

Draft

"CENTRIST ORTHODOXY"

AGENDA AND VISION,
SELF-DEFINITION AND SELF-EVALUATION

by

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This is an essay in self-definition and self-evaluation.

Self-definition requires that we first say what we are and then compare and contrast ourselves with others. Because I assume that those to whom these words are addressed know, more or less, the content of our ideas, ideals, and first principles, I shall proceed to a clarification of who and what we are primarily against the backdrop of other religious orientations in Jewish life today. These comments should not by any means be taken as polemical. Moreover, it is my hope that even those unacquainted with the nature of Centrist Orthodoxy in North America as this century draws to a close will learn something about us from this study in contrasts.

Terminological Chaos

First, a preliminary remark about nomenclature. The names that attach to the Jewish religious movements in America are, in most cases, accidents of history and are singularly unrevealing and unenlightening. They bear little or no resemblance to the movements they purport to represent. Thus, for example, the name "Reform" is a misnomer; this denomination does not aspire to recapture an earlier period of Judaism, cleansed of all unworthy accretions--which is what the term "reform" should imply. The name "Liberal" is probably more accurate. Similarly, "Conservative" appears inappropriate for a movement that, despite its stated desire to "conserve" the Jewish tradition, has in recent years made major and irreversible changes in that very tradition.

This terminological chaos becomes especially pronounced when we deal with Orthodoxy and its various subdivisions. I have never liked the name "Orthodox." First, it is inadequate, because our tradition emphasizes behavior more than creed, and hence "orthoprax" would be more to the point. Moreover, the term is faintly insulting; because it means "right thinking," it gives the impression of narrowness, of a parochial stance that brooks no variations. If I had my choice, I would prefer "Torah Judaism"--even though I consider that a redundancy, for what is Judaism if not Torah?--and shall occasionally use that name.

The name that is commonly used, especially in the media, for the more intense or separatist segment of Orthodoxy, "ultra-Orthodox," is particularly offensive, implying that such people are beyond the consensus of the reasonable and the rational, somehow outside the bounds of civilized discourse. Such condescension is unworthy and unwarranted and more than a little xenophobic. In Israel, the Hebrew term

Haredim (God-fearing) is used, both by those within and without this group, and it serves admirably. For our present purposes, we shall occasionally refer to this group as Haredim, and also borrow from the political lexicon and refer to this branch as the Right or right wing, bearing in mind that it is by no means a monolithic group and has its own inner tensions and conflicts.

"Modern Orthodox," the appellation usually reserved for the more moderate and acculturated interpretation of Torah Judaism, compounds the pejorative with the silly. As if "Orthodox" were not bad enough, we attach to it the inane puffery of those who consider their modernity a badge of honor. But Jews who subscribe to this version of the Jewish tradition are no longer recent immigrants who have to prove their modernity. In recent years I have been referring to us as "Centrist Orthodox," which is almost as obscure but less supercilious. The trouble with this designation is that it depends on the extremes to define what is "Center"--certainly a shifting needle in an unsteady compass. But it does set us off from the Right, as well as from a quite small left wing which consists of a few rabbis, professors, and intellectuals. They are deserving of analysis, but that must be left for some other time.

Hence, we are stuck with our names, and we are forced to use them despite our distaste for them. Surely fate could have been more unkind to us. The public, however, should draw no ideological conclusions whatever from the "differences" between "Modern" and "Centrist" Orthodoxy. No "signals" are intended, and any inferences based upon this change in nomenclature should be taken a priori as exercises in ideological or sociological casuistry.

I find it necessary to offer one more caveat: not only are the particular labels inadequate, but the whole concept of labels in this context is questionable. They conceal more than they reveal. People often associate with one group rather than another because of a host of reasons unrelated to ultimate commitments or religious ideals. I use denominational terms, therefore, in the loosest sense, to convey a general idea of a point of view about Judaism, and always with the understanding that individuals should not be judged by the groups to which they belong. There must be no guilt by affiliation.

We shall now proceed to define Centrist Orthodoxy in contrast to the non-Orthodox groups. We shall then turn to those Orthodox groups to the right of Centrist Orthodoxy, and then undertake an assessment of our strengths and weaknesses.

Orthodoxy and the non-Orthodox

There is no Judaism without mitzvah, the commandment. Mitzvah presupposes a monotheistic God, One who is able to and did indeed reveal Himself to Israel in the form of commandments by means of which man ennobles his life and communicates with his Creator. The 613 commandments recorded in the Written Torah (Scripture) and the many more elaborated by the Sages as part of the Oral Law and recorded in the Talmud, constitute the Halakhah, the highly sophisticated Jewish legal system which has its own set methodology and which constantly tests itself for inner consistency. This Halakhah has served the Jewish people for millennia, and has proved viable in a variety of climes and times, in different cultures and civilizations. It contains within itself the means to adapt to constantly changing circumstances. Although the methods of such adaptation have become constricted in the course of the centuries, its most distinguished exponents have exercised both their ingenuity and sensitivity in creative and successful efforts to keep it responsive even in this century of precipitate change and technological progress. One thing is certain: the integrity of Halakhah requires that any changes be effected only in a manner approved of by the Halakhah itself, and that such adjustment be undertaken only by those qualified by expertise and by commitment to it. Such requirements are not at all exceptional; thus, neither amateurs nor those unwilling to accept the authority of the U.S. Constitution need apply as Supreme Court justices.

Now, this Halakhah is the touchstone of Orthodoxy. The question is not whether one is strict or liberal in his interpretation of the halakhic norms, but whether one regards them as binding or not binding on Jews. If I accept that Halakhah is the authoritative code for my conduct and that its decisions are obligatory for me, then, despite personal lapses and despite differing interpretations in reaction to modernity, I am Orthodox. If I do not accept it as binding, authoritative, and normative, then--no matter how much I may revere it--I am non-Orthodox.

