

"Modern Orthodoxy at the Brink of a New Century"

*The Rabbi Isaac Bernstein z"l Memorial Lecture
delivered on 19 October, 1998*

This is a bitter-sweet occasion for me. It is bitter because it confirms for me psychologically what I already know rationally, namely, that Isaac Bernstein is no longer with us. And it is sweet because the memories are sweet and inspiring.

Rabbi Bernstein was my successor at The Jewish Center in New York City. We became not only colleagues but fast friends. I was enchanted by his sparkling sense of humor, in awe of his range of knowledge and interests--from Torah, of course, to mathematics to opera--and I simply adored the man's dazzling personality. Because of this combination of talents--scholar, orator, wit, *darshan*--I invited him to teach at our Stern College for Women, where he won a string of loyal students who speak of him with a reverence that survives to this day.

One of his great strengths was his interpretation of the *parashat ha-shavua*, the biblical portion of the week. In deference to him, I shall present my theme as he would have done it--homiletically, by discoursing on this week's *parasha* which happens to be *Noach* and, last Shabbat, *Bereshit*.

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The great floods covered the face of the earth and finally begin to recede. Noah, ensconced in his ark, was not quite sure what to do. He took the raven and sent it out as a test: if the raven does not return, that will be a sign that dry land is available and he can prepare to leave; if it does come back, it means there is no dry land and he must continue to stay in the ark.

R. Velvel Soloveitchik of Brisk zt"l asks why this bird was sent out in the first place: even if the bird came back with olive leaves, implying that Noah may leave--or if the bird did not return at all, signifying that land had been sighted and he should prepare to leave the ark--he would not be permitted to leave. Why? Because just as he entered the ark on God's command, so would he not be permitted to leave until he was instructed by divine command. R. Velvel offers no answer to his question.

I humbly offer my own solution: Noah certainly was permitted to leave the ark. There was nothing in the message he received about going into the ark that prevented him from going out when the flood was over. He could have and wanted to leave his floating menagerie, for which reason he sent the bird, but at the last moment he stopped to ponder: "what kind of world am I going into?"--a world of horrendous corruption (*chamas*, as the Torah terms it--a world of violence and moral rot). Not only is the rest of humanity dead of its own crookedness, but the very earth itself has been corrupted. In this kind of world, Noah reflected, should I not rather stay in the ark with animals as the sole accompaniment of my family rather than expose myself and my family to the debris of human society and the lingering stench of this perverted society? Hesitatingly, Noah decided to stay--and it was only then that the divine command came to him: *Tzei min ha-tevah*, "get out of the ark!" You may not want to leave, you may feel correctly about the rest of the human race, dead or alive. But you dare not stay any longer in the privacy and intimacy of your own ark, averse to what is happening about you. Out of the ark! There comes a time when you have to swallow your pride, risk your moral convenience, overcome your sense of disgust and repugnance, and go out, face the world, rebuild it.

This internal dialogue of Noah, as we have described it, has great relevance to our time. It speaks to us very directly because Noah's situation was not entirely unlike ours. Noah makes an argument for exclusiveness and for cutting himself off from society. And there are groups in our Orthodox Jewish life which openly and unashamedly speak in favour of cutting ourselves off from the rest of the Jewish community. They believe that our society has become irremediably depraved, and that its moral currency has become irreparably debased, and they have effectively given up on it. So, they will have as little as possible to do with it--or with the Jewish community that reflects society's pitifully depraved values. In a world of falling standards in morality, ethics, and spirituality there is a good argument to be made for breaking off relations with the rest of the Jewish community and its environing society. It is only fifty years after the Shoah; why should we be interested in the rest of the world? In a situation where the Jewish

community is shockingly shrinking, experiencing an unprecedented rate of intermarriages, a case can be made for not mingling with anyone else, for abandoning the communal ship before it goes down and we all drown. The best path--so the argument goes--is for us to isolate ourselves, increase our population internally, protect our children, keep them immune from the virus of the sick society around us.

