



Jewish Life

AMERICAN POLICY IN THE NEAR EAST
THE VOICE OF TORAH IN THE BATTLE OF IDEAS
SPOTLIGHT ON CHALITZAH IN ISRAEL
WE WERE NOT SLAVES IN EGYPT
BRAZIL • ECUMENICISM AND DIALOGUE
ATHEISM IN THE SOVIET SCHOOL

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The Voice of Torah In the Battle of Ideas

A Program for Orthodoxy*

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THIS is an exciting period for a thinking Orthodox Jew. It is a dangerous time too—when faith threatens to be swept away in the wildly whirling intellectual currents of the times. But the danger enhances the excitement and highlights the opportunities. Rarely before have we been faced with such an array of challenging, stimulating, and provoking ideas. And yet, rarely before have we reacted to such stimuli so passively, so defensively, so apprehensively, so uncreatively.

What does the Torah have to say about the great issues that confront modern man and the modern Jew? Unfortunately, I do not know. My training has left me largely unprepared for them. I have even had to overcome powerful inhibitions in order to reach the stage where I am not suspicious of the very question. Assuming that by the "battle of ideas" we mean something that transcends

the petty concerns of institutional rivalry, all I can say is that—to borrow a phrase from the Zohar—the Voice of Torah today is *kol beli dibbur*, it is inchoate: a voice without words, a general cry not yet reduced to clear speech. In an age which stresses the importance of communication, we have not yet developed clear guidelines, not yet formulated convincing approaches, not yet spoken lucidly, to the cardinal issues of our century. I have faith that there *are* clear views and answers within Torah; but we have largely failed to express the *kol Torah* in *dibbur*, to articulate the vision of Torah, to spell out the implications of our tradition. Too often we have even refused to acknowledge the existence or the validity of the questions. I am therefore dispirited and vexed by our apparent unwillingness to engage in the Battle of Ideas, but optimistic as to the ultimate outcome if we finally do begin searching out the judgment of Torah and communicating it effectively.

* Based upon an address to the National Convention of the UOJCA in Washington, D.C. on November 25, 1966.

THE RANGE of intellectual problems that today confronts a thinking Jew—especially a young one—is quite impressive. What is the meaning of chosenness in the modern world? How can I reconcile true *emunah* with my right to question and even doubt? What is unique in the message of Torah that cannot be found elsewhere? What about Biblical criticism? What of the “moral problems” in Torah that bother so many students? What does Torah tell us about the uniqueness of man in an age of genetic engineering and psychological manipulation? How does man encounter G-d in a world which has yielded more and more of its secrets to scientific inquiry? How are we to advocate Halachah for the community as a whole, when those who accept Halachah are in a minority and when religion in general is becoming more marginal in society?

That Torah does offer guidance on these and all other issues is evident from the fact that *some* efforts have been made to spell out authentic Jewish views—here and there an article, a monograph, a book. In every gen-

eration attempts were made to grapple with questions that disturbed people's minds and hearts. But our generation has not yet done so, at least not adequately. Perhaps we were too busy with the exigencies of everyday life and with assuring our material and financial survival. But now survival will be determined by the quality of our ideas, and we must begin to make up for lost time. More students in Yeshivoh will not solve the problem, not even bigger institutions of learning. The *size* of our schools will be meaningful only if the *content* of our teaching is germane to the life of our students, only if we succeed in relating our classical literature to life as it is lived today.

Because we barely have begun on meeting these challenges, it may be wiser for us to concentrate not on specific responses of Judaism to individual problems, but on a general strategy for its campaigns in the battle of ideas and ideals and ideologies.

A battle plan calls, before all else, for defining our attitudes—towards our “enemies,” towards other Jews, and towards our fellow Orthodox Jews.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

FIRST it is necessary to identify the enemy in this battle. I submit that the enemy is not an institution and not a movement—not even Reform or Conservatism. The polemics and counter-polemics against them—and they have almost become a kind of required loyalty oath to Orthodoxy—are, for the most part, vain and fruitless. They would be amusing if they did not involve such a tremendous cost of time and talent and of good will in the community at large.

