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The Reform decision concerning patrilineal descent, in effect validating it as a legitimate form of Jewish identity, and the recent Conservative flirtation with the same idea (the suggestion by the head of the JTS that the Rabbinical Assembly should "study" the issue is a disingenuous means of floating a trial balloon), will unquestionably have a profoundly negative impact upon the attempts to secure the unity of the Jewish people.

There are a number of features that have characterized Centrist Orthodoxy in the past decades. Among these features are the commitment to the State of Israel and the positive rather than reluctant validation of higher secular studies. In addition to these, and of no less equal import, is the effort to secure the inviolable integrity of Kelal Yisrael. From this flow a number of practical communal consequences, such as: membership in the Synagogue Council; an ambiguous, but at least not clearly negative, attitude towards membership of individual rabbis in mixed rabbinical bodies; working together at national levels such as the JWB, UJA, Federations, etc. Those of us who identify with this Centrist approach have always felt that, saddened and angered though we were by successive departures from Halakhah and tradition by the dissenting groups, we affirm their Jewish identity and hence their legitimate membership in Kelal Yisrael.

We felt that with the majority of the Jewish people today not being identified with Orthodoxy, and certainly not as meticulous shomrei mitzvot, it was a national imperative for our people to stay together if at all possible. The price we have paid has been religiously, culturally, and

psychologically high. The Reform abrogation of Halakhah, especially of the laws of marriage and divorce and the consequent proliferation of mamzerim, and the chipping away at the whole halakhic structure by the Conservative movement in areas as diverse as kashrut, Shabbat, the nature of the Bet Hakeset, the unspoken abandonment of taharat ha-mishpachah, and a myriad of other such major Jewish religious institutions -- pained us. We sighed or yelled or howled, as the case may be, but we took the long view, and held that as long as these groups were halakhically Jewish, we would not and should not read them out of the fold. We argued with our colleagues from the "World of the Yeshivot" and the Agudas Harabbonim and insisted that our self-segregation from the entire polis of the Jewish people would be a terrible historic mistake.

I do not regret that policy, or my role as one of its main protagonists. I believe it was halakhically correct and Jewishly responsible. The advocacy of this position came at a high price to Yeshiva University, to Rabbinical Council of America, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations. But it was worth it, because it was based upon a true and honorable conception.

I now confess to you publicly that I am beginning to have serious doubts as to how long we can maintain this communal policy. We have been pushed to the outer limits of our tolerance. I say this not with gusto, not with vindictiveness, certainly not with triumphalism or self-righteousness. Rather, I say this with great pain at the rending of the fabric of Jewish unity by the dissident groups, and -- to be perfectly honest -- with not a little anger at the irresponsibility of those who failed to appreciate the tensions under which we labored to keep the whole Jewish community together on speaking terms, and for having taken actions



-- or contemplating taking actions -- which will make it impossible for us to continue as one people, one Kelal Yisrael.

Unlike the Reform movement which, almost from its inception, rejected the discipline of Halakhah, and Conservatism which originally located itself within the ambit of Halakhah but has in more recent years both professedly and functionally abandoned it, we Orthodox Jews are bound by this objective, transcendent halakhic tradition. We may be lenient in our halakhic interpretations or stringent, and give greater or lesser consideration to the realities of contemporary life in formulating our halakhic judgments, but one thing is clear -- it is our sacred responsibility to interpret Halakhah, not fabricate it. The common ~~to interpret Halakhah, not to fabricate it.~~ The common layman's conception that Jewish law is what a group of rabbis get together and decide it is, does not apply to us. We have no "Jewish Law Committee" which, by majority vote, may decide on fundamental and radical departures from the objective Halakhah and justify it by some semantic legerdemain as tekanot or the like. There comes a point where our powers of interpretation have been stretched to the utmost, and we have no choice but to rely upon the received Halakhah.

How that same Halakhah operated in the past offers strong and credible guidance on how it may instruct us in the present and near future.

