

THE ARROGANCE OF MODERNISM

THE French Catholic thinker, Jacques Maritan, has coined a new word which deserves wide currency: **chronolatry**, the worship of what is latest in time, the idolatry of "modernity."

That such chronolatry is an unspoken presupposition of our culture is self-evident. And it is an irritating phenomenon at best, and a dangerous one at worst. I beg the indulgence of the reader for sharing with him my allergy to the world "modern". I find infuriating the smug and complacent **am ha-aretz** who says: "How can you be Ortho-

dox when you are so modern? How can you refrain from smoking or driving on Shabbat, or eating non-kosher food, or fasting on Yom Kippur, in this 20th century?"

I am similarly annoyed when I hear people saying, "He is religious—but modern," in almost exactly the same tone as one would say, "He is slightly insane

—but sincere"—as if modernity can save the benighted religious soul from the damnation to which the unsophisticated are foredoomed.

I even confess that I am uncomfortable with the title "Modern Orthodox".

There is an arrogance about this assertion of modernity which should give offence to any intelligent and sensitive man. There is no better term that I have

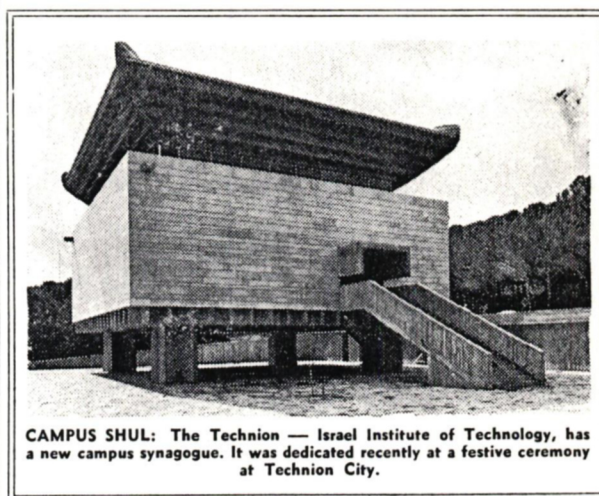
**By Rabbi
Norman Lamm**

found, but I shudder when I pronounce the words.

"Modern" — what conceit! How vain, how meaningless! As if the accident of being born into the Space Age makes one superior to the past, because "we" know so much more than those of previous generations did. But who is this "we" who know so much? If any of us has advanced knowledge in any one specialized field, does that give us warrant for feeling better and greater than ancients whose wisdom often ranged far and wide, whose interests were universal? Because we have the ability, through no fault of our own, to turn a knob on the television set and watch a space ship near the moon, does that make us better than Newton or Kepler or any of the other geniuses of the past who discovered and described the laws of the universe which have made our age possible?

Jewish life makes full use of the fruits of modern civilization, and alert Jewish thinkers are — or should be — ready to confront every advance in human thought.

But the source and touch-stone of our faith is the Torah, and an old Torah it is! It is NOT necessarily a "modern" Torah. It is a holy Torah, a powerful and wise and meaningful and vital and just Torah — but not a modern one, packaged to compete with the daily press. It is not materialistic or hedonistic or



CAMPUS SHUL: The Technion — Israel Institute of Technology, has a new campus synagogue. It was dedicated recently at a festive ceremony at Technion City.

youth-orientated or secularistic or "with it".

Beyond time

Judaism maintains that truth does not depend on time. The Maharal of Prague observed that the festival of **Shavuot**, unlike all the others, is not appointed by the Torah to a special date on the calendar. It is only indirectly fixed as seven weeks after Passover. This is so, the Maharal avers, because Torah is **le'maalah min ha-zaman**, beyond time. Its truth is not a function of the age in which it was given or the one in which it is studied. It is relevant to all times, precisely because it is not incarcerated in the inhibiting "modernity" of any one time. It can be timely because it is timeless. Jews, therefore, should not assent to the cult of "chronolatry".

Every age is, of course, modern in its own eyes. But the tendency to consider this modernity as a virtue is fairly recent. Possibly it is the result of a misinterpretation of evolutionary theory: since life is supposed to evolve to higher forms, therefore we are greater than our fathers, and they were greater than theirs . . . Thus, one might conclude — and many often do — that the religious tradition that comes to us from the remote past is inadequate for us, because the ancients were not "modern" and we are.

This feeling afflicts even profoundly religious people. About 150 years ago, the Protestant theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher, wrote a book entitled **ON RELIGION: To Its Cultured Despisers**. How revealing: those who despise religion are modern, they are cultured. The

rest of us are benighted, we are behind the times. Most religious folk labour under the heavy burden of an inferiority feeling because they are not sufficiently modern.

This should not be taken to imply that all that is modern is bad, and that as observant Jews we are against modernity. That would be as absurd a notion as the supposition that all that is modern is good and true.

Over 200 years ago, Lord Chesterfield wrote: "Speak of the moderns without contempt, and of the ancients without idolatry; judge them all by their merits, and not by their age." These Orthodox Jews who revel in the foreignness of Judaism and who retreat into little, well-preserved cubicles of tradition, denying any and all value and significance to modern thought, are doing a disservice to Torah.

Yet, to be truthful, it seems as though the Rabbis of the Talmud were inclined to ascribe greater virtue to ages past: "If those of the earlier generations were the children of angels, we are merely the children of men; and if they were but the children of men, then we are like mules" (Sab. 112b).

