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TRADITION

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THE NEED FOR TRADITION

The Editor's Introduction to a New Journal

"Tradition" is perhaps one of the most misunderstood and maligned words in our contemporary vocabulary. It has been misconstrued by some as the very antithesis of "progress" and as a synonym for the tyranny that a rigid past blindly imposes upon the present. For others the word evokes different associations. Tradition becomes for them the object of sentimental adoration, the kind of nostalgic affection which renders it ineffective and inconsequential, like the love for an old and naive grandmother — possessing great charm, but exercising little power or influence.

What then do we mean by "tradition," and why have we decided to publish a journal by that name in an age when man has broken the shackles of gravity and is on the verge of the conquest of the heavens themselves, an age which seems to have broken completely with the past which nurtured it?

By "tradition" we mean neither a slavish adherence to old formulas, nor a romantic veneration of "the good old days" which strips the past of all meaningfulness for the present. In our conception of "tradition" we do not concentrate exclusively on the past at all. The word itself comes from the Latin *tradere* which means to hand down, to transmit, to bequeath. Similarly, its Hebrew equivalent *masorah* derives from the root מסר which means "to give over." The focus of Tradition is, then, the future and not

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the past. "Tradition" is thus a commitment by the past to the future, the promise of roots, the precondition of a healthy continuity of that which is worthy of being preserved, the affirmation that the human predicament in general, and the Jewish situation in particular, are not frighteningly new, but that they grow out of a soil which we can know and analyze and use to great benefit.

What, exactly, does this "tradition" consist of, this "tradition" we want to "give over" to our readers, to our future? It is the cumulative historical experience and wisdom of the people of Israel and the totality of its divinely revealed insights and moral injunctions and ethical imperatives and religious instruction — in a word, its *Torah* and *mitzvot*.

משה קבל תורה מסיני ומסרה ליהושע (אבות א, א)

"Moses received the Torah at Sinai and gave it over — *umesarah* — to Joshua." That *masorah*, that Tradition — of the Sinaitic revelation, both written and oral, in all its ramifications — is the one we espouse and want to "give over." This Sinaitic Tradition, divinely ordained, from its very inception constituted an unyielding challenge to the unredeemed pagan world which sought to choke it in its infancy. The *masorah* then was given over to Joshua, thence to the Elders, and thus down through the ages — and again and again the Word of God, expressed in the Tradition of *Torah* and *mitzvot*, challenged the idolatry of sundry societies, each of which was smugly certain that it and it alone embodied the absolutes and ultimates of life to which all else must be subservient.

That Tradition has not been without its detractors even within the camp of Israel. For the *masorah* constitutes a burden upon the Jew: it obligates him to a discipline of personal holiness called *halakhah*; it informs him of the fact that God and not he is the center of the universe; it makes him, as its bearer, the target of the forces of rebellion from within and of anti-Semitism — really anti-Sinaiism — from without; it imposes upon him the responsibility to transmit — מסר — this Tradition to others. The Tradition was attacked at every stage of its development. The pagan world thought its concept of God absurd and the Sabbath the invention of lazy people. The early Christians attacked it as legalistic and devoid of love. The Saducees accused it of inventing elaborate fictions and of subverting the very Torah it sought to

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perpetuate. The Karaites repeated the charge in new forms throughout the Middle Ages. And in modern times too, the Saducee-Karaite heresy, in various garbs, has kept up a sustained attack on Orthodox Judaism, as the authentic Tradition is now known.

The modern era generated a host of new ideologies which increased the confusions of those who sought a viable philosophy of life in a world of profound technological and social revolution. With every major scientific achievement and technological "break-through," modern man's self-estimation changed. This change in self-estimation, in man's view of man and his place in the universe, took on a paradoxical form. On the one hand, modern man was constantly amazed at his own genius and power. He marveled at his newly acquired strength, sneered at the primitive mentality of his predecessors, and arrogantly began to think of himself as a god. And concomitant with this self-apotheosis, came an equal and opposite reaction: a feeling of desperation, a sense of being lost and without moorings, a terrible cosmic loneliness. The "existential crisis" was deepened as a result of the self-deification; for the more man created, the more he was at mercy of his creations; the more he *did* the less he *was*; the more he considered himself a god, the greater became the distance between himself and God.

Jews were affected by this modern crisis perhaps more than all others. A sensitive, marginal, minority group, they possessed, in addition, a traditionally high valuation of freedom and of intellect. The Emancipation gave them the freedom they so long cherished and which was so long denied to them. The new ideological currents were made to sound intellectually appealing, and the advances in the sciences and the arts were, after all, matters of the mind in which Jews were participants and often leaders. And so Jews threw themselves with abandon into the preoccupations of the modern world, and they felt beholden to this world and adopted, along with all else, its neurotic, paradoxical view of man.