I recently heard a story which, despite its humor, bears a salient lesson quite relevant to our theme. A large naval vessel was moving across the ocean, its speed impeded by a dense fog. When a faint light was sighted in the distance, the captain ordered the corpsman to flash the signal, "Go 10° North." Soon an answer was flashed back: "You go 10° South." The captain was understandably upset, and ordered that the signal be sent: "I am a Captain and I order you to go 10° North." The answer: "I'm a first mate and I say you go 10° South." This blatant insubordination infuriated the captain who responded: "I'm captain of a battleship!" The retort came none too soon: "And I'm first mate at the lighthouse."

Orthodoxy teaches that in the turbulent seas of modern life, awash in the mountainous waves of secularism, materialism, nihilism, relativism, and hedonism, Halakhah remains the firm, steady, reliable, unchanging guide to spiritual security and national stability. If the great ships of circumstance--economic need or social convention or technological innovation or philosophical challenge--are to carry us to safety instead of perdition, we must be guided by the light of Torah, and if they seem on collision course, the modest lighthouse of Halakhah must prevail over the ideological Leviathans and existential behemoth that populate the ocean of contemporary Jewish existence.

This is the dividing line between Orthodoxy, in all its varieties, and non-Orthodoxy.

Reform Judaism has gone far beyond the mere abandonment of Halakhah. One of its most distinguished expositors, Prof. Jakob Petuchowski (in the Fall 1986 issue of the Journal of Reform Judaism), has traced the evolution of the movement and demonstrated that what began as an effort to introduce esthetic improvements in the traditional service in accordance with talmudic law later "progressed" to the rejection of all but "ethical monotheism." It then compromised on the belief in God (the famous Lenn Report revealed the large number of Reform rabbis who do not believe in God) and later jettisoned Jewish ethics and morality (in the acceptance of abortion-on-demand and of homosexuality), thus marking the demise of both "ethical" and "monotheism"... Now it has (in its decision on patrilineality) ignored the rest of religious Jewry in changing the rules for determining Jewish identity--probably the most grievous offense against Halakhah in the past century.

This not the place for an exegesis of Emet Ve-emunah, the recent publication on the principles of the Conservative movement. I remain troubled by my inability to know where it stands on Halakhah. The authors struggle with the issues, but clarity eludes them. Their document--as well as their doctrine--achieves consensus at the expense of definition and lucidity. Most important, they have yet to speak clearly on the issue of change in Halakhah. Will the "changes" be made according to Halakhah? Will external circumstances be allowed to impose the tyranny of transient taste and societal bias upon the Halakhah in the form of patently forced interpretations and takanah legislation? Will the espousal of "democracy" and "pluralism" alter the millennial tradition of Halakhah whereby halakhic decision-making is reserved for the committed and the expert?

In the past, when Conservative spokesmen pronounced upon the Halakhah, they spoke of their deep respect for it--a sentiment worthy of acknowledgement--and their readiness to consult it in the formulation of religious life and behavior. But to "respect" and "consult" Halakah is simply inadequate. If the captain of a ship wishes to avoid calamity, he does not "consult" the lighthouse; he obeys its instructions. No one really cares whether he "respects" or loves or despises or fears the first-mate manning the lantern-room; all that matters is that he follows its guidance in steering his ship to the safety of the port. And he does not change direction unless that First-Mate, aware of the environment and possessed of the proper charts, authorizes such changes.

How Orthodoxy does and should relate to these non-Orthodox groups is a critical question not only for Orthodoxy but for the entire Jewish community. It is a question which divides most (but not all) Centrist Orthodox Jews from Right-Wing Orthodoxy. We shall elaborate on this when we speak of integrationism and segregationism as one of the differentia between the two varieties of Torah Judaism.

Centrist Orthodoxy and the Right.

Because of the shared ultimate commitments of Centrist and Rightist Orthodoxy, clarity requires that we examine in some detail the differences that do exist between them. However, this introduces an element of distortion into our analysis. In highlighting such differences, they may well appear much more critical and far more extensive than they really are. It would do well to bear in mind that what the two groups share is far greater and far more significant than what separates them. We are as one on all principles, the Ikkarim, of Judaism: We share the same commitment to Torah and its study and to the practice of the Mitzvot; we are on the same side of the "Great Divide," namely, the authority of the Halakhah. The differences, then, should be viewed against this backdrop of an identity of views on the most fundamental principles. We recite the same lyrics and read from the same sheet music although we differ on interpretation of the melody.

Let us now turn to four areas where Centrist Orthodoxy takes a distinctive stand. These are not the only areas of divergence; there are others, but these are probably some of the most significant. A word of caution: not all Centrist Orthodox Jews subscribe to or give equal weight to each point. This is a general pattern, not a catechism, and "Centrist Orthodoxy" is not a denomination but an interpretation of Torah Judaism that emerges from specific responses to Judaism's confrontation with the world about it.

The four areas are: the openness to secular culture; integrationism or segregation; moderation and tolerance; and the State of Israel.

Secular Culture

Rightist Orthodoxy is generally opposed to the study of general culture, but it is not monolithic in its rejection of all secular learning. Indeed, the contemporary followers of the school of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch of Frankfurt embrace the study of Western culture as part of their doctrine of Torah im Derekh Eretz, even though they side most strongly with the rest of Rightist Orthodoxy on the question of segregating from the larger Jewish community. Some, indeed most, of the Hasidic groups take an altogether rejectionist attitude towards higher secular education, and do no more than the bare minimum required by the law of the land in the secondary education they give their young. The Lithuanian-Mitnagdic schools, the so-called "Yeshiva World," are generally a bit more permissive but are far less coherent. Some will concur with the Hasidic rejection of all non-sacred learning; others will permit higher education but only for vocational reasons; and others yet will formally prohibit it but close their eyes to students who take pre-professional courses in "night college"--an accommodation that cannot be successfully reconciled with doctrinal consistency.

Centrist Orthodoxy takes a positive approach towards worldly knowledge. Whether it is known as derekh eretz, in the Hirschian formulation, or hokhmah, the term favored in talmudic and midrashic literature and in the writings of Maimonides, or madda as in the logo of Yeshiva University (Torah u-Madda), non-sacred learning is accorded a place of honor. The exact nature of the relationship of sacred and secular education is a question that admits of several solutions, but the common denominator of all of them is that such madda plays a key role in the human response to the divine imperative to "subdue" nature, be sensitive to human needs, attain the knowledge of God, enhance Torah learning, and strive for shelemut or perfection.

