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November 24, 1990

ADDRESS: THE UNION OF ORTHODOX JEWISH CONGREGATIONS OF AMERICA

The Initiation of a new administration is similar to the dawn of a new day. Just as the day begins with מוֹדֵה אֲנִי, so the installation of a new President and officers ought to begin with מוֹדֵה אֲנִי to the outgoing President and his associates. I am therefore pleased to acknowledge with gratitude the hard work, earnest efforts, and many achievements of Shimon Kwestel and his colleagues. These have not been calm years, and he has borne the weight of office with ease and conducted himself with endless dedication and enthusiasm. The entire Orthodox community is indebted to him and his fellow officers who, we know, will continue to give of their wisdom and experience to the incoming administration.

The next administration or two will put its stamp on UOJCA as the 20th century draws to an end. And it comes into office as a new world seems to be emerging both globally and for us of the Jewish and especially the Torah community.

I generally distrust the hoopla so characteristic of conventions, in which organizational spokesmen point with pride at their own supposed achievements and view with alarm the alleged failings of their adversaries. I am suspicious of them when they overstate the positive and favorable and, minimize or omit the negative and the unfavorable. Yet I believe that at this point in our history we can allow ourselves the luxury of just a bit of optimism-- provided that we do not allow it to lull us into euphoric paralysis.

Things are changing under our very eyes, as the sands of time shift under our feet. And, for once, most of the changes seem to be for the good. And these improvements in the condition of Orthodoxy, these brightened prospects for Torah, require of us not only an expression of gratitude, not only a surge of new confidence, certainly not the smugness of triumphalism--but a sober appreciation that these events constitute a historic challenge for us to exploit the new situations so as to make the prospects for the acceptance of Torah by Jews even greater, more widespread, more enduring.

What I am referring to is not organizational victories or institutional achievements which, by themselves, are usually ephemeral and ultimately unimpressive. Rather, I have in mind a major shift in perceptions by leading members of the Jewish community, towards the views and values that we Orthodox Jews have been preaching and propounding and advocating for decades and decades. One of them is the significance of Jewish education.

cc: to camp J. Hines  
RH/ Ari Galdun



I remember well my early days in the rabbinate, in Springfield, Mass., in the mid 1950's when, together with some dedicated and hard-working baalebatim I solicited for our local Day School. How disheartening it was to hear those polysyllabic put-downs: "parochial... un-American ...segregation..." Eventually, Federations had to be picketed and young people had to engage in sit-down strikes-- and even when gave us a hearing, they didn't give us a farthing. Charles Bronfman of Montreal tells me the story related to him by his father, Sam Bronfman, founder of the Seagram empire: a friend of his complained that his wife was always pestering him, constantly demanding money. "And what does she do with the money?," he asked. His friend replied, "I don't know; I never give her any." That, more or less, was our situation: we were condemned for being so demanding for funds for chinukh, but we never got them anyway. We were charity cases at best, alien intrusions at worst.

Now, as you most probably have heard, there is new promise for the future funding of Jewish education with the new program announced by the "Mandel Commission," a new effort initiated by a Reform Jew who had hardly ever had a good word for Orthodoxy but who was wise enough and sensitive enough to perceive the obvious need for education if our people is to survive, let alone flourish. He has gathered around himself an impressive list of truly big big-givers, many of whom (as one of them stated publicly) were never even "Bar Mitzvahed" and some of whose children have married out. (Ah, when the Ribbono Shel Olam does a miracle, He does it in a big way!)

The immediate goal of this group is to raise \$25-50 million over and above what we are now spending for Jewish education... These philanthropists wish to remain ideologically neutral, not favoring any one group over any other. The idea behind this venture is to achieve two things: to improve the lot of Jewish teachers so that more and better people will enter the profession, and to prevail upon Jewish philanthropists to put Jewish education at the top, not the bottom, of their agenda. True, these amounts are still not enough, but what a massive concession to values we have been advocating! Until now, in recent years, only one man had the vision to undertake large scale aid to Jewish education, and that was Joseph Gruss. Now, he will have others to make this a movement of philanthropists who have heretofore been estranged from the educational enterprise.

The second encouraging phenomenon occurred at the recent General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations. The NY Times reporter, Ari Goldman in an article this past Monday, informed us that contrary to past practices, more and more are Kashrut and Shabbat being practiced by the delegates who, after all, represent the leadership of the wider Jewish community. Listen:

From sundown Friday until after the stars came out Saturday, not a single formal resolution passed, an official photograph taken, or a charitable dollar disbursed.



