anyone's mind on the substantive halachic issues. The Orthodox community, here and in Israel, and across the spectrum, is united on such fundamentals as the definition of Jewish identity and the exclusive definition of conversion as "according to halacha."

On the other hand, the reaction of the great majority of organized American Jewry has been as unprecedented as it has been unanticipated. Whether they are right or wrong, informed or misinformed (and I believe they are badly misinformed), the fact is that large numbers of non-Orthodox American Jews feel their identification with Israel and thus their Jewishness is being questioned and rejected by Israel if this amendment is passed. They are angered, outraged, and they are ready to take revenge on all who are connected with what they see is an effort to divide world Jewry and to force the State of Israel to deny them and their communities Jewish legitimacy. The longer this goes on, the more will they despise Orthodox Jews and hate Orthodoxy itself.

On the Talmud's dictum, "scholars increase peace in the world," the great rabbi of Brisk, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, comments: "We see that in everyday life in our communities and congregations — as when there are various factions in a shul who are constantly battling with each other, at each other's throats; but as soon as the rabbi, 'student of wisdom,' takes a position or makes a request, they gladly unite with each other in order to oppose him."

So, too, have we succeeded in uniting a deeply divided Jewish world — against us.

So there is no really "clean" choice. Either alternative carries along its negatives, its disadvantages. Whatever you choose, you will be wrong. We must, if we are responsible leaders, look for the least harmful, the least unprincipled alternative, even if it has jagged ends and is less than perfect.

Allow me to share with you my feelings on the matter as it now stands.

FIRST, LET ME SAY that I am dismayed that leaders, on both sides, have allowed this matter to get out of hand when, in purely practical terms, it involves but a handful of people per year — maybe six or eight non-halachically converted non-Jews who annually seek to make aliyah.

The battle is over symbols, and symbols are important. For us, an amended Law of Return symbolizes the supremacy of halacha and the invalidity of any other form of conversion. For the non-Orthodox, this very amendment and these very words symbolize Israel's denial of their participation as full partners in Jewish life and the enterprise of Israel and represent an Orthodox effort to sow divisiveness amongst Jews.

So now we face a bitterly divided Jewish world and growing enmity and hatred not over substance but over symbols. And I submit that no symbols are worth hurting the cause of Torah or the cause of Israel so grievously!

Second, I take exception to the position of most Orthodox parties in Israel who are pursuing the amendment with relentless determination. The whole campaign is an exercise in futility. Even if we should force the Knesset by our political leverage to adopt the amendment, it will be challenged by the others, especially the Conservatives, who probably will persuade the Israeli Supreme Court that their conversions, too, are halachic. In that case, we shall have lost on the "Who is a Jew" question and gained the hatred of all other Jews.

This will be not a Pyrrhic victory, but — if there is such a thing — a Pyrrhic defeat.

Moreover, important as the principle of "conversion according to halacha" is, we have failed to distinguish between means and ends. An ideal may be sacred, but the means of implementation are not necessarily sacrosanct — and, indeed, may be quite the reverse.

There is a vast difference between content and form, between substance and strategy. A secular body such as the Knesset is not the right forum to determine halachic issues, and politics is not necessarily the most effective way to win the hearts and minds of the Jewish people.

Threats and coalitions, coercion and legislation do not advance the program of Torah Judaism, which teaches that to love God means to make His name beloved by others; that people of Torah must appear and be "gentler and kinder" than others. We must be sensitive to others who, although they now are estranged from us, may one day wish to come closer and should not be permanently alienated.

This is Torah doctrine, not just some "goody-goody" preaching. For to cause widespread disaffection and rejection of Torah is a desecration of the Divine Name, and where such desecration of the Divine Name takes place, as the Mishna taught us, we do not bow to anyone's authority.

Third, I cannot let this occasion pass without expressing my consternation at the disproportionate reaction of the Reform and Conservative communities, at the fiercely extravagant and irresponsibly extreme onslaught against Orthodoxy as a result of this perceived hurt. The mobilization of members of Congress, some of them non-Jewish, to interfere in an internal Israeli and Jewish issue is something which, if we Orthodox did it, would be considered inexcusable. When religious parties, elected in a democratic if awkward manner, negotiate for their constituencies' needs and demands, that is sneeringly termed "blackmail" and occasions near anti-Semitic cartoons in the Israeli press. What is sauce for the goose, however, apparently is *not* sauce for the gander. How lightly do certain leaders of the organized American Jewish community threaten the withholding of funds from Israel (actually from needy people and worthy causes, not from the government) and, far worse, the refusal to help Israel politically in its ongoing dealings with the U.S. government and public opinion.

My heart breaks when I say this is more than blackmail; it is an act of betrayal, nothing less. It is, tragically, a highly disturbing insight into the loyalty of the State of Israel by so much of American Jewry and American Jewish leadership if, because of this alleged insult to their rabbis, they are prepared to abandon the Jewish state. What a sad commentary it is on their priorities.

At a time when a new administration is taking over in the United States, Israel's great and powerful ally; when the Palestinian threat hangs over the heads of all Israelis; when tempers flare and positions harden and the vision of Jewish unity seems more distant than ever — at such a time we must be prepared for greater risks, for redoubled efforts at talking to each other civilly, for greater restraint and for more mutual understanding.

When Jacob prepared for his historic confrontation with his brother Esau, we are told, "Jacob was very frightened and he was distressed, and he divided his people into two groups."

What so scared him that the Torah uses two synonyms to

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Leadership

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describe his fright?

Chasidim answer: he feared, first, the enmity of Esau, and so he knew he had to divide his clan so that at least some of them could

survive Esau's possible attack. Yet he remained deeply troubled by the very strategy of division because he knew that no matter what the danger from without, divisions within his own family constituted a mortal danger in its own right!

Jacob was terrified at the thought of divisiveness and disunity in his own ranks. He knew that whatever he did, his decision would be morally imperfect — that he had no choice but to select the lesser of two evils. The thought, however, of a split in the Jewish polity, of profound disunity — *that* terrorized him.

All Jews, of all groups, must acknowledge that fright and that terror. We must do whatever we can to avoid further divisions, more hate, greater enmity in the House of Israel.

We must learn from Jacob and be ready to do all to avoid "and he divided his people" — even if it means that we do not achieve our entire ideological agenda, even if we are not quite perfect when measured by heavenly standards.

I make no facile assumptions

that "cooling it" now will solve any ultimate problems. It will not. The problem of halachically illicit conversions in Israel will remain, but it is at present a manageable one from a practical point of view. The times are too tense to press the issue now.

And there are even greater, more sinister problems that we are ignoring at our own peril, such as the problem of halachically illicit remarriage by divorced persons and the consequent question of illegitimacy, a problem that cannot be solved by reconversion according to halacha. We shall have to exercise great heroism to solve that thorniest of all issues.

I reiterate my main thesis, however: Leadership requires that we risk making imperfect decisions. Otherwise, we have no right to claim the mantle of leadership in the real, terrestrial world in which we live and in which alone the destiny of our people will be forged.