Such "synthesis" or symbiosis of the sacred and the secular was widely practiced in medieval Spain, during the so-called Golden Age. But even in other communities and at other times in the long history of the Jews, when external conditions forced Jews to look inwards, individuals still held on to the principle that knowledge of the world and man is a cherished value of Torah. Yeshiva University has recently commissioned three eminent Judaic scholars to write comprehensive works demonstrating the precedents for the view of Torah U-madda.

It is true that there are those who are identified with Centrist Orthodoxy who, while subscribing to the general principle of Torah U-madda, would limit it—to such learning as is necessary for earning a livelihood, or to the natural sciences but not to the more "dangerous" humanities, etc. I respect those who espouse this minimalist position on Torah U-madda, but I do not agree with them. I shall here repeat a part of what I have written elsewhere—in Tradition (Fall 1986)—and trust that those interested in a further exposition of this important principle of Centrist Orthodoxy will refer to that essay.

The study of worldly wisdom is not a concession to economic necessity. It is *de jure*, not *de facto*. I have never understood how the excuse of permitting "college" for the sake of "*parnasah*" or earning a living can be advocated by religiously serious people. If all secular learning is regarded as dangerous spiritually and forbidden halakhically, what right does one have to tolerate it at all? Why not restrict careers for Orthodox Jews to the trades and small businesses?

The study of worldly wisdom *enhances* Torah. It reveals not a lowering of the value of Torah in the hierarchy of values, but a symbiotic or synergistic view.

For those ~~of~~ in the Centrist camp, *Torah Umadda* does not imply the coequality of the two poles. Torah remains the unchallenged and pre-eminent center of our lives, our community, our value system. But centrality is not the same as exclusivity. It does not imply the rejection of all other forms or sources of knowledge, such that non-sacred learning constitutes a transgression. It does not yield the astounding conclusion that ignorance of Wisdom becomes a virtue. I cannot reconcile myself, or my reading of the whole Torah tradition, with the idea that ignorance—any ignorance—should be raised to the level of a transcendental good and a source of ideological pride.

Time does not permit a more extensive analysis, based upon appropriate sources, of the relationship between *Torah* and *Madda* within the context of *Torah Umadda*. But this one note should be added: Granting that Wisdom has autonomous rights, it does not remain outside the purview of Torah as a world-view, even though it may not be absorbed in Torah as a corpus of texts or body of knowledge. Ultimately, as Rav Kook taught, both the sacred and the profane are profoundly interrelated; the קדש הקדשים is the source of both יסוד הקדש ויסוד החול. The Author of the Book of Exodus, the

repository of the beginnings of the halakhic portions of the Torah, is the self-same Author of the Book of Genesis, the teachings about God as the universal Creator, and hence the subject matter of all the non-halakhic disciplines. Truly, "both these and these are the words of the living God!"

The principle of Torah Umadda is enshrined in the dual program that is characteristic of day school education from elementary school through the undergraduate schools of Yeshiva University.

Integrationism and Segregationism

Both Centrist Orthodox and Rightist Orthodox Jews agree that legitimacy cannot be bestowed upon groups which do not accept Halakhah. No amount of good will or friendship can disguise that basic theological stance: If the halakhic imperatives as embodied in the Written Torah and especially in the Oral Law, and if the commandments which sustained the religious fellowship of Judaism and became the cohesive center of Jewish life throughout the globe for millennia--if all this is diminished in value and considered as less than authoritative, then those who teach such doctrine are not legitimate expositors of the Jewish faith.

It is unpleasant to have to say this to American Jews, raised in the atmosphere of sportsmanship and looking with a jaundiced eye on all those who allow "mere" doctrinal differences to impede the good fellowship that ought to prevail and that is itself a fundamental tenet of what has come to be called the "civic religion" of American Jewry. To question the spiritual or halakhic credentials of "my rabbi" is tantamount to heresy--even by those who delight in tormenting these same rabbis and making their lives miserable. But truth has its own claims (and they are usually quite bitter, as Saadia reminded us a thousand years ago in his Introduction to his Emunot ve'Deiot), and integrity must prevail over popularity. Of course, such denial of legitimacy is never meant ad hominem, but it sounds harsh and grating in the environment in which most American Jews live.

Does this mean that Orthodox Jews are required to segregate themselves from the non-Orthodox, who constitute the majority of the Jewish community?

It is here that the two groups within Torah Judaism, both here and in Israel diverge. The Rightist Orthodox conclude that since the non-Orthodox view of Judaism is not legitimate, we must have no truck with them as religious groups at all. (Note that the Right Wing does not deligitimize non-Orthodox Jews as such; that canard has unfortunately gained far too much currency, even among those who should know better. The disqualification pertains only to the doctrines and to the rabbinic credentials of those who teach them.) Centrist Orthodoxy respectfully disagrees, and holds that one must indeed disagree with the non-Orthodox, but we must do so: respectfully.

That means not only lowering the temperature of the polemical rhetoric and relating to each other civilly and respectfully, but also recognizing the validity of such non-Orthodox groups and their rabbis.

A couple of years ago I spoke about "pluralism," the newest sacred cow in the stable of unassailable slogans of liberal American Jews. So self-evident has pluralism become as the primary dogma in the Jewish civic catechism, that even to question it puts one beyond the pale. I regard this as most unfortunate, because pluralism is a rich and fruitful concept--in philosophy, in the American political structure, in the Halakhah itself. But it threatens to become a sanitized form of relativism in the cavalier way it used nowadays. A self-respecting person, if he does not agree with the idea, must not allow himself to be cowed--even by sacred cows.

In the course of that lecture (later reduced to writing and published, in abbreviated form, in Moment, June 1986), I addressed the question of "recognition" of non-Orthodox rabbis. I shall here repeat several paragraphs of that article that I regard as pertinent to our theme:

Three categories to consider in the "recognition" or "legitimation/delegitimation" issue are: (a) functional validity, (b) spiritual dignity and (c) Jewish or rabbinic legitimacy.

