

"THE PURISTS"

We who are known, for better or for worse, as "Modern Orthodox" accept, as both an integral part of our Weltanschauung and as the basis for our community structure, the idea of uniting within ourselves two worlds -- that of Judaism and that of the larger culture, the one that is expressed in Western civilization -- its science and technology and humanities.

Depending on the period of Jewish history, this point of view has used different terms to describe the two poles which are in tension with each other. In the Rabbinic literature they are known as "Torah and Hokhmah" (Wisdom). They are called "Torah and Derekh Eretz," both in early Tannaitic times and much later in German-Jewish history. They have been referred to as sacred and profane, religion and science, revelation and reason, Judaism and Western civilization. No matter by what name these two poles are known, the main idea is that Torah must be embraced together with that which is noblest and most compatible in the prevalent culture, and that the Jew, totally committed to Torah, must utilize his spiritual powers that inhere in Torah in order to fructify and sanctify all the rest of human endeavor.

It has been my contention that whereas we in fact accept this ideology -- our whole educational system from Day School to Yeshiva University is predicated on it -- we have been too apolo-

getic in explaining and interpreting ourselves to the outside world. This was the burden of my remarks a week or two ago to the national convention of the Union of Jewish Orthodox Congregations of America. We ought not apologize for our Torah when we confront the outside world, and we ought not apologize for our involvement with world culture when we confront the rest of the Orthodox Jewish community.

Today, however, I wish to develop another aspect of this problem. While the main thrust of Orthodox Judaism in our times must be the synthesis of these two poles or worlds, yet the total Torah community must consist of more than our "modernist" group alone. For one thing, we ourselves must always remember that the vital center of our own lives is Torah. Furthermore, we must recognize that we cannot and dare not get along without some element in the over-all community that is totally and exclusively committed to the study of Torah and Torah alone, except where such profane knowledge is necessary for the actual study of Torah texts and the solution of halakhic problems.

This, I believe, is the lesson of Hanukkah. The miracle, according to the famous passage in the Talmud, was that after the Greek-Syrians defiled the Temple and all its contents, the Israelites came back and sought to rekindle the Menorah and found only one cruse of oil which was pure and which could last for only one day. The purity of this pakh shel shemmen, the jug of oil, was

attested to by hotamo shel kohen gadol, the seal of the last High Priest, which indicated that it had not been defiled. Some of our great authorities, however, ask a pertinent question: why was it at all necessary that the Jews find oil that is tahor, ritually pure? Why could they not get along with oil that is tamei, impure? After all, the Talmud lays down as a firm principle that tum'ah hutrah be'tzibbur, the laws of purity and impurity apply only to individuals; when, however, the entire community as such is confronted by a problem in the Temple service, when all of Israel is obstructed by the problem of ritual defilement, then the Halakhah declares a dispensation, and considers that all laws of purity and impurity are suspended for the purpose of the entire community. Hence, even if the pitcher of oil were tamei or unclean, the Jews should have been permitted to use it to kindle the Menorah in the Temple.

The answer that is offered by some commentators is that this itself is indeed the miracle! The great wonder was that at least one pakh shel shemmen was tahor, that at least one cruse of oil was totally pure and did not require of us that we rely on any dispensation even if fully halakhic, but that it was pure beyond question, that it still retained hotamo shel kohen gadol, the seal of that High Priest who was (as the platelet on his forehead proclaimed) "kodesh la-Shem -- altogether holy unto the Lord." The miracle of Hanukkah was not only the military victory of the few

over the many, not only the oil which lasted for seven days longer than it should have, but also the fact that Jews aspired to purity -- and they achieved it, their ambitions were realized, and they found that which was unquestionably tahor, untouched by profane hands and a profane world.

What we must therefore learn to stress and not overlook in the development of our point of view as Modern Orthodox, is the significance to us and in our lives of the "purists," those who study only Torah, those who are devoted only to the sacred, those who will accept nothing but oil that is absolutely tahor.

A long history can be cited to document this idea, which is, fundamentally, that the Orthodox community must be not monolithic but pluralistic, that it must contain elements that are both modernist and purist.