The “enemy” hovers in the pervasive intellectual climate of the whole Western world. It is the view that religion has been bypassed in our time, a view implicit in the philosophies, both explicit and assumed, of secularism and naturalism, and the values of hedonism and amorality which they bring in their wake. It is not a single, well-defined ideology, but a hodge-podge of ideas of varying subtlety and depth. The adversary of Judaism, and of its endeavor to sanc-

tify all of life through the Mitzvoh, is the combination of attitudes—so indigenous to modern society that its members are shocked when its validity is questioned—that religion is purely a matter of private conscience; that it is a collection of sacred symbols and ecclesiastical rituals, to be performed at certain times and in special places, wedded to a general and vague system of ethical values; that, as a vital force in daily existence and in public affairs, it is virtually nonexistent; that its conception of G-d is a mythical “grandfather” image, and its cosmogony, taken literally, is based on an outdated world-view and is therefore totally unscientific; that it must be suffered as a historic relic by a Jewish community which is the most Westernized of all, and indulged as the sentimental whim of some old-timers and die-hards. This potpourri, in its very heterogeneity, is symptomatic of the noxious confusions of the secularist Jew, who cannot see beyond his naturalist nose.

If there is any institutionalization of this unhealthy spiritual mood, it is in the powerful Jewish secular agencies that control the finances and the public relations of the Jewish community. I find more peril for Judaism in the American Jewish Congress and American Jewish Committee and the various welfare organizations and “Y”s than I do in the Conservative and Reform groups. The spiritual bankruptcy combined with the pecuniary and political power of the former represents a far greater threat than the sanctification of a truncated Torah by the latter. Ten, twenty, or thirty years ago there was a certain cogency to the identification of the various heterodox “Judaisms” as the most pernicious rivals to the authentic Jew-

ish tradition. There was substance, then, to the quest in our ranks for erecting the greatest possible barriers between Orthodoxy and the other “interpretations.” Let our positions be firmly marked, we argued, and better a Reformer of the American Council for Judaism type than a right-wing Conservative. Let Jews see the alternatives clearly, and let us do away with the confusions that blur the dividing lines.

I am no longer so sure that this is a valid and effective approach. The conditions of American Jewish life have changed, and yesterday’s tactics may be outmoded today. Once, the ranks of Conservatism were replenished by defecting Orthodox Jews, and the Jewish Theological Seminary drew its students, to a large extent, from the dropouts from our Yeshivoh. I do not believe that is true any longer, at least not to the same extent. The Conservative movement has accomplished much with its youth organization, especially its Ramah camps, and its theological students now are usually those who are on their way *in* rather than on their way *out*. One does not treat such people as renegades; one welcomes them and regrets only that they have stopped short of the true goal. In a more limited way, one may say the same of the Reform. Their young leadership is not cut of the same cloth as was the old one which considered flirtation with Christianity as far more important than pondering its sorry lack of fidelity to the Jewish tradition.

TODAY we are all of us—all who assent to the idea that the Jewish people is more than an ethnic group with certain ethical pretensions and the pioneers of “democracy” and

"Americanism," but a people dedicated to a transcendent religious vision—threatened by extinction. Between intermarriage and a depressed birth-rate, both of which are approved or at least condoned by the inner logic of Jewish secularism, the existence of the entire community is threatened. At a time of this sort we are using the wrong weapons against the wrong enemies if we continue to consider Conservatism and Reform as the sole or even the major threats to Torah.

This by no means implies a "Jewish ecumenicism" for our times. We are not now—and should *never* be—ready to give the seal of approval to "kosher-style" Judaism. It does mean that we must concentrate our energies and talents in those areas which are today most significant and most in need of attention. It means that we must encourage any and every sign of Jewishness and Torah-consciousness, no matter how primitive and truncated, wherever we find it.

Shall we, then, apply the same means we once used against Reform and Conservatism to the various secular agencies and federations? No, decidedly not. The methods we employed in the past have not proven so successful as to be worthy of emulation in new situations. Moreover, I repeat that it is not an *institution* that threatens us, but a climate, a mood, a spirit of the age. This "enemy" is not as clearly identifiable as is an organization or a movement. It infiltrates our own ranks too, and attacks the vitals of Orthodoxy and its institutions from within.

Because this mood, so inimical to our highest interests, is not a single theory, this "enemy" is not necessarily "bad" in the sense of well defined

theories antagonistic to Judaism. It is, to some extent, a collection of honest doubts, a mood of individual autonomy rather than submission to authority, a bewilderment in the face of evil of the dimensions of the Age of Auschwitz. It is such that constitutes the spirit of an age that makes it unusually difficult for Torah to prevail, as we should like to see it prevail.