Because Orthodox rabbis consider those movements not bound by the traditional *halachah* as heretical, many refuse to accord non-Orthodox rabbis any credibility as leaders of Jewish religious communities.

I consider this an egregious error. Facts cannot be wished away by theories, no matter how cherished. And the facts are that Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist communities are not only more numerous in their official memberships than the Orthodox community, but they are also vital, powerful and dynamic; they are committed to Jewish survival, each according to its own lights; they are a part of *Klal Yisrael*; and they consider their rabbis their leaders. From a functional point of view, therefore, non-Orthodox rabbis are valid leaders of Jewish religious communities, and it is both fatuous and self-defeating not to acknowl-

edge this openly and draw the necessary consequences--for example, establishing friendly and harmonious and respectful relationships and working together, all of us, towards those Jewish communal and global goals that we share and that unite us inextricably and indissolubly.

As an Orthodox Jew, I not only have no trouble in acknowledging the functional validity of non-Orthodox rabbinic leadership, but also in granting that non-Orthodox rabbis and laypeople may possess *spiritual dignity*. If they are sincere, if they believe in God, if they are motivated by principle and not by convenience or trendiness, if they endeavor to carry out the consequences of their faith in a consistent manner--then they are *religious* people. In this sense, they are no different from Orthodox Jews who may attain such spiritual dignity--or may not, if their faith is not genuinely felt and if they do not struggle to have their conduct conform with their principles. Phonies abound in all camps, and should be respected by no one, no

matter what their labels. And sincerely devout people exist everywhere, and deserve the admiration of all.

But neither functional *validity* nor spiritual *dignity* are identical with Jewish *legitimacy*. "Validity" derives from the Latin *validus*, strong. It is a factual, descriptive term. "Legitimacy" derives from the Latin *lex*, law. It is a normative and evaluative term.

Validity describes the *fact* of one's religious existence. *Dignity* refers to

the *quality* of one's religious posture, not its *content*. It is the latter which, to my eyes, determines what we are terming *legitimacy*. Here I have no choice but to judge such legitimacy by my own understanding of what constitutes Judaism and what does not. The criterion of such legitimacy is the Jewish *lex*--the *halachah*: not a specific interpretation of an individual *halachah*; not a general tendency to be strict or lenient; but the fundamental acceptance of *halachah's* divine origin. of *Torah min*

hashamayim. And if we become bogged down in definitions of these terms, then let us extricate ourselves from the theological morass by saying that the criterion is acceptance of *halachah* as transcendentally obligatory, as the holy and normative "way" for Jews, as decisive law and not just something to "consult" in the process of developing policy.

Hence, I consider myself a brother to all Jews, in love and respect, and together with them I seek the unity of all our people. But I cannot, in the name of such unity, assent to a legitimization of what every fiber of my being tells me is in violation of the most sacred precepts of the Torah.

At bottom, any vision of the truth excludes certain competing visions. So it is with the Torah commitment. Under no circumstances can an Orthodox Jew, for instance, consider

as Jewishly authentic a view of Judaism that excludes faith in God—such as "humanistic Judaism"; or one that condones marriage of Jew with non-Jew; or one that rejects the halachic structure of Sabbath observance or the laws of divorce or the institution of *kashrut*. To ask that, in the name of pluralism, Orthodox Jews accept such interpretations as Jewishly legitimate is to ask that we stop being Orthodox. If that is what pluralism and mutual legitimization mean, the price is too high.

Hence, while I side with the Orthodox Right in withholding halakhic legitimacy from advocates of non-Orthodox views of Halakhah (and I do so without relish), I do not deny their validity, and hence I do not subscribe to Haredi segregationism.

The integrationist view that I consider fundamental to the communal vision of Centrist Orthodoxy is a maximalist position on Kelal Yisrael, the total Jewish community, the House of Israel. I do not believe in rejecting the majority of the Jewish people on religious grounds. I firmly believe that the commandment, "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," which R. Akiva considered a kelal gadol ba-torah, a major principle of all Torah, applies to almost all Jews, and that the commandment to hate the evil-doer is moot and does not obtain today. (I plan to defend that position halakhically in an article I am now preparing for a forthcoming issue of Tradition.)

It is for this reason that I am appalled at the militant exclusionism and segregationism of some, though not all, in the Haredi camp. I reject categorically such sentiments as appeared in an editorial of an otherwise informative and intelligent Hasidic weekly, published both in Israel and in New York, Ha-mahaneh ha-Haredi (Aug. 6, 1987). The offending passage, which sums up the whole argument, reads:

From our vantage, Kelal Yisrael consists of less than a million Jews throughout the world.

This is an incredibly harsh judgment to pass on the millions of Jews, outside the Rightist and the Orthodox camp, who strive to remain Jewish, to raise their children Jewishly, and who often sacrifice much for Israel and for the Jewish people. It is not only heartless but, as I indicated, anti-halakhic and, what is more, anti-Hasidic. I cannot imagine that the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, who came to teach the love of Israel, would permit himself such a harsh and unfeeling verdict about the great majority of his people.

Compare this small-mindedness with the vision and capaciousness of a genuine giant of Torah, Rabbi Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin, known as "the Netziv" (the acrostic of his name), Rosh Yeshivah of Volozhin. In his Respona Meshiv Davar (chap. 44) he writes in response to the editor of a religious journal:

The editor teaches and recommends that in this generation we separate from each other completely, even as Abraham separated from Lot. With apologies to the editor, such advice is as harsh as a sword [thrust] into the body of our people [endangering our very] existence. In the days of the Second Temple, when we were independent in our Holy Land, the Land was ravaged, the Temple was destroyed, and Israel was exiled because of the controversy between the Pharisees and the Saducees. The baseless hatred resulted in the illegal spilling of blood; as when a Pharisee saw another, not a Saducee, who committed a sin by excessive leniency in some matter, his baseless hatred caused him to accuse him of being a Saducee and thus worthy of casting him into a pit (i.e., endangering his life). Thus did murder become widespread under the erroneous guise of permissibility, as if it were a mitzvah...