But that is a Noahide policy of defeatism that I cannot accept. It is an abdication of responsibility towards our fellow Jews and fellow humans. We too must listen to the divine command: *Tzei min ha-tevah*, get out of the ark! Yes, society has far lower standard than we have and you are right to want to protect our children, but we have a responsibility for the rest of mankind. Noah abdicated his responsibility when building the ark because he failed to use the opportunity to preach *teshuvah* to the rest of mankind. Likewise, Orthodox Jews have a responsibility to the rest of the Jewish community. We dare not close our eyes, saying *va-ani et nafshi hitzalti*, I have saved myself, my spiritual integrity, and that is all that counts. I want to secure myself and my family and I don't really care what happens to anyone else. We must not turn our backs on the world and especially not on the Jewish world. We have to trust the divine promise that we are an eternal people and that those who seem to be far away will be brought close. We are responsible for them, and no matter what we may think of them our duty is to be sympathetically aware of their existence, to care for them, to make sure that we bring whatever benign influence we have on those less committed to Torah. In short, we are summoned to love them as brothers and sisters, to love them if not for their own sakes, at least for the sake of our mutual parents and ancestors. "Have we not all One Father? Has not One God created us?" (Malachi 2:10).

Furthermore, even beyond the practical effects of having an influence on the rest of the community, and on its own merits, one must not rush to judge others too harshly. People are complex; some people are strong in one area, weak in another. None of us is perfect, and none is totally beyond redemption.

Let us return briefly to Noah and his ark. When he left the ark, God promised Noah that He would never again destroy the entire human race. He gave mankind a symbol of that promise--more than a promise, a *covenant*: the rainbow. So we read in Genesis 9:12, 13:

I have set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be a token of a covenant between Me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring clouds over the earth., and the rainbow is seen in the cloud, that I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh

A passage in the Talmud (*Ketubot* 77b) tells us that the prophet Elijah--who, in talmudic literature often makes his appearance in mystical visions even centuries after he had lived--announces: "make place for R. Yehoshua ben Levi!" In response, someone was appointed to locate R. Yehoshua ben Levi and accord him this honor. The emissary happened to meet R Shimon ben Yochai, whom he did not recognize, and asked him if he was R Yehoshua ben Levi. For reasons unimportant for our theme, R Shimon ben Yochai said that he was. The emissary asked: Have you ever seen a rainbow? R Shimon said yes, he had. In that case, replied the emissary, you are *not* R Yehoshua ben Levi!

Now, this anonymous emissary was right, but how did he know to make such a test? And why did he conclude that the man who admitted to having seen a rainbow could not possibly be R. Yehoshua ben Levi? How explain this astonishing talmudic tale?

My late, revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Solveitchik zt"l, explained our passage as follows: A rainbow is a spectrum, one colour fades into the next and that shades into the next and so on; there is no clear line dividing one from the other. The rainbow is thus a symbol of variability, specifically of the human propensity for diversity and complexity, one attribute flowing into another and blending with it. It is not a black-and-white world; it is a world of greys and shades of colours which constitute the whole spectrum. A human being cannot be identified with only one colour; no one is that simple, and anyone who tries to define another human being as representing one solitary hue misrepresents, because we are each of us very, very complicated. Now, if we have a rainbow in our hearts--that is, if we act on the knowledge that other people are polychromatic and complicated, that each of us is therefore unique, deserving of our compassion and our respect--we do not need a rainbow in the clouds. A rainbow is necessary in the clouds only when there is no rainbow in the inner folds of one's very being. Hence, the response of the emissary makes sense: if you were R. Yehoshua ben Levi you would have had an internal rainbow--because that is the kind of man I heard he is; he needed no rainbow in the cloud because he had one in his heart. Therefore, if you saw a rainbow, you cannot be R Yehoshua ben Levi.

It is vitally important for the contemporary Orthodox Jewish community to acknowledge this principle of variation or gradations. Most people are neither a *tzaddik gamur* nor a *rasha gamur*. Rather, these complicated organisms called "human beings" are maddeningly complex and deserving of our respect even if we are critical of them or disagree with them.