WHEN the enemy is a pervasive intellectual mood, bolstered by profound perplexities of people who are not illiterate but cultured and intelligent and honest, you cannot beat it into submission by belligerence and invective. That just does not work, especially in a democratic society. Condemnation, denunciation, and *issurim* will not convince people to return to Torah. Nor can we simply ignore problems. In a society with instantaneous communication and almost universal higher education, everyone is aware of the ideological problems even if we refuse to consider them. There is only one effective attitude to take: analysis, understanding, intelligent persuasion, ethical example, and—yes!—sympathy with and respect for opponents who often would like to believe if only we could convince them.

The right attitude towards other Jews means not to despair of our ultimate victory. It means to recognize the good inherent in the masses of non-observant Jews, a goodness that is waiting to be redeemed, that invites us to save it. The early Chasidic Tzaddik, R. Elimelech of Lizensk, interpreted the words of David: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me (*yirdefuni*) all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever" (Psalm 23). *Yirdefuni*

means "will pursue me" more than "follow me." David is not asking merely for his personal "goodness and mercy." He is telling us that the Jew who possesses innate goodness and performs acts of mercy is such that this goodness and mercy will *pursue* him until they drive him back to the Source of all goodness and mercy: "and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever."

A MERICAN JEWS have a tremendous reservoir of "goodness" and of "mercy." They have given munificently to Israel, to refugees, even to Yeshivah, to charities of all kinds; they have contributed strength to the cause of the racially and financially oppressed throughout the world. This goodness, if harnessed by us intelligently, can lead them to return to the House of the Lord, to the fold of Torah Judaism. If we fail to exploit this goodness for the sake of Torah, we are foolish. If all we can do is excoriate and villify Jews—we are worse. To reproach an erring Jew is a Biblical commandment. But to do so in a manner which will further

alienate him is to compound obvious ineffectiveness with criminal stupidity.

Then, our attitude towards our fellow Orthodox Jews must be re-examined. What the times cry out for is—mutual respect. I emphasize respect—not submission. The Left must acknowledge the authenticity of the Right as a fulcrum of Torah learning and living and as a restraint upon those who might otherwise be cast adrift. And the Right must stop looking with suspicion on those who read the facts of American Jewish life differently, on those who are impatient with our patent paralysis in addressing ourselves to the bulk of American Jewry. We must restrain the hotheads among us from posing as the exclusive Defenders of the Faith. One inane ad in the New York Times can do more to undo the effectiveness and attractiveness of Torah in this country than what the Yeshivah have accomplished in the last five or ten years. Insults lead only to a profanation of the Divine Name. Public recrimination means the fouling of our own nest. We are not strong enough to afford such dubious luxuries.

THE MESSAGE AND THE MEDIUM

GIVEN these attitudes towards the adversary, towards the general Jewish community, and towards those in our own camp, what must we do that has not yet been done in order to triumph in the Battle of Ideas?

I submit that we must reorient ourselves—in our thinking, our scholarship, our teaching, our public posture, our curricula—so that we become *relevant* to man, and Jew, in this last third of the twentieth century. We

must search out those themes which address themselves most directly to modern man's yearnings, his fears, his loneliness, his desperate inner void, his magnificent technological achievements, and we must do so in an idiom which he understands, which he respects, and to which he responds.

In every age, the Sages of Israel presented the view of Torah in a manner which their contemporaries understood and which dealt with their most

vital concerns. The Sephardic Sages expressed Torah in a rationalist idiom, because it was Greek philosophy that bothered their people. R. Yehudah he-Chasid spoke in a different tongue in addressing medieval German Jewry—and struck a responsive chord.

"Both these and those are the words of the Living G-d." They were making the same Torah relevant to different communities. The Kabbalah, especially after its popularization; Musar in Lithuania; Chasidism in the rest of Eastern Europe—all produced great literatures, each highlighting a different aspect of the "seventy faces of Torah." Hirsch in Germany and Kook in Palestine did the same—they talked to the hearts and the minds of their contemporaries. The same truth of the same Torah must be presented differently for each age and each cultural climate. Let it be clearly understood—I absolutely do not, Heaven forbid, speak of changing the Halachah or any of the principles of Judaism. I speak only of making them *relevant*. Relevance does not mean compromise or submission to the presuppositions of Western civilization; it does imply meaningfulness and intelligibility. It means "*reden tzu der zach*." Forms may differ in response to new needs, while contents remain unchanged. The Torah is, to use the Kabbalistic metaphor, *poshet tzurah ve'lovesh tzurah*.