It is not improbable that such things can happen in our time too, Heaven forbid, whereby one who is pious imagines that so-and-so is not acting according to his view of what is the proper service of the Lord, adjudging him a heretic and distancing himself from him. Thus they come to persecute each other in the false impression that this is permissible, Heaven forbid, thereby endangering all of the people of the Lord. This obtained even when we were independent, in our [own] land.

Certainly now when we are oppressed in exile... amongst the nations of the world: When we are in exile, we are compared to the dust of the earth, as the Holy One said to Jacob, "and thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth," and the nations are compared to flooding waters, as Isaiah said... Now, a lump of earth [endangered] by raging waters cannot be saved except if the dust [is compressed and] becomes a veritable rock. Then, even if the river engulfs it, it can at most roll it from place to place but it cannot utterly destroy it. So is Israel amongst the nations of the world: We have no hope except if we become the rock of Israel, that is, united as one group. Then no people, no nation, will be able to destroy us.

How then can we advise separating one from the other, thus [allowing] the nations of the world to come and eventually drown us, Heaven forbid?

How refreshing and how wise is this counsel! True, the Netziv was referring to far less serious divergences from Jewish norms. Yet the pattern holds true for each generation, most especially ours. **We are the generation after the Holocaust.** To ignore that is to place ourselves in mortal peril. The Netziv's words are thus far more meaningful to our generation than the one to which he originally addressed them.

In preparation for the celebration of Passover, the "festival of freedom," we read on Shabbat ha-Gadol the famous climactic verse describing the great vision of the reconciliation of generations: on "the great and terrible day of the Lord," the Prophet Elijah will "restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers"-- **והשיב לב אבות על בנים ולב בנים על אבותם**.

Now, this does not necessarily imply the unity of shared opinions and common answers; our verse says not **לדעת אבות על בנים** but **לב**, not that he will restore the "minds" or "thoughts" but the "hearts" of the generations to each other. This is the unity of friendship, of love, of shared destiny and common fate. With such oneness, we can attain freedom.

But this is more than pretty rhetoric and precatory inspiration. We tend to overlook the end of that verse: **פן אבוא והכיתי את הארץ חרם**—"lest I come and destroy the land utterly." The alternative to unity is nothing less than utter destruction and unmitigated catastrophe.

We have already experienced the end of that verse. We have had our fill of destruction and devastation in our own lifetime. Have we still not learned the value of Jewish solidarity? The Jewish people was reduced by one third; are we mad enough to want to reduce it even more by the legerdemain of halakhic semantics, by deciding that every one but us--whoever that "us" may be--is to be read out of Kelal Yisrael, and to be denied the patrimony of Israel?

Centrist Orthodoxy insists that loyalty to Torah and to Israel demands that we strive for maximal inclusiveness and for minimal segregation from each other. If we stick together, as the Netziv taught us, we will be safe as a rock; if we do not, we will be dust, dirt, washed away into obscurity by the raging waves of history.

Moderation and Tolerance

Moderation is one of the most characteristic traits of Centrist Orthodoxy which holds that the time has come to lower the temperature of our debates, to calm the tempers of those who know all the answers but few of the questions, to apply to the body politic of the Jewish people the same teaching of moderation codified by Maimonides in his Code, Hilkhot Deiot, namely, that of the Middle Way, which he calls "the way of the Lord" taught by God to Abraham. (In the Tradition article mentioned earlier I try to demonstrate that this Maimonidean teaching applies not only to personal dispositions but, as well, to communal conduct and public policy.)

Moderation is based upon an appreciation that life is filled with ambiguities and complexities and resists black-and-white simplism. This is a sophisticated insight and must not be confused with indecisiveness. Moderation should never be misconstrued as a lack of conviction. On the contrary, a lack of self-confidence in one's most basic commitments is often expressed as extremism; one who is sure of what he stands for can afford to be moderate. A strong heart can risk being an open heart.

Mark Twain once said, "Moderation in all things--except moderation." The only area where we must be extreme is in the pursuit of moderation in all aspects of our communal and social life. I am in favor of "radical moderation."

I spoke of this theme to Yeshiva's Israel alumni in July 1976, when over 1000 or 1100 men and women attended a reunion at the Jerusalem Theater. Circulating in the crowd after the program, I overheard one alumnus say to another, "I never knew there were so many sane people left in this country." He had a point. While it would be absurd to characterize all who disagree with the policy of moderation as wanting in sanity, I do believe that moderation contributes to mental health and spiritual balance, both of individuals and collectivities.

Closely allied with the theme of moderation is that of tolerance. Rav Kook taught that the foundation of tolerance in Judaism is the truth that no human being can grasp all of the truth. Only God knows the whole truth: ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ אֵחָד. Mere mortals can aspire at most to an aspect of the truth. Hence one must tolerate the views of others, for even if they are mostly in error, one may learn from them that one glimpse of the truth that has otherwise proved elusive.

Such teaching of tolerance is dear to Centrist Orthodoxy. We have not mastered it yet. But we must keep trying.

But this truth about tolerance is itself only a partial truth. Tolerance is not an unlimited virtue. Lionel Trilling once said that some people are so open-minded that their brains fall out. To be tolerant of intolerance is an error. And to hold one's peace and fail to protest in the presence of a gross violation of what one holds to be the truth is in itself a most questionable virtue. This is more a failure of nerve than tolerance.

Political and religious liberals often overlook this point. They forget that it is all too easy to be tolerant of something you do not much care about. A music lover will be scandalized by a second violinist who is off tune; an amateur will be "tolerant" of such shoddiness. Likewise, if Shabbat is only "a day off," one can be "tolerant" of its desecration. If kashruth is only "folkways," you can suffer violations of kosher law. Such tolerance is a cheap virtue -- and singularly unimpressive. But for someone who believes that these are divine commandments, mitzvot and not just "rituals" or "customs and ceremonies," and that their violation is a most painful experience, tolerance is a mark of courage. Hence, interestingly, true tolerance in Judaism is to be found amongst the more observant and the more committed. Only with them is such tolerance an act of moral heroism.