While Sabbath observance has been a growing feature of the gathering for the last 20 years, it reached a record level of participation on Saturday morning when worshippers filled five separate religious services...

Dr. John S. Ruskay, a vice chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, said that over the last two decades, organizational leaders came to realize that the themes of Israel and American social concerns were not adequate to insure Jewish continuity.

"The survival of Judaism requires a connection with the religious civilization of the Jewish people as expressed in study, ritual and observance," said Dr. Ruskay, who is Conservative. "These are the building blocks of Jewish identity."

Orthodox Judaism, the most traditional of the major branches but the smallest numerically, has long argued this point. The real glue that binds one to Judaism, the Orthodox have argued, is tradition rather than community.

This idea has gained currency not only because the other branches have come to the same conclusion but also because of the emergence of a new generation of Orthodox Jews who have assumed top jobs in communal life, a realm once left to the less religiously rigorous. Orthodox Jews now occupy major staff positions in virtually every large national Jewish organization.

What does all this mean?

It means that our insistence upon principle, our stubborn refusal to compromise on essentials, our ideological firmness--have been vindicated, they have paid off. Our adversaries now have come around to our position. Barukh Hashem!

The great question is: how shall we react in a manner that will intensify and accelerate this trend to Torah?

One thing I know: If we crow triumphantly, if we declaim "I told you so"--that is the way to certain defeat in our efforts to make Jews come even closer to Judaism as we understand it. To show respect and affection, to react with gratitude and humility, to greet with a smile and fraternity--that is the way to bring Jews into the fold of Torah--and, incidentally, a way to learn some מדות ourselves...

Imagine if we were not only stubborn but also lovable, not only firm but also friendly, not only right but also accessible.

Imagine if we criticized with sadness and not smugness, if we reacted with modesty and not self-righteousness, if we showed we were eager to draw them close and not push them away, if we learned to disagree agreeably and not argue argumentatively.

If we did these things, how much more would our fellow Jews look upon us not only with respect but with love-- and therefore, how much more likely would they be to explore the Torah that makes people of Torah such admirable human beings!

We still can do these things. And, perhaps, it is the destiny and duty and challenge of the UOJCA, especially under this new administration, to make that one of its major undertakings, to adopt it as its distinctive modus operandi.

How shall we go about doing this? What change in attitude and mind-set is required of us to correspond to those apparently taking place in the broader community? I am referring to fundamental orientations, rather than to specific programs or policies.

We must react primarily by making it clear that we cherish each and every Jew-- no matter how enormous his ignorance, how solid his indifference, how distasteful his heretical views--as long as he wishes to remain a Jew and be known as a Jew. We Orthodox Jews can and must become known as the most personally open of all Jews, as the ones who love Jews just because they are Jews, in the same way that a brother loves even his estranged and hostile brother.

Let me be clear. I hold that we must stand firm in our refusal to accept non-halakhic criteria in determining Jewish status--and I say this as one who has urged that the "Who is a Jew" question be removed from the agenda of the Knesset, a political body, and as one who is extremely unhappy at the prospect of any further religious legislation in the Knesset. I believe we may even have underreacted to the enormity of the Reform deviation from Jewish tradition in instituting their patrilineal concept. I reject denominationalism in Judaism, and consider it the ill begotten son of a misconceived pluralism.

Nevertheless, and consistent with these views, I earnestly believe that we must with equal energy open up our homes and our hearts, our shuls and our schools, to every Jew--and not only because we see in him or her a potential Baal Teshuvah!--who affirms his Jewish identity even if that is his maximum level in Jewishness.

Every Jew in the world must know that as long as he/she wants to remain Jewish, wishes to be called a Jew, is "proud to be a Jew" (whatever that means), even if there is no concomitant interest in the content of Jewishness, that person is regarded by Orthodox Jewry as a brother or sister, as part of the mishpacha.



At the eve of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln made a speech in which he called upon North and South to lay aside their differences and try again to be reconciled to each other. He failed, and over 650,000 young men paid with their lives for it. But an expression he used then is unforgettable: he asked them to display "the better angels of our nature." That is precisely what we must do in relating to our non-Orthodox fellow Jews: display the better angels of our nature, show them a human face, and thus evoke from them too the better angels of their nature. And where, ultimately, do better angels lead if not to Torah?

That, unfortunately, fairly or not, is not the picture most people have of Orthodoxy at the present. It is true that we are doing many fine things in the area of outreach--but not enough, and not always in the right spirit. Our image is far less benevolent, far less attractive. And the effectiveness of our message is therefore diminished.

