

January 28, 1984

The Challenge to Modern Orthodoxy
Joshua Berkowitz

1 - Berkowitz makes the same mistake that the Conservative always did -- the insistence upon institutional self-definition as if that alone created a legitimacy for a movement. But I see no need for an ideological pushing of the elbows in order to make room for institutional "space." We do not and should not consider ourselves a separate "movement" in the sense that we are different from classical Orthodoxy. We are Orthodox -- but with a new-old interpretation. As such, we have no need to rue the fact that "our" people consult "their" Gedolim. The institutional and even ideological differentia must not be mistaken for rigid lines -- even though the Right may look upon us with contempt and condemn us to irrelevancy.

2 - Berkowitz is inconsistent. In one point he asserts that we have no differences in Halakhah, and in another he resents the fact that nowadays the "Modern Orthodox" do not allow mixed dancing at their weddings...

3 - Additionally, Berkowitz mistakes goals and reality, the ought and is. The aspiration of "Modern Orthodoxy" is not to insinuate the trappings of modernity into the Jewish framework, but, identically with the Right, to create a "kehillah kedoshah" in the fuller sense, one in which Talmud Torah takes priority.

4 - Where we do differ is in these respects:

a) Torah Umada. He is correct in his criticism that we have compartmentalized the two, and that we must make an effort at synthesis which will be meaningful. However, even as we are we are still miles ahead of the Right for whom the entire enterprise of secular study is a bediavad, and legitimized only because of "parnossah."

b) Of critical importance is the element of tolerance. We believe that in order for a Jewish community to prosper in a democratic society there must be mutual tolerance and an absence of bigotry. They do not.

c) Flowing from this is the question of authority and authoritarianism. As opposed to the movements of the Left, we do believe in authority: that is our whole commitment to Halakhah. But we do not believe in authoritarianism. The Right -- both in its Hasidic and its Yeshiva branches -- is now caught up in the authoritarian mode, and this is nothing but a reflection of the currents in the world today -- to wit, the thirst for authority figures in the Guru world; Khomeini in Islam; and the return to authority figures in both the Catholic world (Eastern and Western) and the Evangelical movements.

Another issue that may be discerned between "Modern" and "Rightist" Orthodoxy is -- Israel. It cannot be so lightly dismissed, as Berkowitz does, by pointing out that the Agudah is

a member of the Knesset. There are differences -- but they are not fundamental. Thus, insofar as Israel is concerned, there are those who in all their other ways are Rightists and yet are extremely Nationalistic -- some of the Gush Emunim do not have much good to say for secular education and yet their Zionism is fierce. At the same time, some Modernists share the Messianic skepticism of the Agudah, and refuse to identify our period as "the beginning of redemption."

Also one, might mention such non-ideological but sociological features as dress (no hats? grey hats? blue hats? black hats?) and language (see the Josh Fishman volume on "Yinglish").