

May 3, 1983

Rabbinical Council of America Convention

"The American Orthodox Rabbi in the Computer Age"

1. The topic assigned to me, formally, is "The American Orthodox Rabbi in the Computer Age." In elaborating on the theme, my hosts informed me that I was expected to expatiate on the issues and challenges that will confront Centrist Orthodoxy in the coming years.

Now, this leaves me in a dilemma. I know less than nothing about computers. Since I am away from the rabbinate for 6-7 years, I feel unqualified to elaborate my views before those who bear its daily burdens. And in so far as predicting the future is concerned, I am always mindful of what Samuel Goldwyn used to say: "Never make forecasts, especially about the future."

I shall therefore ask your leave to make some general and some specific comments about Centrist Orthodoxy, especially as it relates to American Orthodox Rabbis, and therefore most especially to the Rabbinical Council of America. I apologize in advance if I occasionally stray from my assigned theme to include matters that appear to me either urgent or important.

2. Before focusing on Centrist Orthodoxy -- or by whatever name we now go -- let me say a word about the emerging right wing of Orthodoxy because, despite all its aggressiveness which often annoys and troubles some of us, it deserves our proper appreciation.

Let us not underestimate the contribution of the New Right. Think back to our beginnings in the Rabbinate twenty or thirty or forty years ago. Our complaints centered primarily on the condition that the New Right has now successfully attacked and remedied: A laity that was not only ignorant of Torah, but contemptuous of the values of study and halakhic performance; congregations that had placed greater emphasis on the social hall than on the bet ha-midrash; a Synagogue calendar that highlighted balls and dances rather than she'urim; people who had to be cajoled and almost hoodwinked into religious life by a variety of degrading gimmicks; she'elot that were remarkable either by their non-existence or by the banalities and the trivia of their content; congregational leadership which, although usually divided and disunited, came together only in their hostility to the values preached by the Rabbi.

That has now begun to change, and if the new intensification sometimes pits us against those of our people who are more demanding, more punctillious, more halakically rigorous -- then that is far better than the situation that prevailed

before.

3. Having said that, I must warn against the dangers of defeatism, against accepting too lightly the triumphalism that percolates through so much of the Orthodox Right.

5734 We must beware of the self-doubt engendered in us by the self-confidence of our critics. The Kotzker used to say: *role - Enk*
5735 he who despairs acts out of foolishness. We may be in flux, but we are far from surpassed.

We must be equally careful not to give credence to the assumption that our values are the result of temporizing and undignified compromises. The מסורה -- or as, the Rambam calls it, the מצוות -- is the מצוות, not merely a compromise between extremes. Moderation is a real principle of Torah; the competition to proliferate מצוות indiscriminately is not. The integrity and unity of Kelal Yisrael is part and parcel of our Masorah; the facile deligitimation of everyone outside your own group is not an example of מצוות. Our belief in Torah Umadda, our receptivity to secular learning, is grounded not in economic need but in Torah principles.

4. Fundamental to our whole Weltanschauung is a certain perception of the communal nature of Torah Jewry. Permit me to explain it by the symbolism of a passage in the Yerushalmi (, ורז) concerning Shemithah.

תניא, א"ר יוחנן שלח כ"א: אין לשלם זמון בית דין ופסוק מן המעלות.
 ושינוי צריכה [למנוח], מ"ט, דבית דין ושינוי האור, ובית דין לא יבדוק. ופני משה ולא
 מפני היכולת, דבר מקום לבית דין "מחזק מקום מוקף כן בית דין. וזו כלל "אור"
 (מחזק) משמע כי לית ביה ואלו מקום מוסר כמו בית דין. אפיכ, בזכר לבית דין
 "ובי תמונה ואלו הן" ונעשה כי ע"י מחזק וזוהר וזוהר וזוהר - משמע כי מקום ואלו
 יהי הילוך נעוד ביה, ואלו זמון בית דין. ואלו חייב בזכר. ואלו במעלות כמ"ט, ואלו
 תשרי ואלו כי תמונה כדכר הילוך לשכר - ואלו חזון לשלם זמון בית דין פסוק מן המעלות.
 ופני (היה) ארען למנוח, בבית ארען - לשכר - ואלו חזון - ואלו לשכר
 או גכר: מזה ספק ארען למנוח הילוך אור, ואפיכ חזון לשלם זמון בית דין
 למנוח, או כי לזה ואפיכ פסוק מן המעלות.