Only frightened Orthodox Jews who lack self-confidence and are not secure in their own convictions will recoil from the suggestion that we be open even to Jews who are Jews in name only and who evince no patent interest in further Jewish growth or development, and of whom we cannot rationally expect that they will don ארבע כנפות or observe טהרת המשפחה within a given period of time--or, for that matter, ever. Secure Orthodox Jews will be able to express that ideologically selfless אהבת ישראל--and will probably discover that, in the long run, it is the most effective way of winning over Jews to Judaism.

In this connection, let me present to you an opinion on this matter. I am translating from the Hebrew:

The essence of Judaism is the name ישראל or Jew. This is what Isaiah says: זה יאמר לה' אני, "One shall say, I am the Lord's and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob" ובשם ישראל יכנה "and designate himself by the name of Israel" (Isa. 44:5). This means that a Jew who has no greater distinction than this, that he calls himself a Jew--that is enough.

We find in the Talmud that גר שנתגייר בין גויים, a non-Jew who was converted amongst Goyyim (and thus failed to observe the commandments), later has to bring a חטאת for eating non-kosher food, drinking blood, violating Shabbat, and bowing to idols (Shabbat 68b). Obviously, he was unaware that these things are forbidden--even Shabbat and idolatry; thus he knew nothing at all about Torah. In what way, then, is he considered a Jew so that חייב חטאת for these infractions? Obviously, it is because he calls himself a Jew!



Thus we may understand as well why the law requiring martyrdom (יהרג ואל יעבר) applies to one who converts to Islam, even though that religion prohibits idol worship, immorality, and the shedding of blood... So: abandoning the name (or: identity) of "Jew" alone, is considered as serious as the violation of all the other commandments of the Torah, including the three most heinous of all sins, namely, idolatry, immorality, and murder...

So too, [our ancestors] once worshipped idols but they never denied they were Jews [and so they remained Jews indeed].

Is what I am saying another instance of Modern Orthodoxy heresy, or (horrors!) Centrist Orthodoxy\_abberation?

Hardly. I have just been translating from the צדקת הצדיק, an extremely important ספר by ר' צדוק הכהן מלובלין, one of the most significant, thoughtful, and insightful of Hasidic Rebbeim.

Such a policy by Orthodoxy will result in a new respect and affection for Orthodox Jews as men and women of principle, one of whose principles is to love, cherish, respect, and value all other Jews regardless of their opinions or behavior. And such respect and affection reciprocated by them for Orthodox Jews may well result in them finding Torah Jews worthy not only of admiration but of emulation as well. This is the kind of broadening of horizons which can only accelerate the positive changes we are beginning to see in American Jewry.

But such a change in attitude and mind-set requires that the UOJCA, as the premier lay spokesman for Orthodoxy, become a more efficient and more efficacious instrument for serious change in American Jewish life. To change the world, one must first change oneself, and that holds true for the UOJCA as well. To effect a broadening of horizons, the UOJCA must narrow its focus on itself analytically, critically, and fearlessly. It must, as must all Orthodox institutions, by its actions disprove the ancient bias that efficiency and order are somehow anti-Orthodox ... Then, I humbly suggest, if the UOJCA is to succeed in its mission of להגדיל תורה ולהאדירה, it must consider the following four items, amongst others:

a) First, the new administration must vigorously attempt to unify and consolidate the Orthodox community, especially those who identify with the UOJCA's general ideological position. This is not the first time I have mentioned this from this podium. There is far too much duplication, which only divides the power of our message. And maybe if the UOJCA and Young Israel will get together, so will the Israel-oriented Orthodox women's groups...



b) The UOJCA has wisely, in recent years, emphasized תלמוד תורה not only as a preachment but as a practical program for its membership. What you are doing in this area, for your own membership, is marvelously admirable. This must continue to be developed and strengthened. Ultimately, what distinguishes us is not primarily the mechitzah or Glatt Kosher or mikveh, but the Study of Torah. כי הם חיינו ואורך ימינו.

c) The UOJCA should take the lead in restoring to Modern Orthodoxy (or: Centrist/Moderate/Dati) a sense of self-confidence. We should always be prepared to cooperate and coordinate with other Orthodox groups, even if we have certain policy differences; certainly, these are our own ideological comrades-in-arms. But we should not be discouraged if there is little response and if our gestures are rebuffed. Nor should we bewail our misfortune if the non-Orthodox groups find fault with us quite vocally. We must accept dissension as a fact of life and cope as best as we can without surrendering either our souls or our reason. Here is my פשט in a פסוק well known to us: לא תסור ממך שיגידו לך ימין ושמאל --don't diverge from your own way regardless of what they say about you, ימין ושמאל, in the circles of either the Right or the Left...