A recent book (Lawrence H. Schiffman, Who Was A Jew?, KTAV: 1985) describes the historic break of Halakhic Judaism with Christianity. The author (who is Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies in New York University) concludes that the Tannaim did not deny Jewish identity to the early Jewish-Christians, the minnim. They considered them heretics, and regarded them a danger to Jewry and Judaism -- but as long as they were

Jewish according to Halakhah, they could not and would not read them out of our people. It was only when the Jerusalem Church began to wane, and Gentile Christianity got the upper hand over Jewish Christianity, that the Rabbis, applying the same halakhic standard, recognized Christianity as a separate religion and no longer part of the House of Israel. Those halakhic standards were the same then as they are today: birth to a Jewish mother, or a legitimate conversion.

The decision of the Tannim during the first two centuries of this era have had profound historic consequences. The author concludes his work with the following observation:

In retrospect, the halakhot we have studied were what maintained the identity of the Jewish people. Had the rabbis relaxed these standards, accepting either the semi-proselytes or the earliest Gentile Christians into the Jewish people, Christians would quickly have become the majority within the expanded community of "Israel." Judaism as we know it would have ceased to exist even before reaching its codification in the Mishnah and the other great compilations of the Tannaitic tradition. Christianity would have been the sole heir to the traditions of Biblical antiquity, and observance of the commandments of the Torah would have disappeared within just a few centuries. In short, it was the Halakhah and its definition of Jewish identity which saved the Jewish people and its heritage from extinction as a result of the newly emerging Christian ideology.

The ultimate parting of the ways for Judaism and Christianity took place when the adherence to Christianity no longer conformed to the halakhic definitions of a Jew. As these Gentile Christians, never converted to Judaism through the legal requirements we have discussed, became the dominant stream in the Christian communities which the rabbis confronted, even in Palestine, the rabbis ceased to regard the Christians as a group of Jews with heretical views and Christianity as a Jewish sect. Rather, the rabbis began to regard the Christians as members of a separate community, and their teachings a perversion of the Biblical tradition...

-- (Lawrence H. Schiffman, What Was Judaism? [Ktav: 1985])

It is with fear and trepidation that I note this analogy of a halakhic decision taken 1800 years ago to the situation that prevails today. As long as the deviations of the dissident groups apply to



individual religious institutions which, taken singly or together, did not create irrevocable breaks in the continuity of Jewish identity, one could regard them as heretics or apostates , but they were Jews.

But now, with the Reform decision to recognize children born of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers as legitimate Jews, flying in the face of the whole age-old halakhic tradition, and the report of the Conservative flirtation with this blasphemy (even the thought of "studying" it, or even submitting it to a vote, is revealing -- and frightening), -- we are faced with the agonizing possibility of a rupture as historically consequential as that which occurred close to two millenia ago.

Within two or three generations, who will be able to tell which Reform (and possibly Conservative -- if they follow the Reform lead and if, indeed, the two groups do not merge in the near future) adherents are truly Jews by halakhic standards and which are not? No impassioned appeals by our Israeli brothers and sisters for Jewish unity, and no financial threats by the barons of the American Jewish organizations who have only recently decided to enter the area of interdenominational polemics, will help. We are bound by Halakhah, and after having exhausted all our liberalism, all our ahavat Yisrael, all our compassion for the pitiful remnant from the Holocaust that is now World Jewry, there may be little we can do. I grant that Halakhah may not be as totally impervious to subjectivity as is sometimes asserted; but clearly and unquestionably, it is fundamentally an autonomous corpus that cannot be manipulated at will without destroying its integrity.

Should the patrilineal issue become enshrined in practice in the Reform group and, possibly, the Conservative group, that would inexorably trigger the halakhic mechanism that will eventuate in the denial of

Jewish identity not only to individuals -- we already have that situation with regard to invalid conversions -- but with regard to entire movements and whoever identifies with them.