I take "field" and "house" not only as discrete geographical entities which impinge on specific halakhot, but as larger symbols that speak of the philosophy of community.

Judaism generally, and the 1000-year tradition of the Rabbinate in particular, was always על כל ישראל: it was concerned with the entirety of the Jewish people, with the totality of mankind, and not only small segments of Am Yisrael. Its vision was that of the sadeh, not the bayit. Newer tendencies in the last couple of centuries, and especially since pre-World War II Eastern Europe, would restrict the of Jewish life to a bayit -- to a "shtetl," not only in an institutional but also in a sectarian sense: limited, elitist, exclusionary, segregated, introverted. Torah was removed from the "field" of Jewish communal life -- not without great provocation, of course -- and confined to the role of an מורה ומגיד.

scope + preview

(Professor Jacob Katz, in his Tradition and Crisis, page 242f., has detected a similar polarity in the history of the rabbinate. The classical community Rav presided over a Kehillah, whereas the Hasidim -- and, in a different way, the Yeshiva movement -- introduced the edah. These roughly correspond to the symbols of sadeh and bayit.)

The view that restricts Torah to a bayit is more protective of it and gives one a greater sense of security. But an על כל ישראל is less natural, more stifling, and more confining. It lacks the sense of רחב, of breadth and scope and horizon that characterize a sadeh conception of Torah and its community.

There are certain immediate consequences to this polarity. The bayit view leads one to be a more careful פזרן -- to forego luxury and leisure and economic advantage and to exercise self-denial. Hence, אדם אחד. Hence, אדם אחד. At the same time, the bayit Orthodox Jew is relatively unconcerned with the needs of the broader community. Hence, his lack of leadership in an identification with UJA or Bonds or Federation -- or service in Zahal...

אדם אחד

The big question is: can this bayit-confined Torah experience shemittah? Shemittah is tied in to redemption:

שמיטה. In the Kabbalah, Shemittah is the redemptive culmination of divinely ordained aeons. The question of whether אדם אחד is, in its metaphorical interpretation, the question of whether redemption is possible through the practice of a bayit or of a sadeh community.

What divides Centrist from Right Orthodoxy is this question of whether we affirm a bayit or a sadeh conception. What we stand for is a sadeh Orthodoxy -- broad, inclusive, concerned, open -- not austrits, not "shtetl," not self-enclosed and introverted.

5. Certain consequences flow from this choice. A sadeh view, for one, requires openness by us to the very Right which we criticize for being self-segregated.

Not only does this mean that, despite any difference with the Right, we are fundamentally at one in all ikkarim, but that we gladly acknowledge whatever debt we owe to the various institutions of the Right.

Let me give you an example. A few weeks ago we lost one of our Rashei Yeshivah -- a great רש"י, a wonderful human being, whose son learned in our Yeshiva, received his Semikhah from us, and now is a Ram in our High School. The students of the son, as a tribute, collected and distributed Tzedakah, תְּצַדַּק, to those institutions with which the father was associated -- world famous yeshivot which I prefer not to name now -- as well as to our own Division of Communal Service for outreach programs.

Consider the openness -- in all its freshness -- of those young talmidim. Would their counterparts in those other yeshivot have been equally forthcoming, had the situation been reversed, in donating to Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary or Yeshiva University?...

Contrast their sadeh - openness with the attitude of the Rosh Yeshivah of one of these institutions who rose to eulogize our Rosh Yeshiva in Lampert Auditorium. It was an elaborate apology for the fact that the Niftar taught not at a "regular" yeshivah where Torah is studied 24 hours a day but, "nebech," at an institution which is only 1/2 devoted to Torah...