But this should not be read as implying a general condemnation of later generations. It is not really anti-modernist. Rather, it represents a specific judgment the Rabbis made when comparing their own generation with that of the Prophets — and it is unquestionably true that spiritually we have been in decline for a long time.

Greater future

But this is an evaluation of one slice of history, no matter how large. It does not mean that, in their view, human history **always** deteriorates. When the farmer in ancient Palestine brought his **bikkurim** or first fruits, he would recite the passage that begins: "My father was a wandering Syrian."

Abraham had very humble origins. And on Passover we proclaim: "In the beginning our ancestors were idol-worshippers."

The past is not always better than the present. And, by the same token, the present is seen as leading to a much greater future: the coming of the Messiah.

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Nevertheless, Judaism does not subscribe to "chronolatry." And we Jews, today, must not submit to the arrogance of modernity.

This modern worship of modernity results in a number of patent absurdities. Consider this: if we are bright and intelligent and wise because we are modern, and therefore superior to past generations, how will we be judged by the coming generations? And how will they be judged by the ones following them? And if by their standards we are primitive, how sure are we now that we are right in anything we believe, including our supercilious assumption about modernity?

Dean Inge once remarked that a man who marries the spirit of the age soon finds himself a widower.

Fetish

Even our vocabulary suffers and reveals the foolishness of making a fetish of modernity. The very word "modern" has become shopworn. Many people have begun to use "contemporary" instead. More recently, learned journals have featured a spate of articles on the "post-modern". What is to come next? — "post-contemporary?", "post-post-modern?"

It is true, generally, that technological knowledge and ability is cumulative, and that every generation is in this sense greater than the one preceding it. Even technologically, the idea of constant and uninterrupted progress is true **only** provided that there is no devastating war that results from technology itself, so that man is reduced—as Albert Einstein put it — to fighting the next one with bow and arrow; and provided that the flow of technical knowledge does not become so vast, so enormous, so stifling, that mankind strangles on it, unable to digest and use it.

But what is true for technology and science is not necessarily true for ethics and morality, for religion and the life of the spirit. Love and hate, fear and reverence, the sense of mystery and worship — all these are independent of artifacts and gadgets and mathematics. Science and technology is more critical — but are we wiser? We have more efficient communications—but do we say more that is worth saying? We can have more "fun" — but are we happier?

Pertinent

Torah is not anchored to the "modernity" of any age. For the Torah is beyond time — and therefore given for all times. It is always "modern" and yet never merely, "modern".

A recent report of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (May 8, 1969) is pertinent to the prevalence of "chronolatry" amongst Jews. It tells of a statement by a Reconstructionist leader who urged that Jewish community centres remain open on the Sabbath to serve "the needs of those who do not hold to Orthodoxy." He declared that the Sabbath "must be re-established not as a restrictive day of fourth-century worship and rest, but rather as a twentieth-century turn-on to relevance."

Such is the colossal AM HAARATZUT of a "Rabbi" who speaks so disparagingly

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and **UNKNOWNLY** of fourth-century Judaism — the very high point of the creation of the Talmud! It is difficult to find a more apt illustration of the "arrogance of modernity."

One would expect not only of a supposedly religious teacher, but of any cultured individual, that he refrain from such obvious vulgarity in preaching "relevance". So the Shabbat should not be a day of worship and rest, but a "turn-on to relevance!"

What does that mean? Are we to abandon the synagogue and repair to the gymnasium? To quit our services and head for the swimming pool? To spend all Shabbat on election campaigns? On breaking windows on the campus? In demonstrations?

Puny dimensions

"Chronolatry", unfortunately, is in the ascendancy. It afflicts our community as much, and possibly more, than others. To know this is to beware of it — and to strive for more humility and respect and responsibility.

Torah must not be geared to the calendar, and must not be reshaped always to accord with the **zeitgeist**, with the spirit of the time.

The late Dr. Raphael Gold, a distinguished Orthodox Jew and practicing psychiatrist (and brother of the late Rabbi Wolf Gold, the great Mizrahi leader), once made this comment: Adam and Eve, after they sinned and corrupted their lives, heard the voice of the Lord: "And they heard the voice of the Lord G-d walking in the garden **le'ruach ha-yom**" (Gen. 3:8), which is usually translated as "toward the cool of the day," but which may just as well be translated, "according to the spirit of the day."

Once they sinned, they approached G-d only according to the **zeitgeist**, according to the canons of modernity. It is the way and the wages of sin: man attempts to reduce the infinity of G-d to his own pitifully puny dimensions. He turns away from G-d, and "turns-on to relevance." He breathes deeply of the **ruach ha-yom** and, intoxicated, becomes arrogantly and vulgarly "modern".

Perspective

Those who are wise will not be frightened by the word "modern". Those who can view life and their own times in the larger perspective of history, will not be awed by the self-satisfied ignoramuses who feel superior because of the accident of their birth in this generation. The fashionable journals may criticize us, and the smug, up-to-date cognoscenti may not like us. The rich and the powerful may consider us antiquated.

But that is no tragedy, it is not fatal. We shall survive — long enough to have to put up with yet another generation which will consider the present moderns as outdated as we are supposed to be. For what we hold to be true — our Torah — we hold to be timeless, unaffected by the years, and uncorroded by the ages, even as G-d, the **noten ha-Torah**, is beyond the ravages of time.

It is a rational and self-evident principle: what is true is valuable, even if ancient; and what is false remains contemptible, even if modern and up-to-date.