d) Finally, we must begin to probe the word "Congregations" in our name, UOJCA. The Union must make new, concerted efforts to enrol congregations, not only individuals who, prominent and worthy as they may be, are only peripherally involved in their local shuls. As a result of our failure to do so successfully, there seems to be a sense of stagnation or perhaps unreality in the UOJCA as a "union of congregations." Getting shuls involved seriously will alleviate the financial condition of the organization, and open up the UOJCA to new blood and new talent--and that is something all of us need. The UOJCA and all the rest of us as well must learn and remember that "musical chairs" is a parlor game for children, not an enterprise for dedicated adults.

If such an effort is pursued vigorously and does not succeed, then I suggest that the time has come to launch a serious study reviewing the very nature of UOJCA in relation to the changing face of American Orthodoxy. Maybe the sociological structure of the contemporary Orthodox community is not centered about congregations, and therefore limiting ourselves to synagogues, in imitation of Conservative or Reform groups, is self-defeating, leading us into a conundrum and putting us at a disadvantage vis-a-vis the other groups. After all, religious commitment in our sacred tradition is expressed not only or not even primarily through the בית הכנסת but equally or even more so in yeshivas, mikvaot, kosher food establishments, summer camps, Jewish book stores, and --in our days -- associations of Orthodox Jewish scientists and teachers and lawyers' advocacy groups and Israel-oriented organizations. Perhaps the UOJCA should reconstitute itself as the Union of Orthodox Jewish Institutions and invite all those other groups to formal affiliation. That may well present a stronger, larger, more vital, and truer picture of American Orthodox Judaism.



These are some of the thoughts about the future course of Orthodoxy in general and the UOJCA in particular, that occur to me as worthy of consideration by the new administration as we gear for the challenge of the last decade of this fantastic and troubled century. They, joined to the ambitions of the incoming president and officers, no doubt add up to a very formidable, almost impossible, program. Before it looms as crushingly difficult, let me tell you what I recently heard about the late and much lamented **גאון וחכם**, Rabbi Kahanaman **זצ"ל**, the Rosh Yeshiva of Ponovezh. When Bnei Brak still a collection of sand dunes, solicited a highly influential Jew and shared with him his ambitious program of building a great **מקום תורה** in this desolate area. His interlocutor, renowned for his practical and sober judgment, said, **רבי, איר חלומ'ט**. To which Rabbi Kahanaman replied, **יא... אפשר חלום איך--אבער איך שלאף ניט**.

This simultaneous motion of broadening our scope and deepening our focus will fall to an administration headed by my good friend Sheldon **הרב שלמה בן רפאל** Rudoff, as he dreams without sleeping.

The Talmud (Shab. 14b) teaches: **בשעה שתיקן שלמה ערובין ונטילת ידים יצתה בת קול ואמרה ... חכם בני ושמח לבי**. What does this mean? Why is King Solomon considered a **חכם** for ordaining these decrees?

**ערובי** is the sign of broadening and expanding. The **ערובין** enlarge the scope of one's property, embracing additional **חצרות** and **מבואות**. The **ערובי תחומין** extends one's **מקום** or locus, allowing one to walk farther.

**נטילת ידים** signifies the opposite motion: withdrawal and recoil from all that might contaminate, a narrowing of focus in order to achieve greater depth.

To know when to choose both, and especially to manage to do both simultaneously and appropriately--that takes a special measure of **חכמה**.

The UOJCA here assembled, in electing Sheldon **שלמה** Rudoff to the presidency of the UOJCA have indicated their confidence that he-- by virtue of the talents and the wisdom and the judgment with which his Creator so amply endowed him, and the work and dedication and loyalty he has expressed in practical terms for the cause of the UOJCA for many years--is worthy of dreaming great dreams and executing them, of balancing conflicting needs and ideals and reconciling them, of acting responsibly and wisely as he leads the lay Orthodox community in the years ahead and evokes from us the better angels of our nature.

I have no doubt that the **בית קול** too offers divine approval to this splendid choice, and we join with It in exclaiming: **חכם הוא הרב שלמה בני ושמח לבי**.



Sheldon, may all of us have reason to rejoice in your wise stewardship and may the Almighty be with you and your colleagues and guide you in the path of ever greater wisdom as you dedicate your talent and time and experience to the cause of Torah through the instrumentality of the UOJCA.

In the words of the Almighty to the prophet Ezekiel, ואתה בן אדם, עמוד על רגליך והנבא