6. A second consequence of a sadeh orientation is that we need a better and more efficient organizational apparatus. In a house you can afford to be cluttered; the area is limited, so you will find your way around one way or another. In a field you must conserve your energy, marshal your resources, and avoid duplication. Otherwise, all your efforts are wasted.

The time has come for the Rabbinical Council of America to take the initiative in the merging of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America and Young Israel. I have spoken of this at conventions and conferences of both these groups. As I expected, inertia and entrenchment prevailed, and Centrist Orthodoxy laymen plod along in two organizations when one well-run organization could be twice as strong and influential as both put together. This is an act of vandalism against the scarce resources of our community and must not be permitted. My own position and preoccupations preclude me from taking any further action. The burden is entirely that of the Rabbinic Council of America. There is enough talent and commitment and good will in both groups, and in both the laymen and professionals involved, to make any effort by you worthwhile. If you do not feel inspired by the vision of all the good that can come of a united Union of Jewish Congregations of America - Young Israel, consider

the damage that can come from disunity as you contemplate the debacle of Mizrachi as it is being splintered out of existence.

7. Finally a sadeh view will shape our approach to the non-Orthodox in an extremely critical period of our relationships with them.

I refer to the recent, over-publicized Reform "innovation" on patrilineal descent -- a policy that would recognize the child of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother as Jewish.

As usually happens with such anti-halakhic "innovations," ploys undertaken for purely practical, prudential reasons are paraded for the public as acts of moral piety and ethical heroism. Hence, the halakhic principle of recognizing only matrilineal descent in establishing Jewish identity is compromised by legitimating patrilineal descent as well under the guise of "equality" -- and all the other meretricious synonyms which together constitute the sacred vocabulary of Reform heterodoxy. But the fig-leaf is too thin to cover the nakedness of a movement which has countenanced inermarriage even without the benefit of conversion Reform-style, so that there is today in Reform Temples a very large number of children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers. It is no easy matter for a Reform Rabbi to tell them they are not Jewish according to Jewish law. If is easier to change Jewish law...

Of course, their move is totally without merit or validity from a halakhic point of view. אני זועף. I am as irate as any of you are at the brazenness of this move and its callous disregard of the millennial Jewish Masorah. Perhaps it is worth taking some organizational action that will symbolically demonstrate the Rabbinic Council of America's deep displeasure. I leave that to you.

However, what concerns me is the overreaction to this "change." What should have been a dignified and briefly analytical denial of legitimacy, disguising a knowing smirk, became a rapidly escalating barrage which reached its crescendo in the threat of an אשור חייב.

Why do I consider this an overreaction? Simply because Reform has done worse before. For instance, in the area of ishut, they have abandoned gittin and thus permitted the remarriage of an eshet ish. I consider this far more perilous than declaring non-Jews to be Jews, because the former involves mamzerut and the latter does not. In the latter case, we can always recommend and insist upon נישואי כהלכה if such a "patrilinear Jew" comes before us. The former case is a מחלוקת. And if, for so many years -- well over a century -- we have somehow managed to get along without threatening an אשור חייב why do so now?

אני זועף?

Moreover, an איני צריך is unnecessary. During my 25 years in the rabbinate, I always inquired of bride and groom as to their backgrounds, no matter what synagogue or temple their parents did or did not belong to. Divorce, conversion, adoption -- these are items about which all of us responsibly inquire before we agree to siddur kiddushin. We will not accept as Jewish a person whose conversion consisted of a few lessons culminating with a promise before the open Ark to be "a good Jew"; why then create such a tumult when, effectively, the Reform group itself declares their conversions unnecessary for a large group of their people?

But worst of all, such an איני צריך, if it is promulgated, will be an unmitigated disaster. It will be both senseless and catastrophic, and we should fearlessly oppose it.

It is foolish because you do not execute such marital prohibitions against a group larger than yourself.

