

"Towards a Renaissance of Orthodoxy"Priorities in the EightiesU.D.S.C.A.
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I

Twelve years ago, I was invited to address the Orthodox Union Convention in this city on a similar, far-ranging topic. I presented eight principles or suggestions for a strategy -- ranging from the primacy of Torah to a non-apologetic attitude to secular studies; from a relevant exposition of Orthodox Judaism to a more significant curriculum for yeshivot; from the right attitude toward non-Orthodox Jews to the importance of teaching hashkafah; from a balanced conception of the Halakhah to our response to new challenges. I am pleased that I personally have had the opportunity, in the past two years, to begin to implement some of these ideas at Yeshiva University. I am not at all surprised that that talk, and its subsequent appearance in print in Jewish Life, did not receive a second thought from anyone else. I am reminded of what Rabbi Israel Salanter used to say: A musar-schmuess is always worth it, even if it results in only one person davenning only one Maariv with a bit more kavannah, and even if that one person is -- me...

"Priorities of the Eighties": This is not the place or the time for offering a detailed five or ten-year plan. Such a schedule must be hammered out on the anvil of many minds, and requires the participation of the visionary as well as the pragmatist, the thinker as well as the doer, and is best prepared in long sessions away from the glare

of publicity. Instead, let me propose a broad outline of what I consider the truly important problems, principles, and parameters for such a consideration.

I operate on one basic premise: that American/Orthodoxy is mature enough to examine itself critically without becoming demoralized. So, if I am critical, it is not because I want to be captious, but because the only way to be constructive is to trust your basic health and self-confidence in making suggestions for improvement.

Our question, then, is: What must be the priorities of the Orthodox Union, of the entire Orthodox community, as we face the ninth decade of this century? The word "face" is panim, which in the Hebrew is plural. Let us then discuss our actions and attitudes as we face in two directions: inwards and outwards.

II

INWARDS

The first thing the Orthodox Union must strive for is to actualize the principle of ki'shmo ken hu. For many many years we have not really been, in the full sense of the term, a congregational group, but an organization of good people, excellent people, some of whom belonged to synagogues which belonged to the Orthodox Union. But OU was not necessarily an organization of congregations as such. No amount of press releases and

image-building and self-gratulation can make up for the lack of grass-roots support in the synagogue world. OU's Kashrut and youth functions are great achievements, but must be tied to the basic *raison d'être* of OU: synagogues and their baalei batim and rabbis. The large, important, and active synagogues are the ones which will give the Orthodox Union strength -- human, organizational, and financial. If the major Orthodox synagogues of the country are absent, we will continue to be in trouble. I believe an attempt must also be made to contact and (almost a contradiction in terms!) organize the shtiblech. This is not necessarily incompatible with the major thrust to the central synagogues of the country. The shtiblech are, after all, our "havurot" -- long before the trendy radicals discovered them!

There is no use speaking of "Orthodox Renaissance" if we continue to be afflicted with dissension. The OU can perform an extremely creative function by making another effort to get all the segments of the Orthodox community to talk with each other, even if they disagree with each other. I am heartbroken by the trivial jealousies that divide segments of the Orthodox community one from the other, by the petty squabbles and jejune disputes that have for too long caused us to substitute politics for programs, and opinionation for thinking. I am not upset by the proliferation of organizations -- that may be good rather than bad. Certainly, some of the specialized groups,

such as the organizations for Orthodox scientists, lawyers, teachers, and so forth, are a great tribute to the maturation of Orthodox Judaism in this country. The Orthodox Union must take the lead in coordinating them and having all of us work together. Certainly, Yeshiva University will warmly and enthusiastically encourage such cooperation and coordination. But the strident and often truculent divisiveness and internecine attacks must abate if we are to make progress.

In the sheur that I teach at Yeshiva, we are presently learning Pesachim.^{The} Mishnah (Pes. 48b) describes various stages in the fermentation process, whereby dough which is qualified as matzah sours and ultimately becomes chametz. The first step in this souring process is when the dough becomes discolored. The Mishnah uses a fascinating metaphor for this discoloration: hikhsifu penehem, when the dough turns pale, like a man whose face blanches when his hair stands on end when he is shocked. The last stage of the process is when cracks appear on the surface of the hardening dough, and the cracks intermingle with each other: sedakin she'nitarvu zeh bazeh.

