Jewish life

MODERN ORTHODOXY'S IDENTITY CRISIS

A JEWISH VIEW OF HISTORY * FIVE POEMS

THE FOUNT OF REASON * THE MIRRER ROSH YESHIVAH

THE PRECINCTS OF HOLINESS * AMERICA'S VOICE IN ISRAEL

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Jewish Life

MODERN ORTHODOXY'S IDENTITY CRISIS

by NORMAN LAMM

THE FACTS about our community, as represented by the Orthodox Union, are rather encouraging. Numerically and institutionally, in terms of youth and influence, we are a significant group in this country. But we are beset by many problems. And our thorniest and most disabling problem is, curiously, an "identity crisis" – perhaps a sign of our youthfulness as an ideological movement.

Objectively examined, what binds us together as a separate entity is our full commitment to the Torah tradition and our openness, at the same time, to the wider culture of the world about us. To use the two dreadfully inadequate words which normally describe us as a distinct group, we are both "modern" and "orthodox." I shall be using these terms only with the greatest hesitation. "Orthodox" is almost pejorative; it implies a stifling and unthinking narrow-mindedness. And "modern" is amusingly pretentious; it adds nothing to the validity or invalidity of a proposition. Jacques Maritain recently referred to this as "chronolatry," the idolatry of what is newest or latest in time.

But while this observation is true enough as it goes, it does not go nearly far enough. Merely to describe what we are is not a sufficiently convincing reason for being what we are or for persuading others to acknowledge our rightness and join our ranks. The great problem of modern American Orthodoxy is that it has failed to interpret itself to itself. This failure, which reveals itself in many ways, derives from a remarkable intellectual timidity which we should have long outgrown.

ONE should not be too harsh in judging the past. There were reasons – good reasons – for our apologetic posture. But it was humiliating.

In confronting the outside world and those to the left of us, we seemed to be saying that while we hold on to the practices and doctrines of the Jewish tradition, we are really just like everybody else, perhaps even more so. We appeared to be whispering, in unbecoming shyness, that we were not really foreign or dirty.

At the same time, we were and still are apologetic – almost masochistically – towards those to the right of us. We send our children to the universities. And we are going to continue to do so despite the campus' recent notoriety. The far right does not approve of our educational policy, which touches the heart of our distinctiveness, or our educational and congregational institutions. How do we justify ourselves? Neither by scholarship, nor by Halachic reasoning, nor by pointing to historical antecedents, nor by the philosophic validity of our stand. Instead, we present the lamest of all apologies: vocational necessity! Our whole existence is thus based on a practical economic concession – the need of a college degree in order to get a better job.

Our problem, then, is that we have yet to accept ourselves openly and directly on the basis of our major contribution to Jewish life in this century: that it is our *religious* duty, our *sacred* responsibility, to live the whole Torah tradition in the world, instead of retreating from a world in which there is literally no longer any place left to retreat to. As long as this condition of spiritual timidity and intellectual diffidence prevails, we can hardly blame the non-Orthodox world for accusing us of temporizing, the Chasidic world for ignoring us, and the Yeshivah world for disdaining us.

The challenge to our intellectual leadership is clear: to formulate the world-view of "modern Orthodoxy" in a manner that is Halachically legitimate, philosophically persuasive, religiously inspiring, and personally convincing. It is a tall order, admittedly, but one which we must fill if the great centrist mass of American orthodox Jews is not to be pulled apart in all directions, as they stagnate in impotence and inarticulateness for want of a clear world-view *(shitah)* to which they can feel fully committed in good conscience.

IN its encounter with the "outside world" of non-observant Jewry and the rest of mankind, modern Orthodoxy must offer neither "more of the same" nor the illusory advantages of escape and withdrawal. It must present viable options to the prevalent doctrines of the culture of the West, in terms that men and women born into this culture can understand and appreciate. We must make available attractive Jewish alternatives to the nihilism and permissiveness and meaninglessness and Godlessness of secular life. These alternatives must be neither distorted nor compromised, but they must be expressed and elaborated in the cultural and psychological idioms of the contemporary world.

Judaism was born in protest against the idolatries of a simpler age, and must not fail to reject those of our own, far more complicated day. Our message must always be critical and restless with the complacent dogma of

a society content with the correctness of its spiritual paralysis.

I cannot accept the idea that Orthodoxy must defensively retreat and wait for Messiah until it speaks to mankind. We must engage the world right now and, speaking in a cultural idiom it understands, say that we are dissatisfied with it. We must declare forthrightly that its "sexual revolution" is atavistic, a throwback to pagan debauchery; that its conception of man is depressingly shallow; that its prescription for happiness is vulgar and dangerous; that its conception of education is trivial and dehumanizing.