Sadly, this Rainbow Principle is not usually observed in practice. To be judgmental of others is perfectly legitimate; it makes use of our God-given faculty of intelligence and critical evaluation. But when we assume that the other is monochromatic, when we define the other as if he/she possesses no other colour or opinion or characteristic, we demonize such a person. I repeat that it is acceptable to judge others according to our own values, but it is unacceptable to attribute to them the worst of motives and to assume that because we disagree in one area they are beyond the pale and irreparable in all areas.

Of course, we must not be seduced by the popularity of "pluralism"--a term which is widely used and hardly ever analyzed for its real meaning. In its usual context nowadays, it is often a disguise for relativism--that is, that all values are relative to each other, and that all that you affirm or believe is neither truly right nor wrong, because such matters are determined not by any absolute standards but are relative to the norms or mores of your society. Relativism reduces religious principles to the level of taste, of chocolate versus vanilla. So, if you come from a society which has loose morals, you cannot be blamed for any acts which, in a more disciplined society, are considered transgressions. Hence, if someone comes from an African tribal society which sacrifices children, that is what is expected of you in that society so that even if you perform that brutal act it is understandable--and forgivable. That kind of relativism can be terribly dangerous. It is for that reason that I am so wary of the term "pluralism."

We find a great deal of such relativism in contemporary life, and it leads to the inevitable conclusion that there are no real, immutable standards. But when there are no absolutes, there is no God--and no humanity... For then nothing is worthy of our sacrifice; and if there is nothing worthy of our sacrifice, there is nothing worth living for--other than the simple-minded hedonism that we are here in this world to stuff our bellies and indulge our erotic instincts. Our Jewish approach is totally different: *Mosheh emet ve'torato emet* ("Moses is true and his Torah is true"). There *is* such a thing as truth.

How, then, do you reconcile the idea of *emet*--truth, absolutes-- with variations of *emet*, reflecting the variations of the *keshet*? On the one hand, if you believe that human beings are infinitely varied and complex, there is no way to state that any one idea is absolute--there is no *emet*. On the other hand, if you believe in *emet*, there is no place for a variety of different opinions, attributes, characteristics, and personalities.

The way I posed the problem is the intellectual's way of imposing his predilection for clear and abstract analysis on the stubborn facts of real life--and distorting them in the process. We have to learn to make the ideas and ideals reconcilable with each other and, so, conformable to experience. To the best of our ability, we have to live both with *emet* and *keshet*. One may modify the other but both are necessary to have a balanced, mature view of the world and of Jewishness. We must modify our approach to *emet* so that there is a maximum of *shalom* in the world--and refrain from overstating the virtues of variation so that it overwhelms the basic structure of *emet*. Yes, it is burdensome to undertake such evaluations and make such fine distinctions, but that is why God gave us brains and endowed us with both the intellect and the courage to make distinctions.

The Sages relate that when God decided to create the world, He consulted the ministering angels ("Let us make a man in *our* image..."), and they broke up into two groups of opinion on the advisability of creating Man. *Emet* (considered one of the angels) said *al yibare'i*, Man should not be created, because he is full of falsehood. Justice (*Tzeddek*) said *yibare'i*, Man should be created because he has not yet done anything [wrong]; Man must be given a chance. *Shalom* opposed the creation of man because he is always fighting and contentious. *Chessed* (love, kindness) supported man's creation, because he is charitable and generous. So the angels were equally divided: *Tzeddek* and *Chessed* were in favour of creation; *Emet* and *Shalom* were against Man's creation. God broke the tie: He threw the *Emet* angel to the ground, and so the heavenly vote was for the creation of the human race...! The Rabbis offered two verses to explain this divine decision: one, from Daniel (8:12): "You cast the truth to the earth," and the other from Psalms (85:12): "Truth will grow from the earth" instead of from heaven. Thus, there was now a two to one vote in favour of creation. *Emet* was removed, *Shalom* was outvoted, and *Tzeddek* and *Chessed* carried the day. And so, man was created. The rest, as they say, is history.