It is for this reason that I believe that if we are to keep our own generation attuned to the Divine Will, we must change the form of our response in a manner germane to our generation. It may not be completely true that, as Marshal McLuhan has put it, "the medium is the message." But certainly the quality of the medium can either enhance or frustrate the

message. I do not believe, for instance, that such classics of Musar as the *Shevet Musar* or *Kav Hayashar* will win over Jews to Yiddishkeit in our times as they did in the days they were composed. Neither will speculative metaphysics, nor Chasidic *machshavah*, and certainly not the anti-*hashkafah hashkafah* of many Lithuanian Yeshivoth. Nor, for that matter, will any successful method we develop now be very effective 200 years hence.

Insights can be salvaged, but they must be recast and paraphrased, not just translated. No two prophets, said the Rabbis, prophesied in the same style; yet they offered the same message, but applied it to differing circumstances. There are *chiddushim* (novellae) in Halachah—and it remains the same Halachah. So there can be—no, *must* be—different styles and even *chiddushim* in Jewish thought without doing violence to its integrity and its continuity.

OF COURSE, this idea can be taken to an extreme; and I fear that some of my colleagues may be doing just that. We cannot make relevance the *test of validity* of the Jewish tradition and we cannot expect that every item in the catalogue of Jewish belief and practice should be explicated in a manner directly relevant to every individual. That is absurd, and can lead to tragic results. Thus, we may view the Sabbath as a way of addressing man on the creative use of new-found leisure, and "Family Purity" as delineating the views of Judaism on the dignity of woman and the significance of erotic love in life. But we can never make their practice dependent upon such interpretation, nor can we expect every detail to fit into the

scheme. We have it on the authority of Maimonides, no mean expositor of relevance, that whoever expects and attempts this is *mishstageia shigaon aroch*—is exceedingly mad. Unfortunately, some of us have occasionally succumbed to this madness, and the result has been an extravagance of expression that borders on the sensational and reflects both immaturity and irresponsibility. We must remember that, paradoxically, a certain amount of irrelevance is always relevant in religion.

But this does not excuse us from the task at hand.

Usually, unfortunately, we seem dreadfully irrelevant and appear to confirm the impression that we have simply been bypassed. The finest research of Orthodox Jewish scholars in history and in the editing of texts is usually done in esoteric areas of concern to their few colleagues only. Many of the Kollelim produce experts in Kodoshim when there are burning contemporary halachic questions that require immediate attention — and *pesak* is sometimes disdained as a kind of halachic technology beneath the dignity of a scholar *lishmah*. Our popular literature is often incredibly childish; it sometimes seems to be directed to backward grade school children of exceptional naivete. Our Yeshivoh shy away from the teaching of *hashkafah*, perhaps fearing the doubts it may arouse, and what they do teach of it has precious little to do with life outside the Yeshivah. Indeed, our contemporary "Yeshivah circles" have tended to become so centripetal, so ingrown, that they often show no awareness of a Jewish world that might well accept its teachings if only it spoke out. And both the Yeshivah "world" and the "out-

side world" are the poorer for this abyss that separates them.

Our finest thinkers have not yet come to grips with the great issues of the times. Do we have a valid overview on the Population Explosion?—not a halachic decision of Yes, or No, or Maybe, but a genuinely religious approach which sympathizes with the new dimensions of the problem? Here is an instance where we can speak to the rest of mankind without our own vital interests intruding, for Jewry is under-populated, and our judgment, in this case, specifically excludes Jews and other such small communities. Or, take the question of peace. We, the descendants of Isaiah and Micah, have left the spiritual judgments on the issue of World Peace to heterodox Jews, and worse, to Christians—whose concern for *shalom* is written over all the continent of Europe in Jewish blood. We ought not merely react to the opinions of others on Viet Nam, either repudiating United States policy because other religious groups do, or supporting it because *our* religion is different. We must, rather, provide an answer that is authentically Jewish; and if we find no answer, or discover that the situation is too complicated for us—let us have the courage of silence. Similarly, despite growing numbers of Orthodox Jewish scientists, our confrontation with issues raised by natural science is about 100 years behind the times—many of us are still fighting Darwin. To the challenge of the various social sciences—which may ultimately prove more consequential than the problems raised by biology and geology—we have not yet begun to respond. That is why the Voice of Torah is a *kol beli dibbur*. We have too often made a virtue, even a dogma, of irrelevance.