It is precisely to such heroism that we are summoned in this era of dangerous divisiveness and internecine conflict. It is to such moderation and tolerance that, despite all provocations, Centrist Orthodoxy is committed.

The State of Israel

The fourth distinguishing mark of Centrist Orthodoxy as compared with the Haredim, Orthodoxy's Right Wing, is the attitude towards the State of Israel.

Unlike Satmar and the Neturei Karta, Centrist Orthodoxy does not believe that the State of Israel is the work of the Devil, come to tempt and test unwary Jews.

Unlike the Agudah, Centrist Orthodoxy does not believe that the State of Israel is an aberration, a historical accident, and is therefore religiously insignificant.

Most Centrist Jews affirm that it does indeed have religious significance; almost everything does in the Jewish view of things... Some Centrists hold that it heralds the Messianic age. They have therefore committed their careers,

their safety, even their very lives to settling the areas of Judea and Samaria, convinced as they are that this is an imperative of the Messianic era. Others are troubled by this unabashed Messianic fervor and consider it both extravagant and dangerous. The majority are therefore more reserved and believe that Israel heralds "the beginning of the flowering of redemption," thus reciting as part of the weekly prayer for the welfare of the State of Israel the phrase, "רפאות ושלום לארץ ישראל".

A personal note: I take exception to this majority view of the Centrist Orthodox camp. I do not recite the words just mentioned, because I do not presume to know at what stage of the redemption we are in, if we are in such a stage at all. For me, such Messianic considerations and calculations are irrelevant. A political event in the life of the Jewish people can be spiritually compelling even if it is not part of God's final Messianic plan. Even if the State of Israel has nothing to do with the ultimate Messianic redemption, I cherish it all the same. It is a Jewish state, the only state that accepted Jewish refugees without imposing quotas or restrictions, a state which allows Jews to reenter history as equals and not only as guests, and a state where the fullness of Jewish life can be lived as nowhere else. I therefore consider it extraordinarily precious despite all its obvious imperfections. But, as I said, I here am in the minority.

AN EVALUATION OF CENTRIST ORTHODOXY

An assessment of Centrist Orthodoxy at this period of its history requires equal measures of courage and objectivity. Since I am possessed of neither, I should be disqualified from this task. Yet a movement, like an individual, cannot make progress without a heshbon ha-nefesh, and even if such stock-taking is flawed, it must be undertaken as honestly as possible if our goals are to be achieved.

In so examining Centrist Orthodoxy, I find seven areas of weakness and seven of strength. Surely one can add some here, some there, but I present this criticism as the beginning of our collective self-analysis.

1. Our educational system has succeeded in producing an impressive number of talmidei hakhamim. At Yeshiva's affiliated Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, a majority of our Roshei Yeshiva are Yeshiva University graduates. Their learning is in no ways inferior, not one whit, to those of other yeshivot. Yet we have projected onto

the screen of public awareness neither them nor the many practicing rabbis who are splendid scholars, leaving the erroneous impression that Talmud scholarship is the preserve of the Right. Clearly, this is an area where much remains to be done.

2. We Centrist Orthodox Jews often seem to lack passion in our religious lives and religious experience. Beset by a massive inferiority feeling, we cede the quality of נפש (soul) to others. We have deluded ourselves into thinking that to be moderate is to be "pareve." A vicious cycle has come into being: we question our own authenticity or viability, and hence we lose heart and passion; and we suffer a dearth of energy and neshamah and therefore begin to question whether we are on the right track. This Gordian knot must be cut. And this can best be done by emulating the Hasidim in their fervor, their hitlahavut, and their single-minded devotion. Anglo-Saxon self-restraint may be in place at a cocktail party, not at a minyan. Perhaps the time has come for a neo-Hasidic renaissance in our ranks.

3. We have raised our children to strive too much for worldly goods and business success and high-paying professional jobs. We have been too successful in imbuing them with the delights of the Yuppie life which, even if it is combined with observance of the mitzvot, leaves our community and our young people themselves impoverished. One of the unfortunate results of this assimilation of current societal values is that we do not have enough rabbis and teachers. Yet, we do not compensate for this by making these professions more attractive. On the contrary, we continue "rabbi-baiting" as a kind of fundamental layman's right, even duty, and we persist in downgrading the Jewish teacher as a "mere" melamed--and paying him commensurately. Consequently, we have developed a psychology of vicarious communal leadership, whereby we complain that nothing is being done to create a cadre of dedicated and competent communal leaders, but we insist that somebody else's children be the candidates for such honors. Needless to say, this cannot and will not work. Unless there is a radical change of perception and an elevation of goals, we will have neither a sufficient number of rabbis and educators to ensure our communal progress, nor the right kind of laymen to support and appreciate them. And we must begin in the way we raise our own children and the values which we inspire in them.

4. Our birth rate, while higher than the rest of the Jewish community, is not anywhere near as high as the Right, and this is a sign of our diminished commitment. It is true that there are many explanations--high day school tuitions, women seeking careers--but these are not excuses for our demographic deficit. Our children are our future, and numbers most certainly do count in the future of any community, particularly the Jewish people which is so seriously

underpopulated. There is, however, reason for guarded optimism because younger Centrist parents are now raising larger families.

5. Genuinely religious people are not only observant, they are also spiritual. Ramban writes of the אדם צדיק, one who observes the commandments yet is spiritually vulgar. We Centrist Orthodox Jews must admit that too many of us have let our new-found wealth go to our heads. I do not at all mean to say that this is a malady peculiar to us; not by any means. But if we are to take our Judaism seriously, we must beware of failures in middot (character) as well as our neglect of mitzvot. All too often our ostentation grows out of bounds. I have received Bar Mitzvah invitations that cost more than a whole Bar Mitzvah should. I have been to weddings that are a vulgar display of conspicuous waste. Such mindless extravagance is hardly the proper introduction to what should be tasteful and dignified religious events. It represents the triumph of celebration over cerebration. Centrist Orthodoxy, irrespective of the faults or virtues of others, must concern itself with such phenomena. It has not done so heretofore. The one Jewish community I know of that does do so is that of the Gerer Hasidim. The Gerer Rebbe strictly limits the number of guests that can be invited, the number of items on the menu, and the amount of money that may be spent. Kol ha-kavod--all honor and glory to such forceful and effective inculcation of the values of Jewish dignity. This, indeed, is the way of Torah. Let us too learn and practice how to celebrate as Torah Jews.

