

# 53 "...A Time To Speak"

A Diagnosis of the Lack of Good Literature in English on Orthodoxy, and a Prescription for the Future.

• RABBI NORMAN LAMM

## ***There Is Thirst For Knowledge***

"Is there anything you can recommend for me to read on Judaism?"

This question, in many and varied forms, comes to us with greater and greater frequency these days. People are looking for books, magazines, and articles on Jewish traditions, Orthodox ideology, the "how-to" of Jewish observances, and a host of other allied subjects. The new interest in religion, rightly downgraded by the cognoscenti as a mere social phenomenon, has nevertheless encouraged a serious concern with religion on the part of many intelligent Jews. They want to know what it is all about. Where do we refer them? What do we recommend to them? There is the parent of the Day School child, anxious to discover the broader background, on an adult level, of what his child is now learning and bringing home to him. Where shall we direct him? Can we use the written word to bestir the indifferent, and to counter the arguments of the non-Orthodox?

More often than not we are at a loss, and our answer is mostly an embarrassed silence. Not that there is a dearth of books in the Jewish field—there are anthologies and books on Jewish humor, assorted apologia on Jews in sports and the army and science, the story of modern Israel and American Jewish history. But there is unfortunately very little that pretends to deal with serious issues and that is both acceptable in content and attractive in presentation and format.

## ***Works on Judaism***

There is, of course, a small number of works on Judaism as such. Some of the material by the non-Orthodox is of patently poor quality. Some of it is only average. A good part of what they produce is first rate, written well, cogently presented, and handsomely produced.

We Orthodox have not had much luck in this area. While we have issued some excellent material—and this will be discussed shortly—we have by and large made a poor showing. Where the writing is passable, the author often adopts the posture of an elementary school teacher, assuming that his readers—some of them with higher University degrees—are immature children who have to be "talked down to." Where the content is adequate, presented without either condescension or academic pretentiousness, the English is often mediocre, a mere carica-

ture of a great language. There is "a time to speak, and a time to keep silence," said Solomon in Koheles. Today is a time to speak—in lecture and in article, in sermon and book and pamphlet. Yet we have not spoken enough, and what we have said has not always been said well.

## ***Good Commentaries and Books***

What *can* be recommended without hesitation? The English translations of our primary sources are almost all good, some truly superior. The Soncino *Tanakh* especially—and all Soncino publications in general—are a credit to us. There are also available some good English translations of Rashi's Commentary on Chumash.

One of the first to devote himself to Judaica in English is Rabbi Leo Jung. His many volumes, both those written by himself and those he has edited, are well known to most readers. His *Jewish Library Series*, a collection of high quality essays by men of competence in a wide variety of fields, has long been out of print. Fortunately, these volumes will now be reprinted by Soncino in London.

Of late we have enjoyed a fairly large number of translations of the works of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. The thinking of this eminent 19th century German-Jewish sage is of particular significance to us because he reacted to the challenge of modernity in his day in a direct and forthright manner. How he approached the problems of Judaism vis-a-vis Western culture is, therefore, of far more than historical importance to us. Hirsch is a superb source from which can be mined a great number of gems for our times. This explains the current interest in him. However, the trouble with his English-speaking followers is too great a loyalty to the master. They stay too close not only to every nuance of his thought, even the non-essential, but they fall into the mood engendered by his particular German style, which is far too prolix, far too flowery, and far too complicated for modern English. They *translate* Hirsch when he should be *interpreted*. A too literal translation of Hirsch, even when done by a craftsman like Dayan Grunfeld of England, inevitably carries over at least some of the heavy German style which, in English, sounds over-bearing, long-winded, and even pretentious. What Hirsch needs, in order to make his message relevant to and usable by us, is the modern equivalent of the ancient *meturgeman* who will *paraphrase* Hirsch, interpreting his ideas even while translating his words. Hirsch must be re-stated for our day by someone who knows Anglo-American Jewry well and will not be afraid of rewording the master or even of omitting entirely certain parts,

(next page, please)

Rabbi Norman Lamm, Associate Rabbi of The Jewish Center in New York City, and Editor of "Tradition", here speaks out on a most vital issue of our times.



especially most of his linguistic "proofs," products of the 19th century speculative philology which today have no more than homiletic value.

While the Hirsch translations have not fared too well, his disciples have by and large succeeded handsomely. They have distinguished themselves in many fields of scholarship, bringing credit to Orthodoxy as a whole. In popular writing, which is our main interest here, a number of his students and students' students have made their mark. We might mention especially Dayan Grunfeld, whose translations of Hirsch we discussed above. Gifted with an elegant and concise style, Dr. Grunfeld writes with dignity and clarity, and his words also carry the weight of Halachic authority. His short volume on *The Sabbath* deserves to be read by every Jew in this country. Rabbi Elie Munk's "The World of Prayer" is another illustration of the influence of Hirsch and contains profound insights in the understanding of the *Siddur*.