Federation conducted a demographic study last year concerning the religious practice of the Jewish community of Greater New York. The survey, not yet published, reveals that 80% participate in a Seder; 60% light Hanukkah candles; 50% fast on Yom Kippur; 22% light Shabbat candles; 17% buy Kosher meat; 14% use 2 sets of dishes. Outside half a dozen neighborhoods in this country, Orthodox Jews are a minority. The Yiddish press reports that some members of an Orthodox rabbinical group that cannot be accused of excessive moderation even demand that the Conservatives be treated no different from Reform. Consider now that Orthodox Jews, who constitute about 5-8% of American Jewry, will announce a prohibition to intermarry with the other 95% -- effectively declaring ourselves to be a brave but inordinately marginal, trivial, and insignificant group in Jewry. Instead of gad-flies we will thus become mere mosquitos...

Historically, an איני צריך was used to isolate small heretical groups, not the vast majority of our people. By the time the איני צריך against the Karaites was formalized (see 3 מ'ס 10 פ'ס'ק 106'2), they were a tiny and insignificant group. In our case, such an issur now will only confirm us as a tiny bayit -- a marginal hut off on an insignificant corner of the great Jewish sadeh.

Moreover, consider certain other consequences of such an act: it will call an abrupt halt to the Baal Teshuvah movement! The (אין פ'ס'ק 106'2) הגדה, in codifying the ruling of

הגדה with Karaites as פ'ס'ק 106'2, adds that אין פ'ס'ק 106'2. Is that really what we want? -- to cut off any possibility for ever after for any progeny of Reform or unaffiliated or maybe even Conservative Jews to be אין פ'ס'ק 106'2?

If this threat is an exercise in empty hortatory invective, it is irresponsible.

If it was seriously meant, it is an invitation to a massive ~~plan~~ ^{plan}.

If such a ruling is issued -- by anyone -- and attempts made to implement it, it will be nothing if not catastrophic. The bad feelings and ill temper and hostility that now characterize intra-Jewish relations here and in Israel will appear as child's play compared with the explosive wrath that will be turned on us by every segment of Jewry outside our own camp. American Jewry may become destabilized, but we will surely become "shtibbelized" -- an off-shoot, a pariah, universally regarded as an exotic group of irresponsible hot-heads. Federation, UJA, every other group will turn us out and cut us off, and the media will have a field day with us.

None of the triumphalism and self-righteousness that characterize too much of our more extreme colleagues can justify such opprobrium for Torah, such disrepute to Orthodoxy, and such an irreparable rift in Kelal Yisrael.

The Rabbinic Council of America should make it well known in advance that it will not countenance such a move, not sanction it, and resolutely oppose it.

8. Our generation, especially our generation of Rabbanim, is faced with more serious, complex, and grave problems than perhaps any generation since the ^{בנין בית המקדש}. There is a time for pulling away and into a bayit. But not today. It is too easy to follow our natural instinct to slink away in petulant resentment. After the great Destruction of Jewry in our own times, we must reach out, not pull in. We must plow the field, not retire to our private cabins. The Tree of Life that is Torah must be planted in the "field" -- where its protective branches and its fruit can benefit all of our fellow Jews. It must not be confined to those already at home, in the bayit.

Whether the ge'ulah will come from trees planted in a bayit or not was not decided by the Yerushalmi. Even the Rambam, uncharacteristically, does not decide the question. But everyone agrees that a tree planted in a field certainly is liable to the laws of Shemitah.

In an age of such danger to our people, we cannot risk further rifts and cleavages and animosity. We must summon up the courage to practice ahavat yisrael even for those with whom we profoundly disagree; the heroism to risk the elements and brave the storms and the hail in the open field of Jewish life; and the honor of practicing tolerance and friendship and modesty that will reflect the darkei no'am of Torah. Let us follow that path to the ge'ulah. Then, as King David promised us in Psalms,

ישראל, יום הולדתו של
המדינה, 15 במאי 1948

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