6. In the same vein: We do not engage sufficiently in תנן, in personal charity and good deeds--whether in systematic visiting of the sick or hospitality to strangers (not just social entertainment!) or taking in foster children and the like. True, a number of our people in different communities do practice such hessed, but not enough do so; certainly not to the extent that, for instance, the benighted Satmar Hasidim do! We talk a great deal about the social-ethical dimension of Torah, but our deeds do not always match our rhetoric. Centrist Orthodoxy would have much more credibility if we instituted such hessed practice on a large and systematic scale.

7. We are institutionally fragmented--for no good reason. Thus, we have two weak competing congregational groups, when we might have one strong one. And the various groups we do have usually do not speak with one voice. The organizational chaos and duplication is nothing less than scandalous. We can no longer afford it.

Let us now turn to what I consider our strengths. Here too my list is incomplete but may serve as a corrective to critics from without and to the tendency of some Centrist Orthodox Jews to indulge in communal self-laceration.

1. Our powerful commitment to Israel is the envy of other groups. The practice of a year of Torah Study in Israel has now spread from Yeshiva University High Schools to other Centrist Yeshivot. Our rate of Aliyah is genuinely impressive: over 1500 Yeshiva University alumni families now make their home in Israel. Over 350 of our students are spending this year Israel, and a similar number do so every year. Young Israel has built a superb network of affiliated synagogues in Israel. The Orthodox Union is effective in its outreach programs in Jerusalem. The Rabbinical Council of America has now begun to mobilize its rabbinic retirees in Israel to serve the religious needs not only of American olim, but of Israelis as well.

2. Our vision of Torah is more comprehensive. It does not exclude any respectable, creative area of human endeavor. When the Right excludes all secular studies from the purview of Torah, it diminishes the scope of Torah and in effect accommodates secularism by saying that, for whole areas of life, religion is irrelevant. It is our young people who experience the Presence of the Divine and the judgment of Torah in laboratory and classroom, office and concert hall; and it is our advocates of Torah Umadda, or Torah im Derekh Eretz, who founded such groups as the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists, the medical and social science groups affiliated with it, COLPA, and other such organizations.

3. Our greater concern for more Jews, our integrationist and inclusivist view, holds more promise for return by more Jews to Torah. Yeshiva University pioneered what has become the Baal Teshuvah yeshivah movement when it established, over 30 years ago, the Jewish Studies Program, later to become the James Striar School of General Jewish Studies. The current efforts by both Hasidic and non-Hasidic Haredi groups in this area are to be applauded--and they are a tribute to the programs initiated by us. Centrist places great emphasis on the interpretation by the Sifre of the commandment, "thou shalt love the Lord thy God," וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, saying: שִׁיחָא וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, "this means: [act so] that God becomes beloved because of you." Outreach by segregationist groups will succeed principally with marginal types (both the upper and lower margins); integrationist outreach stands a better chance of attracting the bulk of Jewry.

4. Because we are what we are, we form a bridge without which the Left and the Right, the non-Orthodox and the Haredi elements, would fly apart altogether. One has only to observe the tragic situation in Israel where the disintegration of the moderates, represented by Mizrachi, has resulted in progressive polarization and confrontations between

extremists of both groups. It is true that we are not overly appreciated by those closest to us on either side of the religious spectrum, because of the sociological tendency to be most captious in your criticism of those who are closest to you and therefore potentially the most significant rivals--a tendency amply illustrated in the history of most revolutions--but such troublesome annoyances are worth enduring for the larger good of the people as a whole.

5. We have the capacity to accomodate internal differences of opinion without falling apart. I note the varieties of Orthodoxy flourishing within Yeshiva University and yet remaining within the halakhic consensus and within one institutional framework. In no Haredi yeshivah, to my knowledge, is there a conscious openness to competing interpretations--whether on Zionism, distinctive clothing for Orthodox Jews, the nature of Torah U-madda, etc.--as there is in our ranks. This makes for more internal tensions, but such tensions are creative, broadening, and a sign of vitality. Only life is tense; death is remarkably tension-free.

6. Yet, this variegation does not result in institutional chaos and in a smorgasbord approach to Judaism. There is indeed a mainstream Centrist Orthodoxy that is recognizeable and it is this "mainstream" that predominates in the student body of Yeshiva University. A study recently commissioned by Yeshiva and conducted by a well-known and competent sociologist happily confirmed this impression.

7. Most important, the quality of our youth remains a source of enormous inspiration and encouragement. As one who has the privilege of seeing them and interacting with them on a regular basis, I can be optimistic as to our future on the basis of facts and not only faith.

External Pressures

It is in the nature of competing ideologies that those inclined to moderation and occupying the middle of the spectrum are most embattled because they are subject to pressures from both sides. This principle holds true for Centrist Orthodoxy, perhaps more now than ever before.

Thus, the Right loses no opportunity to attack Centrist Orthodoxy and accuse it either of illicit compromise of principle or, because of our refusal to break off from other groups, of ideological tergiversation. Powered by a new triumphalism, and encouraged by their remarkable and admirable demographic growth and consequent political and

institutional strength, their attacks on Centrist Orthodoxy and Yeshiva University are more sustained, more intense, and fiercer than they were even in the days of Dr. Revel, the first President of Yeshiva.

The Left has by no means been passive in assaulting Orthodoxy. In my 37 years in Jewish public life I have never experienced such animosity against Orthodoxy. Demanding recognition of their religious legitimacy and not getting it, Reform and Conservative leaders have undertaken unprecedented attacks against all Orthodoxy, both Haredi and Centrist. Waving the flag of Pluralism, the religious Left has demanded to be accepted as authentic, and has threatened to punish those whose religious convictions do not allow them to assent to the rightness of deviations from the Halakhah.