One famous explanation of this Midrash is offered by the Kotzker Rebbe: God had to side-track *emet*; otherwise, man could never have been created. The reason: *emet* prevails against any majority. *Emet* is never up for a vote; truth is absolute. Truth always prevails.

Let me propose another explanation: truth can be confronted in two ways. If truth comes from heaven, that truth is overwhelming and intimidating, and so crushing are the absolute demands it makes upon us that none of us could survive. R Saadia Gaon in the introduction to his great work *Emunot ve'Deot* speaks about *ha-emet ha-mara* [the bitter truth]. Truth can indeed be bitter. If you look into a mirror and examine yourself intently and honestly, you are likely to be unhappy; this refers not only to the physical mirror but even more so to the mirror of your soul, your personality and character. The truth that comes from heaven is truly unbearable. Hence, God threw *Emet* into the ground and made it come up again, *emet me-eretz titzmach*. Truth must grow from the ground up--in little bits, step by step, cell by cell, leaf by leaf, root by root, branch by branch. Only then can we learn to absorb and assimilate it. *Such* truth enhances and ennoble all of life. Truth must come organically, slowly, as an evolutionary process, from the earth.

There is yet a third explanation. This interpretation--which is in consonance with the one I just proposed--comes to us from a Hasidic Rebbe who avers that if *emet* is taken in an absolute sense, then *shalom* is defeated. If I believe that what I believe and advocate is *emet* and that therefore, of necessity, your *emet* is not *emet*, then society cannot survive. If the insistence upon my truth necessarily precludes your vision of the truth, then I must fight you to the death, which is what causes so much destruction and dissonance in society. To have *shalom* in the world, if Man is to survive, then those with differing points of view must hold on to their *emet*; but none must hold that their truth precludes the other's truth. No one has a monopoly on the truth. Although I may feel and even *know* that I am right and you are wrong, I must give you the right to utter your truth. So, in the imagery of the Midrash, *emet* was hurled to the ground, because otherwise mankind could never have existed.

Hence, the third lesson is that abstract absolute *emet* must yield to the pragmatic social requirements of *shalom*. Through peace, the Jewish community and the Jewish people as a whole, and all of society, are viable and can survive with dignity. We must allow as much *emet* as possible without suppressing the other party and denying him/her the permission to utter his/her truth.

Thus, while walking this very thin line between principle and practicality, between peace and truth, we learn that it is important to avoid extremism. When dealing with issues of ultimate conviction and commitment--matters of religion, spirit, morality, and belief, upon which you base your life--it is easy to veer to an extreme. The requirement of Judaism is moderation. This does not mean a lack of conviction and passion in what you believe, but in the understanding of how society and community operate and make life possible.

The Rambam, in his *Hilkhot De'ot*, developed his great theory of moderation--what he called the *derekh Hashem*, "the way of the Lord." He refers to it as well as "the middle road," and it is often referred to as "the Golden Mean." In matters of character, it teaches, we must abjure the extremes and keep to the middle, to the path of moderation; this indeed is the *derekh Hashem*. What the Rambam legislates is not a mathematical middle; to be a moderate means you have to exercise your intellect. *Yehei sham be-sikhlo*, he writes: one must evaluate and assess his very own personality with one's mind. We are born with certain predispositions but that does not mean that we are locked into that kind of personality; we have got to create our own character. If you find yourself leaning to one extreme, move towards the other so that you will end up in the middle. This is not a mathematical model, but the use of intellect and judgment to make yourself over into a better kind of human being.