Tradition — *the* Tradition — was therefore largely abandoned. It was looked upon as hopelessly irrelevant. But this disfavor into which the Tradition fell was not only or even primarily the result of an ideological incompatibility with modern western civilization. There were simpler and more embarrassing reasons for the ebb of *Torah* and *mitzvot*. The great migrations of the Jews created agonizing cleavages between the generations. Old fashioned

mannerisms, dated dress, social and linguistic maladjustment of the parents made the children think that the Tradition too was incapable of efficacy in the culture of today. Religious education — the “giving over” of the great body of Jewish wisdom — was sorely neglected, especially in America. And so those who spoke in the name of the Tradition, those who sought to transmit and communicate its holy contents to the new, modern Jew, were simply not understood. The difficulty lay mostly in *communication*. Yiddish instead of English, the foreign accent, European mannerisms, the lack of education, the abrupt cultural discontinuity, and the inability and apparent unwillingness to re-express valid truths in a contemporary idiom — these were problems of communication, not of basic philosophy. And it was this lack of communication which left so many Jews ignorant of the light that the Tradition could shed on the basic problems of the modern world. Thus, Orthodoxy was not tried and found wanting but — to paraphrase a famous writer — it was not tried in the first place by great numbers of people as a working philosophy in the context of modern life.

What was supposed to take the place of Orthodoxy, of the Tradition? Assimilation in its full, blatant form was ruled out as a mass-movement for Jews. First, the gentile world was not ready to accept them. Second, even Jews who had cut themselves off from loyalty to the main body of the Tradition were reluctant to commit collective spiritual suicide. The course that was chosen, then, was to assimilate not Jews but Judaism. Torah was to be rewritten in the universalist accents of a high-sounding liberal humanism; God was to be remade in the image of man; and the Tradition was to be reshaped to conform to contemporary standards of taste. Those who refused to participate in this devious form of assimilation, or “Americanization” or “acculturation” as it was now euphemistically called, were branded as “orthodox” and cavalierly dismissed as religious relics, as fossils of a vanishing faith — as if the Tradition were not a stubborn and imperishable historical fact, as if the Word of God could die by human decree or change by majority vote.

More recently, however, there have been decided changes on the world scene that have caused, particularly in America, a perceptible reorientation vis-a-vis Orthodoxy in the total Jewish community. The horrors of the Hitler era have profoundly shaken

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man's confidence in the beneficent use of the power he had gotten. The creation of the State of Israel has done more than give all Jews a collective pride in their people. It has also given them a sense of rootedness in the long history which gave birth to the little bit of Middle Eastern geography. The old academies of Jewish learning which grew up slowly in lower Manhattan and Brooklyn and Chicago came into their own, until today we have schools such as Yeshiva University which are unique phenomena in Jewish history. In these schools Orthodoxy is taught and learned and lived in the idiom of Western culture and in native American accents. The newly established network of *yeshivot ketanot* or Day Schools is feeding a steady stream of students into the schools of higher Jewish learning, while at the same time exerting a powerful influence in the local communities in which such schools exist. The Rabbinical Council of America, the sponsor of this journal, represents a new type of Orthodox rabbi. He is not only English speaking, but thoroughly conversant with the secular culture of the day. At the same time, he is of course, an expositor of the Torah and the Talmud, the basic stuff of the Tradition. Here then is American Orthodoxy, with dignity, with intellectual honesty, with absolute faith in the Divine origin of the Tradition it represents. Most important, it is an Orthodoxy which has opened the channels of communication with the contemporary generation, so that the Tradition in all its fulness and beauty and holiness can now be presented to those Jews who sincerely are groping for direction and meaningfulness, for a way to live their lives in the framework of the authentic Jewish tradition.

This is the function of TRADITION — to interpret the Tradition, the Word of God, the heritage of *Torah* and *mitzvot* in a manner and form that the modern, educated, thinking Jew can understand. The modern Jew has, by and large, given up his pat, dogmatic answers of doctrinaire liberalism and meliorism, and has now turned for direction to the classical sources of Jewish life. Now that the channels of communication between him and the Tradition are open, all that remains is — to teach, to interpret, to explain. This and this alone is our purpose, our only reason for existing. We make no pretenses of being "non-partisan," for in truth we doubt the wisdom of neutrality on the great questions of the day. TRADITION is a "Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought." In these pages responsible thinkers will explicate our faith, teach

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its principles, and demonstrate its relevance to the concerns of contemporary men.

We hope at first to publish TRADITION semi-annually. Later, we shall perhaps begin to publish quarterly. Yet even this first issue could never have seen the light of day if not for the encouragement and constant help of my colleagues on the Editorial Committee, the personal interest taken in our work by Rabbi Solomon Sharfman, President of the Rabbinical Council of America, and the warm cooperation of Orthodoxy's distinguished leader, Dr. Samuel Belkin, President of Yeshiva University.

Defining מסר, the root of *masorah* or "tradition," Rabbi David Kimchi, the great medieval linguist, writes: ענינו הנתינה בכל לב — "it means to give with the whole heart." We of the Editorial Committee give to our readers this first fruit of our labors, and we give it with our whole heart; and with our whole heart do we pray that TRADITION will succeed in its sacred task of reinterpreting to our fellow Jews the divinely given Tradition.