

The Clash Between Modernity and Eternity

Based on an address by Rabbi Yaakov Perlow, שליט"א, Novominsker Rebbe and Rosh Hayeshiva of Yeshivas Novominsk-Kol Yehuda, in Brooklyn, New York

I. MODERNITY: TO BE EMBRACED OR AVOIDED?

One might well question why, from a Torah perspective, there must be a clash between modernity and eternity. After all, Torah's truths address all circumstances in all times, in whichever *Golus* we Jews find ourselves—be it Babylon, Spain, Poland, or America.

Before Moshe Rabbeinu's *petira* (passing), the Torah tells us, "G-d showed him the entire land, from Gilad to Dan, all of Naftoli, and the lands of Ephraim and Menashe, and all the lands of Yehuda, all the way to Yam Ha'acharon—the last sea." To which Rashi says, "Not the 'last sea,' but 'Yom Ha'acharon—the final day'—all the events that will befall Jewry until the Resurrection of the Dead." Moshe Rabbeinu saw Klal Yisroel in all its shades and colorations until the coming of Moshiach. That is, Moshe Rabbeinu's generous gaze, his blessings to Klal Yisroel—all of these endow Klal Yisroel with an eternity that tran-

scends limitations of modernity. *Toras HaAvos*, the sacred legacy of our Avos, the Blessings of Moshe—all of these have validity until the end of days.

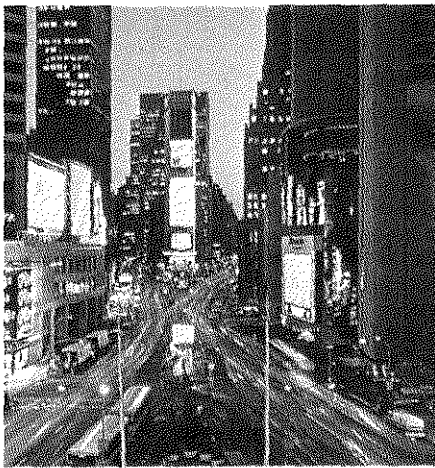
By the same token, the norms of Torah are timeless, and are applicable to every situation imposed upon us by the temporal world. Its principles provide a *derech Hachaim* for all of life's social variations: for the primitive towns of Medieval Europe and for the affluent communities of Modern America. One may therefore call into question the very premise of this discussion. Must there really be a clash between Modernity and Eternity?

And yet, we assume it is a given—we feel it in our bones, we observe it in the atmosphere of our carefully guarded lives: Modernism is not consonant with the sacred spirit of our ancestors. We must indeed recognize that if we do see a clash between modernity and Jewish eternity, it is because modernity today wears non-Jewish garb. "The Jews moved amongst the nations and learned from their actions." The mere fact that Jews live amongst

non-Jews in the world's great urban centers is unto itself a great spiritual hazard. The towering Torah leaders of earlier times foresaw this when the ghetto walls crumbled and Jews entered the mainstream societies. Such movement is fraught with risk, as expressed by Chazal (*Eiruvin* 21b).

Rava expounds: *What is the meaning of the passage: "Come, my Beloved, let us go out to the field, let us lodge in the villages. Let us arise early to the vineyards, let us see if the vine has flowered, the grape blossom has opened, the pomegranates are in bloom; there I will give my love to you" (Shir Hashirim 7:12,13).*

Rava explains the verses, phrase by phrase: "Come, my Beloved, let us go out to the field": *The Congregation of Israel spoke before the Holy One, Blessed is He, "Master of the universe, do not judge me like the residents of cities in which there is theft, immorality, vain oaths and false oaths."* Rather, "Let us go out to the field." "Come and I will show You scholars who study the Torah in poverty." "Let us lodge in the villages"—do not read this as it is written



bakforim (in the villages) but rather read this as if it were written bakofrim (among the disbelievers). "Come and I will show you those upon whom You have bestowed prosperity, and yet they have denied You."

"Let us arise early to the vineyards"—this refers to the synagogues and study halls; "let us see if the vine has flowered"—this refers to the students of the Mishna; "the pomegranates are in bloom"—this refers to the students of the Gemora. "There I will give my love to You"—I will show You my glory and my greatness, the praise of my sons and my daughters.