This teaching of moderation is concerned not only with individuals, but with society at large as well. The Torah tells us that when God created the world, at every step He said: *ki tov*, "it is good." When man was created, the text reads: "it was *very* good" (Gen. 1:31). Our Sages say *tov me'od zeh malakh ha-mavet* (Gen. R. 9). Good is good, but *very* good--that is the Angel of Death! This sounds macabre and strange. Rabbi Yosef Engel, one of the talmudic and mystical giants at the turn of the 20th century, comments: *ki kol me'odiut zeh ha-mavet*--everything that is "very" is death. Any good quality or idea applied "very," in extreme fashion, instead of with a sense of moderation that arises from a rational outlook on life, leads to death. We have seen that all too often in our history and, tragically, in our own lives as well. Josephus' description of the Jewish responses to the Roman siege of Jerusalem of the Second Temple bears eloquent testimony to the truth of that adage.

Let me relate to you an incident that occurred at the end 1970s, in New York. A rabbi of a significant synagogue found himself in a dilemma and asked me to introduce him to the late Rav Soloveitchik zt"l. At the meeting, the rabbi poured his heart out to "the Rav" who was silent while he told his story. When he finished, the Rav looked at him and said: "in this week's *parasha*, *Va-yetzei*, we read that *ve'yaakov halakh le'darko va-yifg'u bo malakhei Elohim*; Jacob went on his way and he encountered the angels of God. My advice to you is: go in your own, authentic *derekh* unafraid, look neither to the right nor to the left. Do not be intimidated by anyone. Go in the way you believe is right and you will meet the angels of God."

That perplexed rabbi was Rabbi Isaac Bernstein, of blessed memory. He followed the Rav's advice. And indeed, by abjuring the *me'od* of the Angel of Death he met the angels of God... This is a lesson for all of us. When pondering our aspirations and what the Jewish community ought to be doing and what we as individuals must do, the answer is: let us do what is right, let us not look to the right or to the left; let us go on our chosen *derekh* and prepare to meet the *malakhei Elohim*.

These four lessons emerging from our *parashat ha-shavua*--responsibility for all Jews, respect for other opinions, striving for communal peace and unity, and pursuing moderation instead of extremism--might well be the map for Modern Orthodoxy. To this I would add *Torah Umadda*, the encounter of Torah with worldly culture; the advocacy of *Medinat Yisrael*; and extending higher Jewish education to women who desire it. These are the main elements of the Modern Orthodox approach. For the rest, we are at one with all of Orthodoxy in the study of Torah and observance of the mitzvot, in *kiruv rechokim*--attracting non-observant Jews to Torah.

Modern Orthodoxy is extremely vital for the health of the entire Jewish people--whether they know it or not. We are in a most difficult situation. In my 48 years in the rabbinate I have never experienced so much and such intense Orthodox-bashing by the Left. Irrational antagonism has grown because of battles in Israel and America by Reform and Conservative groups in collusion with each other. We Orthodox Jews are not blameless: for too long, we have peppered our legitimate disagreements with them with gratuitous insults and personal defamation. They, in turn, have responded by escalating the encounter beyond rhetoric. A number of Orthodox people in communal Jewish life have suffered personally as a result. And most recently American Reform leaders, with Conservative collaboration, have attempted blackmail, threatening Israel that American Jews will withhold their contributions and Israel stands to lose \$100,000,00! Despite the hyperbole, the very fact of such threats goes far beyond the petty insults of not having their conversions recognized in a country where their impotence is reflected in their numbers. This is a frightening situation for all Jewry. At the same time, the Haredi world has become more Haredi and increasingly looks down upon the Modern Orthodox and tries to intimidate us in ways best not described in public. The abuse is too painful for anyone who cherishes brotherly love amongst Jews.

This is not the way Jews, especially "frum" Jews, ought to behave. My late father, z"l, often quoted a Yiddish aphorism that, "A Jew doesn't have to be *frum* (pious). A priest has to be pious. A Jew has to be *ehrllich* (honorable)." The mission of a devout Jew is to be good and pleasant to both God and to man. What we are seeing now is a breakdown of that sacred mission in the course of a *Kulturkampf* that is ugly and unprecedented since the terrible days preceding the destruction of the Second Commonwealth. We are being torn apart politically, culturally, ethnically, and religiously.

