

"TRADITION AND INNOVATION"

I find myself returning again and again to the theme of tradition and innovation in Judaism. We are incessantly bombarded by shrill cries for change from the religious Left, as if a truncated tradition is equivalent to progress, as if "adaptation" is a magic word that will solve all our problems. At the same time, I am perplexed and even vexed by the doctrinaire inertia and resistance in some circles to the least change, as if the fact that something never has been done is sufficient reason never to do it.

I am proud and happy to be part of an unbroken tradition of law and teaching and worship and philosophy that overarches the generations, that links me through my parents and grandparents with the Rishonim and Tannaim on to Moses and Abraham. But I am distressed when "tradition" becomes an excuse for insensitivity to new needs, for refusing to confront new issues.

The whole subject of change is, of course, too large to discuss within the confines of a sermon. So let us set down certain axioms: we are not talking about the Halakhah. In Halakhah, change is generally not the accepted rule. The few places where it can take place requires a high degree of technical competence, and cannot be decided by plebiscite. But I am concerned by the tendency of some people, especially religious folk, to act as if the world never changes, who evince symptoms of the hardening of cultural and social arteries, and who fear that any deviation in procedure -- which they themselves may have set down some years earlier -- will wreck havoc in the Upper Worlds. What ought to be said about these other, non-halakhic aspects of our problem?

First, it is important to stress that while there is little likelihood of significant change in the Halakhah, it demands of us that we change! When you stop changing, you stop growing, and when you stop growing you in effect stop living. Of course, tradition -- the Tradition -- encourages innovation and change within us, and calls it, teshuvah, repentance. Spiritually, the Jew must always be in a state of flux, in movement, in dynamic progress.

Furthermore, not only individuals spiritually, but institutions organizationally should always be open to change. I am often aghast at the institutional inertia of Jewish organizations in the United States. Why, for instance, should an organization that was successful 20, 30, and 40 years ago

in absorbing Jewish immigrants in this country, insist that the same techniques and the same approaches must be used for Russian Jews today -- ignoring the profound changes in the nature of immigration?

In my travels I have come across many synagogues. Sometimes, I chance upon a synagogue which openly flouts sacred Jewish law, which treats with studied neglect the cumulative wisdom of the most profound minds of jurists and philosophers and saints and sages of the centuries. Halakhah is ignored casually, Jewish law is dismissed cavalierly. Yet the slightest deviation from the accepted procedure that the Board of Directors or some synagogue committee or some rabbi set down a number of years ago, as to how the Cantor marches or the Rabbi dresses or the President sits or the Chairman of the Board conducts meetings -- such a deviation is considered dangerously radical and psychologically unnerving, and is often the cause for major crisis and trauma, frequently resulting in part of the membership breaking off and forming a new synagogue.

I see the signs of such senseless fixations, although in the extreme, in today's Sidra. When the angels hurried Lot and his family out of Sodom, prior to its being ravaged by fire and brimstone, Lot and his family were warned not to look backwards upon Sodom while it was being destroyed. The wife of Lot was unable to suppress her curiosity and she violated the command of the angels, whereupon וְהָיָה לְנוֹצִיב מֶלֶח, she became a pillar of salt. The Rabbis of the Midrash, quoted by Rashi, wonder why this specific punishment, that of salt, was chosen. They say: בְּמַלַּח הָטָאָה וּבְמַלַּח לָקְחָהּ . אָמַר כֵּן תִּהְיֶה מַעַץ מֶלֶח לְאוֹרְחִים הִלְלוּ אֶמְרָה כֵּן , אֵף הַמִּשְׁלַח הַזֶּה אֶתְּךָ בֹּא לְהַנְחִיג בְּמִקוֹם הַזֶּה ?

Lot, when the angels came to him disguised as human guests, asked his wife to serve the guests a bit of salt. She responded: "since when do you want to establish this new, evil custom in this place?" And so, since she sinned with salt, she was punished by being turned into salt.

I see in this more than a just criticism of inhospitality. The wife of Lot was conservative to the point of being reactionary. She was so fixated upon old and conventional patterns of conduct, that she became mindless and heartless, insisting upon them even when they violated the most elementary rules of human conduct and ethical living. Sodom had an old custom of turning away strangers, and she resented the effort of Lot to change the "sacrosanct" ways of her community. Not only was salt a sin and punishment, it was also the symbol of her psychological attitude. Salt is a crystalline chemical, which is very difficult to change. Whether you heat salt or freeze it, dissolve it or mix it, it is

unchanging and inflexible and immutable. Salt it was, and salt it remains. Salt symbolizes the lifeless rigidity of Lot's wife. No wonder the Torah describes the event with the words וְרַבֵּעַ אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו, "his wife looked behind him." She was always looking backwards, consulting the unchanging past as a guide to an equally unchanging, hide-bound future.

But while it is fairly simple to agree that, spiritually and institutionally, innovation and change and renewal are important, the real problem of tradition vs. innovation in Judaism takes place in the realm of minhag, sacred custom.

Consult yourself, your own attitudes and experience, and you will appreciate that most of us are ambivalent about revered custom. In Jewish literature too, you find elaborated two general opinions or attitudes. Thus, we frequently hear such words as מִנְהַג הַלֵּכָה הִיא (custom becomes halakhah); מִנְהַג אֲבוֹתֵינוּ טוֹרָה (the custom of our ancestors becomes Torah); or the words of the Jerusalem Talmud, מִנְהַג מַבְטֵל הַלֵּכָה (custom can nullify a halakhah). And yet, on the other side, we often hear great rabbis refer to particular customs as מִנְהַג שְׂטוּת, silly or stupid or foolish customs. Rabbenu Tam, the famous Tosafist, in reply to another French rabbi who tried to prove his point by appealing to local usage, said that מִנְהַג לְמַכּוֹר גִּיהֶנֶם, when you rearrange the four Hebrew letters that make up the word מִנְהַג, you emerge with the word גִּיהֶנֶם, Hell!