Rashi explains that large cities are places of markets, large population masses, where merchants and peddlers frequent, promoting theft and promiscuity—a society that breeds corruption and immorality—and as we see today, decadence, hedonism, and every manner of prohibited activity.

In its pristine integrity, Knesses Yisroel is not satisfied with all this. It longs for a different image of the real world: that I would return to the simplicity of life in the fields; as Rashi explains: "They will labor in the fields, and study Torah in poverty," unmodernized, perhaps primitive, yet pure, virtuous, unblemished by the ink of modern civilization, but at the same time producing talmidei chachamim delving into Torah, anchored in an entirely different standard of living—guided by an entirely different definition of life. And as the Gemora concludes, "There, I will reveal My greatness, the praise of my sons and daughters." Specifically in this kind of existence, precisely because it is unmarred by so-called progress and urbanity, can

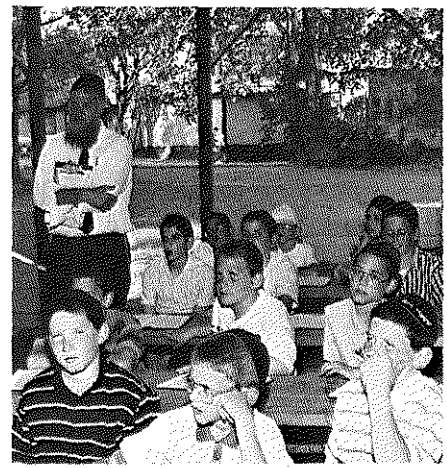
Knesses Yisroel show its true glory, the beauty of its sons and daughters.

All this may seem to us a dream world; it's just not *l'ma'aseh* any more. We live in cities, we are part of society, and we do enjoy the advances of science. We are convinced that we could not live today without electricity, the telephone, and all sorts of other technological marvels. This Gemora has a profound lesson for us regarding our thinking, about our entire state of affairs as dwellers of large cities. We must recognize the great *bidi'eved*—the after-the-fact acceptance—of our way of life, the spiritual pitfalls all around us, the mortal dangers that come in the wake of civilization and technology. While certainly a blessing to the body—and we must thank the *Ribbono Shel Olam* for all these blessings and comforts—they can often be, and often are, a plague to the *neshama*. And we all know that so well.

Of Gifts and Pitfalls

Serious Jews are surely aware that we must be alert to differentiate between the gifts G-d has bestowed upon us with modernity, and the high risks and challenges inherent in this very same modern life. Technology has made life immeasurably more convenient for us. Our contemporaries can scarcely imagine how people managed in earlier times! How did the *Rishonim* live during the Crusades? How were they able to write their commentaries on scrolls of parchment, amidst hunger, pogroms and plagues? Yet they produced an entire Torah civilization from which we are still being nurtured... a thousand years of Europe!

We must clarify for ourselves, with every step we take, which aspects of modernity we flee, as though from destructive flames, and which are blessings that we use for spiritual enrichment. The cassette player from which we learn *Daf Hayomi*, the computer scanner that checks the *Kashrus* of a *mezuzah*—these are heavenly blessings that enhance our lives. But the TV set, which modernity has planted into our homes, is an unmitigated curse—a destructive



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force to our spiritual status, and to our efforts to raise our children. The television conveys the very worst of our civilization, day in, day out, hour after hour. This aspect of modernity is a curse that should never gain entry into our communities.

To be sure, modernity represented by a whole body of Torah literature in English, which reaches out to the hearts of our brethren and brings them closer to our Father in Heaven, is invaluable. But modernity in terms of the media and popular literature, which are replete with disgusting discussions and narrations, should be avoided for the spiritual poisons that they entail. These are obvious truths; nothing new. But, then again,

Mesillas Yeshorim tells us that simple truths must be constantly reviewed, for "To the degree that these facts are widely acknowledged, to that extent do we become oblivious to them and tend to forget them."