SUGGESTIONS FOR A STRATEGY

WHAT must be done in order to encourage an awareness of the Torah's relevance to life today? I would enumerate briefly, the following considerations in developing a strategy for the attainment of our goals:

1. Nothing in Judaism can have *valid* relevance unless it is based on authentic Jewish sources. Hence—the primacy of Torah and the study of Torah: Talmud and Pos'kim.

2. We must take a positive, non-apologetic attitude to secular education, and not accept it begrudgingly as a vocational necessity. Continuing the debate on Yes-College or No-College is no longer meaningful in an age where the vast majority of Jews we want to speak to are college graduates.

3. Our best and most creative thinkers must undertake the sacred task of the relevant exposition of Orthodox Judaism. That means that they must first acquaint themselves with both the problematica and the vocabulary of modern man. This exposition must be expressed in an idiom that will be respected in the academic world. This does not imply an exaggerated reverence for "intellectuals"; it implies only that this is the most effective way of reaching most impressionable, thinking Jews.

4. We must rethink the curricula of our Yeshivoth so that what our students learn is geared to preparing them for life in the "outside world" of business and the professions and not proceed, as is done now, on the unspoken assumption that they will remain in the Yeshivah forever. The choice of *mesichtoth* must be done with this in mind. Most important, we

must begin to teach *hashkafah* as an integral part of *talmud torah*, and not treat it as if it were a subtle kind of *bittul torah*. And the *hashkafah* itself must concern youngsters living here and now—not in Lithuania in the nineteenth century.

5. We must attempt to reach out to *all* Jews with the teachings of Torah. We must never allow ourselves the parochial satisfaction of believing that Torah was meant only for the Orthodox, and that "the others" may be scolded but need not be taught. A continuing retrenchment will harm the general Jewish community and prove self-defeating for Orthodoxy.

6. Our popular and semi-popular literature and journalism must do away with or at least minimize polemics and counter polemics, and concentrate instead on relaying the relevant teachings of Torah to all Jews, with respect for their intelligence and integrity.

7. We must willingly concede that we do not have all the answers to every new problem yet. Even in Hala-chah there are unanswered questions; in *hashkafah* even more so. This openness will spare us the embarrassing dilettantism that often characterizes intellectual improvisation.

8. Above all, we must be receptive to new ideas, to honest questions, and to novel situations. We must examine them objectively and not react with automatic hostility. We must, as Rav Kook taught us, build the *armon ha-torah*, the castle of Torah, around every challenge, whether of modern science or philosophy, see if we can absorb it, reflect on it patiently and then, if we find it inimical to the spirit of Torah, reject it and fight against it.

And then our battle must be forceful, vigorous, and courageous.

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SUCH, to my mind is the grand strategy we ought adopt in order to make the voice of Torah not only audible and articulate but also triumphant in the Battle of Ideas. We most certainly must do it; for if we do not, Heaven forbid, no one else will or can. I may be unhappy with what has been done—or not done—by us so far towards this end. But I know that if our faith in the Almighty and His Torah will outweigh our fear of the modern world we can accomplish our historic task, and succeed splendidly.

I conclude, then, on a more optimistic note. We Jews have remarkable staying power—both physically and spiritually. We can sustain losses and yet rebound miraculously. Our Father Jacob grappled with his mysterious assailant, whom our tradition identified as the angel of Esau in the guise of a

scholar—the personification of the antagonists of Torah in the Battle of Ideas. In the battle, it is Jacob who is injured, not the angel. Yet we consider Jacob the victor. Why so? Because, answers R. Abraham, the son of the Rambam, Jacob did not give up that good fight even *after* he was injured! He held on to the angel until he prevailed; and this special heroic quality of Jacob is an omen, for his descendants, of a powerful persistence and sustaining strength in times of crisis.

Let us proceed, with the courage born of such a tradition, to the great battles ahead of us. We may sustain some losses, and the injuries will hurt; but: *ki alah ha-shachar*, dawn is about to break on a new day for Torah, for Orthodoxy. And, if we act wisely and patiently and heroically, we can yet say to our adversary as Jacob did to his: *Lo ashaleichacha ki im berach-tani*, we shall not let you go until you have blessed us.

For we have come not to conquer you, but to convince you.