Modern Orthodoxy shares with the Haredi world a total commitment to Halakha, and melds this with a critical openness to the rest of the world. We are the only ones who can bridge the abyss between both sides of the Jewish world. To do this, we must not answer insults with other insults, but keep our lines open to all sides for as long as we can. Thus, we have the possibility of keeping our people together during this terrible transitional period of fragmentation and disintegration.

For us to succeed, we must remain true to our principles and not be intimidated. Former Prime Minister Shimon Peres tells of the time he was a junior aide to Ben Gurion. The "Old Man" said to him, "I never met Shmuel Yosef Agnon (the Nobel laureate author). Invite Agnon to visit me in Sde Boker." Peres arranged for the visit, and upon their return Peres asked Agnon what he thought of Ben Gurion. The answer: "Ben Gurion is not afraid of the *goyim*--and he is not even afraid of the Jews." The same applies to us. Let us not be intimidated. What we stand for is real and authentic. This is the way Judaism was meant to be lived--in the fullness of life, not only in a ghetto. At Sinai we were instructed to be *goy kadosh u-mamleket kohanim* (a holy nation and a kingdom of priests). We were not commanded to be (in the

words of the late Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits) the *Neturei Karta* of the nations. We are a Jewish *nation*, not a sect or a cult. This is what Yeshiva University represents and what the late Rav Bernstein z"l represented. And that is the sacred mission to which we are summoned this day.

When the Torah is returned to the ark, we chant *chadesh yamenu ke'keddem*, "renew our days as of old." This verse comes from *Ekhah*, the Book of Lamentations, as Jeremiah witnesses the destruction of the First Temple. The Midrash (Lam. R. 5) comments that the verse refers to the time God expelled Adam and Eve from *Gan Eden* (the Garden of Eden) and He placed them *mi'keddem le'gan eden*, east of Eden. Remarkable! Are we really to pine for the days *after* we were driven out of Paradise?

But the Midrash is teaching us something precious and most relevant. This prayer is not one of nostalgia. The word *keddem* has two meanings: one refers to time and the other to space. *Keddem* as time means the past; as space it means east. Jeremiah intends the space *keddem*--the expulsion of Adam and Eve, when they were placed east of Eden. Thus, there are two types of *Gan Eden*. One is that which God, parents, society give you at birth; it is all prepared. So, Adam did not have to work very hard in Paradise. But that which is given to you for nothing is worth that much. A *Gan Eden* which you do not work for will not last. The real beginning of human history comes when Adam and Eve are expelled from *Gan Eden*, exiled to the east of Eden and told to build their own *Gan Eden*! We should not be satisfied with a *Gan Eden* that was bequeathed to us by parents or society or the community. Every generation has to build its own *Gan Eden*.

I appeal to the younger people who are here: *chadesh yamenu ke'keddem*, renew your coming days *ke'keddem*, in the way the Midrash interprets it-- *mi'keddem le'gan eden*. Build your own *Gan Eden*. Strive for a community in which there is Torah and *Yirat Shamayim* and *kavod* and *derekh eretz*, one in which you can make Torah and mitzvot prevail without embarrassment and without becoming extremist or unthinking or unfeeling. Put your own imprint on it, and it will bring the ultimate redemption closer.

I conclude with the opening words of the Prophet Haggai (1:2): "Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, saying: This people [Israel] say that the time has not yet come that the house of the Lord should be built... Is this a time for you yourselves to dwell in your ceiled houses while this house [the Temple] lies waste?"

Now is the time for us to build the *Beit Yisrael*, the House of Israel, one in which God will dwell. Our people is being pulled apart, facing pressures not seen before: *eit livnot beit Yisrael*, this is the time, now, for each and every one of us to make our individual and collective contributions to the renaissance of Yiddishkeit and thus bring about a world of communal and international peace, health both physical and spiritual, and happiness for all God's creatures. Then the House of God will rise in Jerusalem forever.

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