II. DEALING WITH RELIGIOUS MODERNITY

There is yet another problematic aspect of modernity that has invaded our world. In various ways, a new philosophy of Religious Modernity has emerged, focusing on contemporary culture and how the Torah should conform to its standards and values. This philosophy, which has become a powerful force in Modern Orthodoxy, has come to articulate approaches that are diametrically opposed to our sacred ways of life—both in *halacha* and *hashkafa*, blurring the demarcations that separate Torah wisdom from secular knowledge. Before I pursue this point further, however, I must express—from the depths of my heart and with deep-felt anguish—some strong reservations.

I think that our world, our Yeshivtshe/Chassidische/heimishe world, has become all too comfortable at times, and sometimes a little too eager, to denigrate and even vilify those circles of *shomrei Torah u'mitzvos* with whom we sometimes have ideological differences. One can justify a *kana'us*

l'sheim Shamayim (zealotry sincerely meant), when directed against *Acheinu Bnei Yisroel*, especially against *shomrei hadas* who need and deserve to be criticized, and in whom we may recognize certain *hashkafos* that are not acceptable to our *chachamim*, and we feel compelled to speak out in pain and protest. But if this militancy is not mixed with a sense of *tzaar* and anguish, and coupled with feelings of the need for outreach—outreach out of sheer *ahavas Yisroel*—towards *Yidden ma'aminim bnei ma'aminim*, then this *kana'us* is, in my opinion, seriously flawed. And that extra element within it is the *ba'al davar* himself.

The *pasuk* states: "Your words are a lamp unto my feet, a light for my path" (*Tehillim* 119,105). In this case, as always, the lamp unto our feet and the light for our path should be the guidance of *Chazal*. The *Gemora* enjoins us: "One should always draw near with the right hand while rejecting with the left, not as Elisha did with Gehazi and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Prachya did with one of his *talmidim*." (Earth-shaking details regarding the latter incident are documented in "Omissions From Shas.") Even an angry "rejecting left" can be balanced and accompanied by a sensitive "drawing-near right." Then, and only then, will our vigilance and *kana'us* be effective and bring about the *kavod Shamayim* we sincerely seek.

Humanistic Liberalism vs. Emes

Having said this, one cannot help but shudder when contemplating the degree to which modernity has crept into the Orthodox world. Would you ever have imagined that a woman would read the *Megilla* on behalf of the entire congregation in an Orthodox *shul*? The rabbi of this *shul*, who sanctioned this practice, is a respected member of the Modern Orthodox world!

Did our ancestors ever imagine that institutions of Talmudic studies would be established to enable women to delve into *Gemora* with *Tosefos*, as part of "equality of rights"? (As one woman put it, "I can't walk around and be the equivalent of a card-carrying member of the club without knowing the by-laws of the organization!")

In many of the Hebrew Day Schools across the country, should a *ben Torah* object to such practice, he would be labeled as "fanatic," a "black-hatter," "not in touch with the spirit of the times." Indeed, as Rav Pinchos ben Ya'ir said, "In *Ikvesa d'Meshicha* (the era preceding the advent of *Moshiach*), *chutzpa yasgeh* (will prevail)" (*Sota* 47a). In these last throes of *golus*, we certainly do see a breakdown of respect for tradition and authority. Thus *chutzpa yasgeh* has become the hallmark among the disciples of modernity.

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◆ Unfortunately, I must mention another painful example: The *Mesoras Hahalacha* (the halachic tradition) need not be lectured about *takonas agunos*. Yet the winds of feminism have made inroads even in our own *sheitel* society, and have used the plight of *agnos* as a whip with which to bash and insult rabbis who are expert in laws of divorce.

Let me read to you the first and last paragraphs of an article entitled, "We Have The Right To Question Authority," written by one of the leading activist rabbis of Modern Orthodoxy,

We must clarify for ourselves, with every step we take, which aspects of modernity we flee, as though from destructive flames, and which are blessings that we use for spiritual enrichment.

here and in Israel:

One of the thorniest problems facing anyone who takes religion sincerely and humanistic liberalism seriously: adherence to tradition means adherence to the authority of the carriers of that tradition, but what about individual conscience and the right of dissent? Can one respect authority without becoming authoritarian? Are we to bow down to previous generations without any questions at all, piously relying on the homily that "since we don't even come up to their shoelaces," who are we to second-guess the greats, or are we allowed—and even expected—to think for ourselves and creatively interpret the sources in accordance with our contemporary understanding?...

