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— OPINION —

"IS TRADITIONAL ORTHODOX"

By Rabbi Norman Lamm

In our previous issue, Rabbi Maurice Lamm proposed that our authentic Judaism should shed its adjectival identification as "orthodox," and instead adopt the more accurate characterization as "Traditional". In this issue, his fraternal kin takes a kindly exception to this view and offers an alternative opinion. — The Editor

I thank the editor of *Chavrusa* for affording me the opportunity of offering several alternate ideas on the subject raised by my brother in the previous issue.

First, there is nothing world-shaking about the problem of whether the name of authentic Judaism in our contemporary, confused age be called "Orthodox", "Traditional" or anything else. There is nothing particularly sacrosanct about the name "Orthodox" or any other such appellation. Ideally, our attitude should be that no adjective is the best adjective. We are Jews, and our faith and practice is Judaism, unqualified, uncompromised, undiluted. Once we agree to an adjective of any kind before the name Judaism, we have willy-nilly implied our assent to the co-validity of other "Interpretations" of Judaism. The acceptance of an adjective means that there are many kinds of Judaism and that ours is only one special kind, perhaps the kind with most *chumrot*. This is a concession we must grant the dissenters, as Wouk calls them. They will give us and forgive us anything and everything as long as we grant them a *hebksher* of equal validity based on the spurious and overworked thesis that there "are many roads to the same goal." And this is the one concession which, if we grant it, we have lost our very souls, no matter what else we have won.

And yet, this too, is no solution. Our numerical weakness, our antagonists' claims to historical authenticity as the

legitimate heirs of the past and the nebulous, confused ideas which go into the making of the current consensus, all conspire to make the term "Judaism" as such, fairly meaningless. It, therefore, behooves us to specify who and what we are. The very fact that we are adjectively different in name can, by means of public education, be used to drive home that we repudiate the "equal validity" thesis and claim exclusive legitimacy as the Jewish faith, authoritarian as that may sound in this age of religious euphoria. If we reject an adjective we may find ourselves being confused with the very brands of Jewish modernism whose validity we seek to deny by the very rejection of all adjectives.

If there is to be an adjective, then, what shall it be? In the life of every Orthodox rabbi there comes a time when the term "Orthodox" proves onerous and somewhat embarrassing. "Orthodox" may be neither traditional or particularly holy, yet we must have some name, acceptable to all of us by which we can present our message, our challenge, our claim to the world. Any name will do provided it will ultimately come to mean, in the public mind, the kind of fulness of Torah and Mitzvot for which we stand. But once we have chosen that name, or accepted whatever name history and the dissenters have successfully imposed upon us, we must stick by it.

My argument, in the positive vein, is that most of us are already known for many, many decades as Orthodox Jews,

and that therefore we ought to decide, once and for all, to accept it graciously. Once upon a time we were called Ivrim by our enemies — meaning strangers, aliens, or, if you will, green-horns. Yet when Moses presented himself before Pharaoh he was not ashamed to refer to G-d as *Elokei ha-Ivrim*.

My brother, in proposing the name "Traditional" and in opposing "Orthodox", accuses those of us with whom he disagrees of "sentimentalism for old and dear garments to which we become personally attached because of constant use". I have no argument with this statement. But I do say this: that old and dear garments, like the name "Orthodox", are far superior to such indistinct terms like "traditional" which do not begin to cover the subject — which after all, is what any respectable garment ought to do. "Traditional" is, I submit, a kind of denominational decollete. I feel that far too often this term is used as an excuse for brevity of content and laxity of observance. Are not "Traditional Jews" what we now call "the non-observant Orthodox"? And cannot the same name be used with equal justice for that strange breed of Conservative schoolman who is personally observant even while he is theoretically far removed from us — what we might call "the observant non-Orthodox"? And if this is so, may I not counter my brother's statement that "Orthodox" is not "Traditional" with the rhetorical question "Is 'Traditional' really Orthodox?"

Let me conclude by saying that basically, of course, there is no disagreement between us. And the best advice for all truly observant, loyal Jews — and that includes the two parties to this debate, is still to be found in the Psalms: *Hinei mah tov u'mah naim shevvet achim gam yachad.*

Be: A. Maurice Lamm