Let us cite at least the earliest explicit reference. The Talmud tells us that R. Ishmael and R. Simeon bar Yohai were divided over the question of the relation between the study of Torah and ordinary, mundane work. R. Ishmael, commenting upon the verse in the Shema that "and you shall gather in your corn and your oil and your wine," maintained that there is a time to study Torah and a time to "gather in" one's worldly goods. Hence, says R. Ishmael, study Torah to the maximum of your ability, but at the same time hanheg ba-hem minhag derekh eretz, your commitment to the words of Torah must be combined with involvement in

the real, profane world around you. However, R. Simeon bar Yohai was not happy with this answer. If, he retorted, a man plows in the season of plowing and sows in the season of sowing and reaps in the time of reaping and harvests in the time of harvesting -- if he allows himself to be sucked into the whirlpool of daily activities which are merciless in their totalitarian claims upon our time and attention -- torah mah tehei aleha, what will ever happen to Torah? Who will ever have time for Torah? His answer therefore is direct, simple, and radical: the need to do anything but study Torah is a curse, a sign of weakness, something to be avoided at all costs. Better retreat to your own cave and abandon civilization, if to do otherwise implies the sacrifice of the study of Torah.

The Jewish tradition never offered a clear halakhic decision in this controversy. Indeed, the total experience of Judaism in the world is such that the decision comes out in favor of both. R. Ishmael -- the Modernist -- and R. Simeon bar Yohai -- the Purist -- are both necessary! We shall always need a majority of modernists, of courageous spirits whose commitment to Torah is not one whit less than the purists, but who are ready to march out into the maelstrom of life, to hold aloft the torch and Menorah of Torah despite the tum'ah of the environment, despite the foreigners who seek to defile us, in the very midst of the impure existence in which we live. And we shall always need at

least some radical core of purists, who will recoil from lighting the Menorah with anything but pakh shel shemmen tahor, even if the Halakhah should permit otherwise.

Why is it necessary to strive for a pluralistic rather than a monolithic Orthodox community, for one which supports both types of authentic traditional Judaism and both types of Jewish education?

First, on purely theoretical or theological grounds, our faith commits us to the ideal of total immersion in Torah as a guarantee of Jewish survival. Even more, R.Hayyim of Volozhin taught that this total commitment to the study of Torah is the very condition of the existence of the world. He was fond of saying that if for one moment Torah were not being studied some place on earth, the entire universe would collapse once again into primordial chaos, into tohu va-vohu. This idea is not quite as naive as it sounds; it bespeaks a fundamental principle of Judaism. It is our faith that all of material existence ultimately rests on a spiritual basis. That spiritual basis is Torah, and if you remove the foundation, the superstructure must disintegrate.

Second, from a practical point of view, we of the modernist majority very much need the purist minority. It is to our own interest that they be present, that they thrive, and that they occasionally sound the alarm. Because of our modernist Orthodox involvement in the secular world, because we walk on this dangerous

borderline between two worlds, we sometimes tend to lose our balance and to distort our perspective. At such times we must be held in rein by those who are more firmly anchored and completely involved in the world of Torah -- the purists, the radicals.

Third, the Halakhic scholars of the future, the decisors, the dayyanim, and those who will direct the destiny of our people, must be thoroughly grounded in their Torah studies. It is true that our own institutions, such as Yeshiva University, now offer such programs for total immersion in Torah. Yet, this is not enough. We need the added scholarly strength of those yeshivot and institutions, both here and in Israel, which make it their business to develop the kind of scholar who will be a thoroughly competent research and resource personality. After all, the secular and scientific world recognizes pure research as a valuable adjunct of the whole scientific endeavor. What is the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton, New Jersey, if not a secular "Kollel," an advanced "Yeshivah" for technological and humanistic studies? How unfortunate and disgraceful, therefore, that the secular world supports its academic purists in a so much finer and more adequate way than we do ours, and that we allow our equivalent institutions to become genuinely poverty-depressed areas.

Let us, therefore, not be distressed and dismayed by the occasional divergence of opinion in the American Orthodox Jewish



community. It is true that disagreement sometimes degenerates into distress and far worse -- and that must be avoided. It is true that the more radical elements, which we have called "purists," sometimes tend to unwarranted hostility to the rest of us, and fail to reciprocate whatever gestures of reconciliation we may make to them. But that does not matter at all. We must not be parochial and provincial in putting forth our own claims. The total Torah community must be diverse, it must be pluralistic, it must never be single-minded, single-tracked, single-colored.

Each of us adds a different color, a different hue, a different shade to the eternal flame of Torah as it is symbolized in the Hanukkah Menorah. Let each of us, modernist and purist, add whatever we have to contribute to this Menorah of Judaism, so that we shall bring ultimate enlightenment to the entire Jewish community, and through the Jewish community to all the world, to all of mankind.