Whatever success we have had in popular exposition of our faith in English seems mostly confined to British Jewry. Their literary endeavors, both in journalism and religious writing, far surpass American contributions. We have yet to produce one book like Isidore Epstein's *The Faith of Judaism*. So far, if I may be permitted a broad generalization, the best guarantee of a book's readability and reliability of expression is the legend "Printed in England."

### **Recommended Periodicals**

With the general American tendency away from books and towards magazines, we too have veered to periodicals in order to reach larger numbers of our people. Magazines and journals have the added advantage of being able to treat problems of more immediate and timely interest while books are usually restricted to the timeless issues of Judaism. *Orthodox Jewish Life*, which aims at a middle-popular level, has made a very good name for itself. It is edited well, its articles are relevant, its editorials articulate. There are some other smaller magazines which are not quite as successful as *Orthodox Jewish Life*. One of the newest in the periodical field, addressed to a somewhat more intellectual audience, is the semi-annual *Tradition*. It would not be proper for me to evaluate it here. As its editor, I am not only prejudiced in its favor but also know its weak points all too well. There are a number of other publications, such as *The Jewish Parent*, which I am not mentioning because they are more in the nature of house-organs, directed to restricted groups.

Our list of available literature would not be complete without mention of the books and pamphlets sponsored by the Traditional Educational Association (or Spero Foundation). These have proven useful, but one wishes that the sponsors would publish more often and also avail themselves of more expert editing.

### **Why Are We Inarticulate?**

I should now like to turn from listing and evaluation to a more fundamental problem—an analysis of why we have not done any better for ourselves in this sphere. We have at least one full generation of Day School graduates who are native Americans. There are several hundred American-born Orthodox Rabbis. Why, with all this training, have we not succeeded in developing a whole school of gifted expositors of Judaism? Why do our leading interpreters often lack grace of expression, while others are largely paralyzed by inarticulateness? I suggest there are two reasons.

First is the tendency by some of our Yeshivos to denigrate all but the highest form of scholarship. This is essentially a carry-over from the intellectual aristocracy of the distinguished Lithuanian academies. There is the danger, however, that this same aristocracy can be distorted, in the hands of those who are not sufficiently competent, into mere intellectual snobbism, a contemptuous disregard of the non-scholar. Perhaps this exclusiveness is the result of a defensive reaction to the encroachments of the secular environment. At any rate, it will do us no good to abandon the masses of American Jews—some of them very bright and very sincere—by adopting this insulating posture which assumes that the divine purposes in the world will be served solely by a few select higher Yeshivos or Kollelim. We must manage to combine an appreciation for and pride in outstanding Torah scholarship together with a strong and positive relationship to the non-scholarly Jewish world. Only by means of an open and friendly attitude, purged of all condescension, can we hope to reach our fellow American Jews. Only when our present generation of Yeshiva high school students will be raised without overtones of aggressive insularity will they be able to make a lasting contribution to the opening of the channels of communication between Torah and Israel. They will have something to say, and they will be able to say it well.

The second reason of our inarticulateness, such as it is, is the poor condition of language training which obtained in our younger years in the Yiddish-speaking Yeshivos. Rightly emphasizing the priority of content over form, the schools unwittingly encouraged in the minds of their pupils the erroneous impression that crudity and inelegance in language are an indication of greater piety. American Yeshiva students developed a unique kind of jargon which to this day remains completely incomprehensible to the uninitiated outsider. A basic English framework was studded with Anglicized Yiddish, Yiddishized Hebrew, stray Aramaic words, all in a definite proportion and intoned in a well-defined rhythm. This linguistic barbarization resulted in both poor English and poor Yiddish. Stylistic grace and linguistic clarity cannot be attained when the two languages are indiscriminately

(page 19, please)



## **"... A Time to Speak"**

(continued from page 10)

mixed. Fortunately, this is no longer the case. We may now hope that the linguistic *mechitzah* erected between the languages will eliminate sloppiness of expression and encourage greater facility in and fuller command of both English and Hebrew or Yiddish.

Finally, the way to correct the situation for the future and make sure that we have a larger number of young men and women who will be able to teach the principles of our Torah in native American accents and in the idiom of Western culture, will be to work hard in both directions mentioned above. We must emphasize the art of communication, both writing and speaking, from the very beginning. And we must particularly try to develop an attitude of respect and love for all Jews; thereby underscoring the need to reach them with our message.

## ***It Is A Time To Do***

If we are ready to discard our residual isolationism and reject any incipient defeatism; if we are to commit ourselves to a continuing test of strength with Jewish indifference, with the secularized "Jewishness" of our times, then we must redouble our efforts at creating a great Orthodox literature in English in our own day, and preparing the members of the coming generation to assume their roles as the teachers of the Word of G-d to Israel of tomorrow. In the words of the lepers in II Kings (7:9), "We do not well; this is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace." Ours is an age when Jews have come to acknowledge the emptiness of their secularized lives, turning to Torah for a way to find meaning and inspiration. It is a day of good tidings. We dare not hold our peace and remain silent when destiny demands that we speak out.

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