

Radical Moderation

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A wave of extremism is sweeping the world. America and the American Jewish community, to say nothing of the Israeli community, have not remained unaffected by it. Indeed, the pressures of a resurgent extremism affect every facet of our lives—political, social, religious, educational. In this dangerous climate we must ourselves become radicals and reassert our Centrist position with all force and vigor.

What Yeshiva University has taught—the joining of Torah learning and Western culture under the rubric of Torah U'Mada; openness to the enviroing culture; *ahavat haTorah* plus *ahavat Yisrael*; the appreciation of tolerance and the abhorrence of bigotry; a critical but loving commitment to the State of Israel—all this is a deliberate philosophy of life, not a compromise foisted upon us. In the language of Halakhah, this approach is *le'chat'chilah* and not *bi'diavad*.

As a *le'chatchilah* we must project ourselves as the standard bearer of moderation in Jewish life. We must stand not only for Torah U'Mada—a broader and more comprehensive vision of Torah as expressed in a particular curricular philosophy—but also for sanity and for moderation; for the conviction that Maimonides' "middle way" applies not only to personal dispositions and character traits, but

also to communal conduct and public policy; for an appreciation that life is filled with ambiguities and complexities and resists black-and-white simplism.

We of the Centrist community are often chided that our policy of Centrism and our philosophy of moderation contain implicit hidden dangers. This is true; the study of worldly culture can sometimes lead questioning young people astray. An openness to non-observant Jewish neighbors, or to non-Jews, implies that they are as human

as we are, and that can sometimes have a negative effect on our attempt to maintain our traditions. Agreed. But all life is dangerous, and unless one is determined to raise one's child in a hermetically sealed Skinner box, safe from germs and crossing the street, one will be exposed to danger of all kinds.

Besides, Rav Kook has taught us that our duty as people of Torah is *le'kadesh et ha-chol* to sanctify the profane, and not to reject it. The very encounter of sacred and profane is a high desideratum despite the obvious dangers of "contamination."

Indeed, we are under an obligation to accept a certain amount of danger for the sake of our people as a whole. Hasidic tradition relates that the great Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel of Vorka, affectionately known in Hasidic lore as Der Shweiger, "the Silent One", once said; "The *sod* of *parah adumah* (the secret, mystery of the red heifer)—is *ahavat Yisrael*." This statement proved too cryptic for easy comprehension, so the elders of his hasidim explained as follows: When an Israelite was ritually impure, and sought to rid himself of his *tumah*, he would approach the *kohen* who would mix the ashes of the red heifer with water in the Biblically prescribed manner, and sprinkle it upon the one who was *tamei*. The result was that the impure Israelite became cleansed of his impurity and declared *tahor*, whilst the *kohanim* who participated in the various aspects of the

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ritual became impure until evening. What the Torah was teaching, then, was that the *kohen* who was presumed to stand on a spiritually higher level than the ordinary Israelite was commanded to risk *tumah* and embrace impurity if, by so doing, he could help his fellow Jew achieve *taharah*. The *kohen* was instructed to accept the dangers and consequences of impurity as an act of *ahavat Yisrael*, out of love for his fellow Jews and their needs.

Hence, our readiness as Jews of moderation to accept a certain degree of "danger" is based not only upon the fact that danger is ubiquitous in life, and that the function of the holy is to sanctify the profane, but also as an expression of our love for our fellow Jews.

This moderation must now become not only our private bias but our public

expression. I urge us not only to keep away from extremism, but to declare ourselves openly, assertively, and forcefully for this centrist position.

The advocacy of moderation should never be seen as an act of weakness. 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."

It is our mission to present and represent Torah U'Mada at its highest levels; to cherish Torah scholars and to become, ourselves, people deeply learned in Torah; to extend the hand of friendship to all Jews. For we all share a common history and a common destiny.

We must condemn all destructive extremes and treat them, wherever

possible, with studied neglect. We must invite all serious and well-meaning controversialists to meet and "talk it out" with mutual respect and underlying friendship.

The Sages taught in *Avot* that *kol machloket shehi le'shem shamayim sofah le'hitkayem*—every controversy that is for the sake of Heaven will, in the end, endure. R. Elazar Ashkenzi, in his famous *Maasei Hashem*, asked: Do not the overwhelming majority of participants in a dispute lay claim to the mantle of *le'shem shamayim*, to truth and justice and righteousness? He answered by explaining that the Hebrew word *sof* has two meanings: conclusion and goal. (This is similar to the English "end" which means both conclusion and purpose, or goal.) Hence, the Sages are offering us a definition of *le'shem shamayim*: When the parties to a dispute differ only as to means, but both seek to preserve the end (*sof*) toward which they mutually strive, then that controversy is indeed *le'shem shamayim*.

So too, all who seek a *kiyyum* for Torah and State, no matter how they differ on the nature and degree of that goal—even if by "Torah" they mean "Jewish identity" and by "State" they mean the welfare of *klal Yisrael*—all these should join in a civilized "controversy for the sake of Heaven."

The time has come for us to stop being intimidated, apologetic, or defensive.

Let us not cater to the Left, nor cower before the Right. Let us march straight ahead, and pay more attention to "above" and "below" than to "right" or "left."

It will not be easy for us to blaze our own trail, following the star of our vision, committed to the truths that we cherish and revere, without being pulled and pushed right and left, off our chosen way. Yet we have no choice but to exercise our Jewish dignity, our human honor, and our Torah responsibility. This must be our way. And if, as a result, we do not completely succeed in transforming ourselves and our fellow Jews into paragons of *yirat shamayim* and moral perfection, at least our relations with each other will be human.

More than that we cannot do. Less than that we dare not try. ■

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Ed's Note: Adapted from an address by Dr. Lamm to the Yeshiva University Alumni in Jerusalem, Israel.