A person must have two pockets. If he simply doesn't know, he must listen to the authorities, "...even if they tell you that what appears to you to be left is right." [That is one pocket, to be used if you don't know, if you don't trust your-

self.—R' Y.P.] But the other pocket gives one the right, even the obligation, to learn, to question, and eventually to become an authority. And then, if one is absolutely convinced that the Sages are mistaken, one must only listen when "they say right is right and left is left." [What he obviously means is that you are the authority that prevails over the Sages in such a case.—R' Y.P.]

The author of this spurious ideology revealed the source of his confusion, in his dismay over the perceived contradiction between "adherence to tradition" and "humanistic liberalism." If you understand this phrase "humanistic liberalism" in all its ramifications, as it addresses our present-day way of life, then you have your finger on the idolatry of modernity from a Torah perspective; it means the full brunt of the influence of contemporary Western culture and its corrosive effect on the *Yiddishe neshama*. This is the heart of our present-day challenge: how to protect our thoughts, our lives, our children, our standards of personal modesty, our entire way of life from the influence of these values.

◆ One more example to be given:

The primary spokesman for the mixture known as *Torah Umadda* has the following to say in his book of the same name:

Torah, faith, religious learning on one side, and Madda, science, worldly knowledge on the other, together offer us a more overarching and truer vision than either set alone. Each set gives one view of the Creator as well as His creation, and the other a different perspective that may not at all agree with the first.... Each alone is true, but only partially true; both together present the possibility of a larger truth.

This is neither the time nor the place to discuss the falsehood and the insidious implications of such a philosophy. This has been done already by others. What I would like to say, however, and I address this directly to the rabbis and laymen in the Modern Orthodox world, many of whom have been performing great and productive service on behalf of Torah and *Yahadus* in this country:

Your success in your holy endeavors calls for *siyatta diSh'maya* (Divine assistance), and this can be merited

only by loyalty to the pure *emes* of Torah, untampered with, undiluted, uncompromised by alien creeds. This condition for *siyatta diSh'maya* is attested to by the hundreds of effective *ktruv* workers coming out of our *yeshivos*—who present Judaism in terms of Torah and *mitzvos*, and nothing else, to be *mekarev* people to the *Ribono Shel Olam*. This is proven by the many hundreds and perhaps thousands of *ba'alei teshuva* eager to embrace *Yiddishkeit* in all its details and restrictions, not searching for watered-down versions of *Yahadus*

and Torah. To our dear brethren who live and work in contemporary society and grapple with its problems, we say: Seek not the values of humanistic liberalism nor the lifestyle of modernity as your guidelines in life. "Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders and they will inform you." Keep not the religious company of Reform and Conservative *kofrim*. We in Agudath Israel will never tire of reminding the Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America that membership in the Synagogue Council of America and mixed Boards of

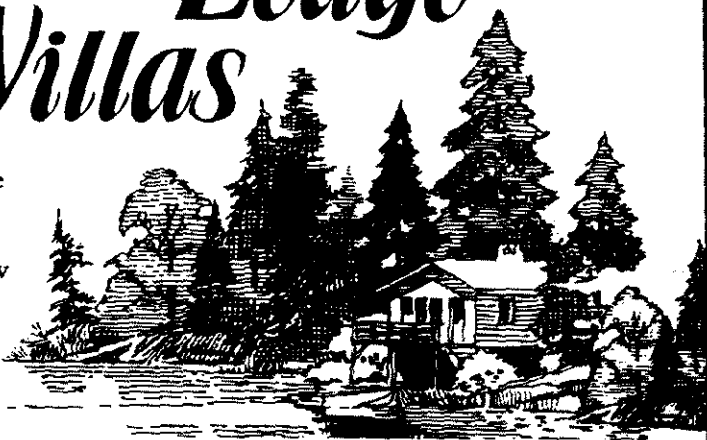
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Rabbis is a travesty upon *kedushas ha'emuna vehamesora*, and an ongoing *Chillul Hashem*.

Dear brothers: Your place is not with them. Your place is with us in the *machaneh* of *Yirei Hashem* and *Shomrei Mishmeres*, regardless of whether you belong to or agree with *Agudath Israel* or not.