An example: In late Winter, 1988, The World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency, which heretofore had prided themselves on being "the parliament of the Jewish people" while insulating themselves from sectarian polemics, succumbed to the threat of wealthy donors to withhold their UJA contributions and, for the first time, allowed such denominational rivalries to enter the highest levels of their precincts. Orthodox groups not only fared poorly at the hands of the delegates, but the result was blatant discrimination that is too embarrassing to discuss publicly.

I must here comment on the excessive militancy of many of the self-proclaimed apostles of tolerance and moderation, and register my dismay at the truculence with which non-Orthodox groups--both religious and secular--have assaulted the Haredi camp. They have tarred all with the same brush, not distinguishing among the many sub-groups--as if all Haredim were wild-eyed fanatics, hating all other Jews and villifying the State of Israel. That is simply untrue. The Reform and Conservative groups are here responding to the provocations of delegitimatization. While this is understandable psychologically, even if it is an over-reaction, one has the right to expect more of their leadership. Surely Jewish dignity and concern for the future of our faith and our people demands more genuine moderation and statesmanship, and less pique and resentment and fulminations. No matter how exasperating they may sometimes be, the Haredim are creating vital communities in which they are keeping Torah alive, they are raising large families at considerable personal sacrifice, they are--at the very least--living symbols of the wondrous East European chapter of Jewish history, and they will probably always constitute a significant part of the Jewish people. We ask of them to be tolerant of massive deviations from Jewish tradition that, to Orthodox eyes, are devastating, blasphemous, and subversive of their most sacred ideals. Why should not the same courtesy be extended to them even if they fail to exercise such polemical temperance? The times do not call for the symmetry

of balanced intolerance. Reciprocity in trading accusations and epithets is not high principle; it is nothing but disguised retaliation. What our people need is a unilateral decision by each side to conduct itself with the dignity and restraint becoming the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Faced by such pressures from all sides, some of our people have begun to lose heart. Thus, some have counseled leaving the WZO and the Jewish Agency because we were disenfranchised--as if picking up your marbles and going home is a way to play the communal game.

Others, cowed by the mockery from the Right, have concluded that Centrist Orthodoxy does not have staying power--which I consider a nonsensical and unwarranted defeatism.

I am convinced with all my heart and soul, and even my mind, that we will make it, that we will prevail, that what Centrist Orthodoxy stands for is ultimately the most viable way that Torah can flourish in an open society.

The Kotzker Rebbe once said: *נדיה ארץ--ולא*; despair is the result of mindlessness. The faint-hearted and the weak-willed and the jelly-kneed must not be allowed to infect the rest of us with the virus of their discouragement.

R.I.E.T.S. will therefore be undertaking in the very near future a program of education and encouragement. As part of this effort, leading scholars, thinkers, and spiritual figures of Centrist Orthodoxy will be sent as "ambassadors of ideas and ideals" to communities across the continent, explaining and expounding Centrist Orthodoxy to our people and to all Jews who are interested and who are open to the message of Torah that is relevant, viable, and effective in our technological megalopolis in the waning years of this century no less than it was at any other time in Jewish history.

If we are persuaded, as I most certainly am, that without Torah there is no future for the Jewish people; that Torah calls upon us to plumb its depths and to hold fast to its teachings, but without being totally introverted, intolerant, or insensitive to the aspirations of others; that Torah is not threatened by life, by culture, by madda but, on the contrary, it thrives on the challenge; that Torah sees in hokhmah (Wisdom) or secular learning a Weltanschauung which recognizes both Torah and Wisdom as emanating from the One God who is Author of both; that in this period of our

history, 40 years after the Holocaust, when Israel-bashing has replaced Jew-baiting, and when our depleted ranks have not been replenished, it is our sacred duty to open up the ranks of kelal Yisrael to as many Jews as we can in good conscience accept--

if we are convinced of this with all our might and main, אם אנחנו בטוחים בזה בכל כוחנו ובכל נפשנו, then we shall reject both defeatism and triumphalism, both apologetics and arrogance.

With confidence and joy we shall proceed to teach others what we believe in; to inscribe our convictions on the agenda of Jewish public life not only reactively but also proactively; to teach it to our children not only through high school but far beyond; to engage in principled but respectful and loving dialogue with all Jews--both those on the other side of the divide of Halakhah and those with whom we share this most precious of all commitments.

And if the putative partners in this dialogue refuse to talk with us, we shall love them all the same and, with dignity and pride, proceed without them, confident in the rightness of our convictions and secure in the faith that in the fullness of time they will join us, learn from us and we from them, and together usher in the Great Reconciliation of והשיב לב אבות על בנים ולב בנים על אבותם.

One does not have the moral right to speak of Centrist Orthodoxy in our times without mentioning that intellectual and spiritual giant who has been its mentor, leader, and teacher for well over 40 years, my revered teacher and master, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, א"ש. I shall therefore conclude my remarks by recounting something that he said, some five or six years ago, to a young rabbi who was beset by problems and by critics who were making his life miserable, and who therefore came to him for counsel and solace.

The Rav listened to the young rabbi's tale of woe and the forces pushing him in different directions. He then looked up at him and said, "at the end of this week's Torah portion we read: ויעקב הלך לדרכו ויפגשו בו מלאכי אלקים, 'And Jacob went on his way and he was met by the angels of God.' If you will go on your own way, the way you are convinced is right and true and proper, looking neither to the left nor to the right, then you too will 'meet the angels of God.'"

I take those words as our marching orders. We shall proceed on our way, in our own way, the way that leads to "the angels of God," the vision of Torah given to all Jews for all times. We shall let no one intimidate us, neither Right nor Left. We shall march straight ahead, and pay more attention to "above" and "below" than to "right" or "left."

This is our way, our destiny, which we hold to be the destiny of all the House of Israel.

We shall follow it fearlessly, confidently, and lovingly.