Judaism, all religion, all tradition -- whether Halakhah or minhag -- are necessarily conservative. That is the way religion has to be, and that is the way it ought to be -- for at least two good reasons: first, psychologically it gives us a sense of continuity amidst all the flux and vicissitudes of life. Second, there is an innate wisdom in this conservatism of the tradition. It understands, and teaches us, that not all changes in custom and life-style and manners and thinking and mores are worthy or even permanent. Make an experiment: look through the last 15 or 18 years of Time magazine, and you will notice the extremely rapid succession of ideas and fashions and fads. The closer you come to today, the shorter the lifespan of each fashion in any field whatever. And then look in their "Religion" section, and you will become convinced of the pitiful and almost comic attempts of religious leaders to "keep up" and become the most "trendy" segment of society! The result is what has been called "mood theology," and there is hardly anything that is more ludicrous.

Yet, there are areas where perceptions change, where style and not principle is involved, where the issues are neither halakhah nor sacred minhag-that-is-Torah -- but simply old usage that was lucky enough to survive without much to commend it. In such cases, to be immovable is to be unthinking, and to be unbending

is to risk repelling new faces and new ideas, and losing Jews.

I, for one, do not aspire to be "with it." But neither do I regard it as a virtue to be without it, or outside it...

An example of an area where we must decide between tradition and innovation is the institution of Bat Mitzvah. I am speaking, of course, within the realms of halakhic permissibility. Thus, I refer to a Bat Mitzvah ceremony which is not performed in the synagogue proper, and in which an appropriate Torah spirit prevails. But what of the idea itself, what of the celebration as such?

One of the great decisors of our generation, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, שליט"א, is unhappy about the Bat Mitzvah ceremony. If he permits it, it is only with the greatest reluctance. The late, eminent halakhic scholar, Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, of blessed memory, writes that some people are opposed to it simply because it is an innovation: "because it is against the custom of earlier generations which did not establish his tradition." But he himself adds the following:

אבל באמת אין זו טענה, כי בדורות הראשונים לפנינו לא הצטרפו לעסוק  
בחינוך הבנות וכמעט שניקו את הידידות מעשרי אימותיהן. נשתנו הדורות.  
שורת ההגיון הישר וחובת העקרון הפדגוגי מחייב כמעט לחוג גם  
לבית היגיון למצוות.

But in truth this is no argument, because in the generations that preceded us there was no need to worry about the education of girls, for they absorbed Judaism with their mother's milk. But times have changed. Straight reasoning and pedagogical understanding almost obligate us to celebrate for girls the occasion when she becomes bat mitzvah.

My own feeling is that I would once have discouraged it, even though it is halakhically unobjectionable. Today I accept it cheerfully -- provided the young lady recites divrei Torah so as to distinguish it from an ordinary birthday party -- but I neither encourage nor discourage it. Some day in the near future, I suspect, I may actively encourage young ladies to celebrate the Bat Mitzvah.

Thus, I feel that this is an innovation which is becoming more meaningful, and will have to be accepted.

Yet I would also confess this publicly: I would prefer to undo the whole thing! And not only this, but I would like to discourage, actively and resolutely, both the Bat Mitzvah and the



Bar Mitzvah! Both of them entail too much hilul Shabbat (Sabbath desecration), too much exhibitionism, too much expense, too much vicarious spending and conspicuous consumption -- and too little Torah, too little piety, too little seriousness, too little continuity.

Finally, with regard to local customs and usages that we find in any institution, my rule is this: if it has value, keep it. If it no longer has much value -- keep it anyway. But if it is counterproductive, remove it without giving it a second thought. A מנהג שטות is an unnecessary burden, and it is foolish to retain it.

For instance, to take a rather trivial subject, but one that externally distinguishes services at The Jewish Center: the formal clothing we wear, as part of our Western European heritage. If these formal בגדי שבת (Sabbath clothes) have any meaning, let us continue them. I believe it has such value. This particular outfit lends distinction to our perception of the holiness of the Sabbath, and it esthetically enhances our כבוד שבת, our reverence for the Sabbath which, according to the Rabbis, is expressed in special clothing. Were it to lose such meaning, I would keep it anyway, because continuity even in externals has a certain psychological value that we ought not ignore. But were it somehow -- because of changing circumstances and differing styles and insights -- to work against the idea of Torah and Shabbat, to injure the image of Judaism, I would have no hesitation in abandoning it in favor of some other form that is more functional in expressing our true and genuine religious sentiment.

So the parameters are fairly well set. In Halakhah, we almost always prefer tradition over innovation. Spiritually, we must always be changing and progressing. Institutionally, we should prefer innovation over tradition as a way to endless renewal. In the area of minhag, we must make responsible and informed choices at all times. I am biased towards the general preservation of traditional forms, but not towards מנהג שטות, foolish customs. I am in favor of the beauty and sometimes the sanctity of ancient usage, but I am aware too that simple repetition of any act over a period of time can mortally weaken our reactions and sensitivities, and can cause the dead hand of the past to strangle any initiative of the present. I do not look with favor upon that kind of minhag about which Rabbenu Tam said, מנהג למפרע גרוע.

So, I want the past to be alive, not dead, and the new to

be religiously significant -- not just change for novelty's sake.

All of this can be summed up in the famous words of the sainted Rav Kook:

הַקִּדְוֶה יִתְחַדֵּשׁ וְהַחֲדָשׁ יִתְקַדֵּשׁ

"The sacred shall be renewed, and the new shall be sanctified."