WE MUST, then, learn to speak persuasively and intelligibly to the man of today about transcendent purpose, about the meaning of the Covenant, about the significance of Halachic living both for personal meaningfulness and for the fulfillment of our covenantal obligations. Never again must we stoop to the kind of inane religious propaganda, which we once considered so very "modern," which led us to offer as proof of the correctness of our commitment the avoidance of cancer or trichinosis by virtue of the practice of certain observances.

It is equally important that we interpret ourselves clearly, forthrightly, and unapologetically to those of our orthodox Jewish brethren who do not accept our involvement in the wider culture as an integral part of our world outlook. We must make it explicit and clear that we are committed to secular studies, including our willingness to embrace all the risks that this implies, not alone because of vocational or social reasons, but because we consider that it is the will of G-d that there be a world in which Torah be effective; that all wisdom issues ultimately from the Wisdom of the Creator, and therefore it is the Almighty who legitimates *all* knowledge; that a world cannot exist, and that certainly an independent Jewish state cannot exist in the contemporary world, in which some of the best of its brains and the most sensitive of its religious spirits will condemn as sinful and dangerous those profane disciplines which alone can keep it alive and prosperous. Our *religious* commitment to such principles must be as passionate and as faithful and as *Jewish* as was that of the Hirschian movement, especially in the first two generations of its history, in the context of conditions that prevail in this second third of the twentieth century.

FOR our own times, if we are to make any headway in the "contest for the Jewish mind," we must resolve the central dilemma of the tension between our "two worlds." A transcendental theological schizophrenia is no virtue. We must, in terms of our own tradition, formulate the method whereby we can accord religious significance to the "other" – the so-called profane or modern – world. But which branches of general knowledge are legitimate for the loyal Jew – the one who is not concerned with vocational dispensations but with a religious world-view? May we ever accord the status of Mitzvah to a secular discipline? Can we consider it technically as the performance of *talmud torah* – remembering that Maimonides

himself felt so inclined? As a minimum, we may grant that scientific, especially medical, studies possess religious significance. As a maximum, they will never attain the rank of Torah and Talmud. But where do they stand in between these two poles?

Rav Kook, of blessed memory, spoke of harmony as the great Jewish ideal, and he comprehended within it the polarities of physicality and spirituality, of the sacred and the profane, even of faith and doubt as part of cosmic unity. It remains for us to elaborate the metaphysical framework and even more, fill in the practical details.

This does not at all mean that we reject or condemn or do not wish to cooperate intensively at all levels with those groupings within orthodox Jewry which do not accept these premises. On the contrary, with more confidence in the religious rightness of our stand, we will be less subject to intimidation by those who feel sure of their different commitments within the context of the Halachic discipline. Perhaps then we shall come to understand that the rabbinic dictum that "there are seventy facets to Torah" refers to social and cultural patterns and to intellectual formulations and attitudes as well as to exegetical approaches. We shall then realize that the Lithuanian yeshivah world was different from the Spanish world of Maimonides, and the Chasidic world different from that of Rashi, and all of them different from each other and from us and from the world of Rabbi Akiva. All were different – and yet all essentially the same because all are aspects of one Torah, bound by one common Halachic commitment. This firmly and unequivocally excludes the non-orthodox movements. But it also means that Judaism need not always develop in one mold, whether that of Brisk or Satmar or Yeshiva University. We have our own contribution to make to these "seventy facets of Torah," and it is not tergiversation or betrayal to state positively those emphases and issues wherein we differ.

I HAVE the feeling that if Jewry and Judaism are to survive in the Diaspora, it will be indebted largely to our group. I do not mean this as a boast – I think it is frightening. If Israel is not to reduce to another Levantine mini-state, but is to become the political expression of the *am segulah* then it will be the result of the work and inspiration and self-sacrifice of like-minded groups in Israel, presently inarticulate and inchoate, with whom we must work in tandem. But this requires of us a keen awareness of our own responsibility, a refusal to remain weak-willed and apologetic, and the courage of our convictions that our approach is a legitimate expression of *avodath ha-Shem.*

The intellectual leaders of modern American Orthodoxy have a Herculean but exciting, vital task before them. Unless it is discharged properly and sensitively, we shall continue to bear the progressively heavy burden of a collective inferiority feeling which will earn us disdain from without and engender for us confusion from within.

". . . Ye shall turn aside neither to the right nor to the left – but you shall walk in the way which the Lord your G-d has commanded you, that you may live and that it might be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess" (Devarim 5:29, 30).