Orthodox Jews living in the American mainstream need the *chizuk* and the inspiration coming from the Torah world, its *Rabbe'im*, its *talmidim*, its dedicated laymen. So we are *mispallel* to Hashem that all the so-

If you understand this phrase "humanistic liberalism" in all its ramifications, as it addresses our present-day way of life, then you have your finger on the idolatry of modernity from a Torah perspective; it means the full brunt of the influence of contemporary Western culture and its corrosive effect on the *Yiddishe neshama*.



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called moderns as well will join our society—*Lehiskadesh Sheim Shamayim al yedei kulonu*, that G-d's Name be sanctified through our combined efforts.

III. INTRUSIONS OF MODERNITY ON THE TORAH WORLD

Once we discuss the problems we encounter in our interface with the so-called modern world, we must examine ourselves, as well. Has modernism affected only others? After all, modernity not only addresses one's philosophy; it touches on lifestyle—how one conducts one's private life, how one engages in business, how one spends one's leisure time, and how we support our communal institutions. The modern world in this *malchus shel chessed*—this benevolent country, the United States of America—has opened up to us new means for supporting Torah *Yiddishkeit*: government funds, through programs. Our faces burn with shame as newspapers proclaim that government officials testify that they have uncovered fraud and deceit among Jewish educational institutions, unjustly blackening the reputation of the entire *yeshiva* world. These are our sins of modernity. When I even obliquely referred to such sins in the past, I incurred the criticism of some people, but since then, the *Chillul Hashem* has grown to awesome proportions. People respond with indifference and equanimity. "Such is the nature of the game," they say.

But it is *not* a matter of insignificance. Do we have any comprehension of the magnitude of such a *Chillul Hashem*? We must have tremendous merit to be spared from the Heavenly indictment that can be provoked by such *Chillul Hashem*!

If we convene public gatherings to arouse people in regard to their obligations for *tzenius*, don't we have similar need to send out alarms regarding dishonesty and swindle? We certainly need Heavenly *zechusim*, and we pray that He take into account our community's vast accomplishments in the areas of Chessed, Torah study, and philanthropy (of which we may be justly proud), to outweigh the grievous liability of *Chillul Hashem*!

I would like to conclude with a story: A person had a wagon-load of merchandise stolen from him, and dispatched a messenger to enlist the help of the Baal Shem Tov to recover his loss. The Baal Shem Tov was about to leave for another community to celebrate a *bris* when the messenger arrived. He took him along, together with Reb Hersch Sofer, to the *bris*. Upon arriving at his destination, the Baal Shem Tov recognized the wagon with the stolen goods, which he traced to a man staying at a nearby inn.

The Baal Shem Tov sent Reb Hersch to summon the man to him, but Reb Hersch returned without the fellow: "When I came there, he was in the middle of davening. I couldn't disturb him."

"Go back and get him anyway," the Baal Shem said.

Again, Reb Hersch returned alone: "He was eating breakfast, delicately, with dignity. I didn't want to interrupt him."

"Go back and tell him that I know how he traveled with the stolen goods through a forest for three days. He rested here, fed his horse there, slept over at such-and-such a place...."

Reb Hersch left, and came back with the culprit. The thief returned the wagon with the stolen goods with great contrition. He joined the paupers' table at the *bris*, and ate humble bread. In the middle of the *seuda*, however, he posed one question before the Baal Shem Tov:

"Rebbe, it is obvious that you can actually see anything and everything. Please tell me, then, why do you look at lowly, insignificant things, such as how thieves steal, and where horses eat? Why don't you fix your gaze on loftier things?"

The story goes on to relate how the Baal Shem Tov addressed the question, expounding on the topic with *divrei Torah* until *Mincha*, without concluding his presentation.

While the story itself needs commentary, one message is clear: We

have the capacity for raising our sights towards loftier goals, instead of focusing on "stolen horses." We should involve ourselves with our treasures—our glorious youth and our wonderful children—thus spreading *k'vod Shamayim* and elevating *k'vod Yisroel*. May G-d grant us the wisdom to extricate ourselves from the quagmire in which we are sinking, and together join forces to become closer to אבינו שבשמים and the eternal truths of Torah. ■

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