I therefore say to Reform Jewry: We of Centrist Orthodoxy have tried, as best we can, to act with communal responsibility towards you. We may or may not have participated in common activities to your satisfaction, we may or may not have resorted to rhetorical excesses, we may or may not have satisfied you that we have tried our best to accomodate your penchant for pluralism. But we never denied your Jewishness -- except for those blatant cases, far too many, where your own spiritual leaders officiated at "wedding" ceremonies of Jews with unconverted non-Jews or non-Jews not converted according to the Halakhah. Now, however, you have presented us with a dilemma of staggering proportions. We are, will remain, must remain, and want to remain squarely within the halakhic tradition. By your actions concerning patrilineal descent, you have invoked a halakhic judgment which allows of no modification, no appeal, no hedging. You have recognized as Jews those whom Halakhah does not recognize as Jews, and thereby have placed in question the Jewish identity of your followers for all generations to come. I plead with you, I implore you: Pull back from the precipice over which you have already begun to leap. Do not force upon us to deny your halakhic identity as Jews. Show the courage which so many of you have demonstrated in battling for humanitarian and civil rights causes and, later in your history, for the fulfillment of the Zionist vision, and repeal your dangerous decision. Do not force Orthodoxy, against its will, to make this tragic judgment about your Jewish identity.

I request of Conservative leaders seriously to rethink the road they have been taking in the last while. You may be angry with Orthodoxy for



not granting you "recognition," for often acting self-righteously, for gratuitous insult. You may be justified in some cases, not justified in others. But certainly, your sense of Jewish destiny, your responsibility for the Jewish present and the Jewish future, must make you rise above personal and institutional or denominational animus and recognize the perils of the path that you have begun to follow. What would Professor Lieberman, of blessed memory, have said about commissioning a "study" about "kashering" patrilineal descent as an avenue to Jewishness? Your Movement has accomplished some constructive things, but your ideologically ambivalent and functionally negative attitude to Halakhah have now led some of your leaders to the point where they are considering undoing the foundation of that structure altogether. More and more, your Movement has become indistinguishable from that of Reform. Is that really the path you wish to follow?

The differences between us heretofore have been too great to allow us to exchange mutual "recognition" in a manner that would leave you and us satisfied. Our polemics have been angry, sullen, often ugly -- and we Orthodox are by no means blameless in this. But at least no one ever questioned the essence of your Jewishness, the halakhic identity of your congregations and their families as Jews. Are you ready to follow those of your leaders who would "study" and submit to a vote the possibility that you too would recognize as Jewish those who are halakhically Gentile? Are you ready to trigger the inevitable halakhic response which we will be helpless to stop?

As for us, there is no joy, only ashes in our mouths, that so many of the dire consequences we prophesied as the inevitable unfolding of the disastrous potential in Reform and even Conservatism have now come to pass

or appear to come to pass. Should such a break eventuate, it will be a bekhiyah le'dorot, a historic tragedy of untold proportions. There is not a single problem, not a single event, not a single disaster since the Holocaust that would equal in consequence this rupture.

It behooves us, therefore, to wait and see how the situation develops. Will Reform reconsider their actions? Will Conservatism go on and further identify themselves as Reform, and perhaps merge with them; or will they pull back and remain with us as brothers who, though at odds over many issues, are nevertheless part of one family, who can learn to live in fraternal love and respect?

There is always plenty of time to make the final break in communal structures. Let no one in our camp, chas ve'shalom, act precipitously in encouraging such a cataclysm. We are all the pitiful remnants of the Holocaust which has taught us, if nothing else, the need we have of each other. One does not decide to amputate his limbs with abandon or with light-hearted rhetoric. The time for such catastrophic consideration is not yet upon us. But the clock is ticking away, the hour is late and whoever, in any camp, is not frightened out of his wits by the ominous prospects that confront us -- has no wits to begin with, only moral obtuseness and historic insensitivity and Jewish irresponsibility.