When the petty rivalries in our community, the ad hominem insults, the begrudging recognition we give each other, the lashon hara and bad-mouthing that is rampant, reach the stage that we do not just have two or three splits but splits on top of splits, and dissension upon dissension, then it is a sign that our whole community may be heading in the direction of chametz -- puffed up with

self-importance, vacuous, and devoid of its freshness, its vigor, its cohesiveness. I am not preaching the usual doctrine of unity, but warning against the unworthy animosities that we can ill afford at this juncture in our history. It is a major challenge to the new leadership of the Orthodox Union to exercise leadership in attempting to bring all the segments of the community closer to each other and to speak of each other with respect and honor even where we have different perceptions.

I should now like to mention one other phenomenon that causes all of us grief. It conforms with the alternative definition of chametz that I just mentioned: when the dough blanches like the face of a man whose hair stands on end. It is a symbol of all that is shocking, scandalous, and dreadful. I refer to the fraud and deceit and dissembling with which we have lived for too long and which, now exposed to the light of day, cause us such moral anguish because of the chillul hashem involved. Of course, no one has a right to point a finger at all Orthodox Jews because of certain individuals who are moral idiots, who have no ethical sense. But it goes much beyond that. What is shocking is that in the desperate fight for survival, too many of our most important Torah institutions have allowed their representatives to play fast and loose with the law and with moral principles. I find no solace in the news that many minority groups have ripped off the government, and therefore we are not alone. When others do it, it is merely a crime; when we

do it, it is a desecration, it is blasphemy. The Orthodox Union must assume the very difficult role of a moral vigilante for the entire Orthodox community -- even if it is uncomfortable, because no one wants to pose as self-righteous -- and even if it means making enemies. For someone to know of corruption and abide it and tolerate it and suffer it, is to be a partner in it. The Gemara (Shevuot 39) tells us that this is the essence of the principle of kol yisrael areivin zeh ba-zeh, that all Jews are responsible one for the other: ke'she'yesh be-yado limchot ve-lo michah, nifra'in memenu u-mi'kol ha-olam -- if one has the power to protest [evil] and fails to do so, both he and the whole world are punished. The Orthodox Jewish "world" has suffered too much from such scandals to allow it to be passive in the face of new exposures.

This is a painful subject. And even if the public were not already aware of it, we would be morally obligated to raise the issue and air it. How much more so, if it is out in the open. I am reminded of the words of Rav Kook in one of his letters:

הנני כותב את הדברים האלה לא מפני שיש לי כח
לכתוב אלא מפני שאין לי כח להשתתק

-- "I write these words not because I have the strength to write, but because I do not have the strength to remain silent."

In the hierarchy of values in Judaism, the study of Torah is preeminent. This axiological fact must be re-

flected in the priorities that the Orthodox Union sets for itself as the representatives of the organized laity or Orthodox Jewry in America and Canada. Chinukh must remain the foremost goal, beyond all else. And even though the Orthodox Union is not in itself an educational organization, it must make every effort to exercise its influence on the rest of the community on behalf of education, if it is to play a significant role in ushering in a renaissance of Orthodoxy.

It must see to it that Orthodox synagogues give primacy to the education of their membership, old as well as young. I shall repeat what I told a group of rabbis some time ago: We may well have made a historic mistake in asserting the definition of an Orthodox synagogue as one that contains a mechitzah, or one of a certain height. How much better off we all would be today if the working definition would have been: an Orthodox synagogue is one in which Torah is studied regularly by most of its membership. Of course, I do not mean to say that I deem such deviations insignificant; I do not. But our priorities were incorrect. Study of Torah outweighs all other values -- even that of public adherence to the proper forms. It is possible for a "shul" with a mechitzah to foster am ha'aratzut; it is exceedingly rare that a truly learned congregation will deviate from the Halakhah.

Orthodox synagogues must become ever more active in their educational efforts to engage the searchers and the inquirers.

We must intensify the "outreach" programs that have given the impetus to the baal teshuvah movement. I am proud that it is Yeshiva University which, over 20 years ago, opened the first "baal-teshuvah yeshiva" -- the Jewish Studies Program, today the James Striar School -- which ushered in, felicitously, a whole group of imitators.

On the formal level, the Orthodox Union, both collectively and its members individually, must make a greater effort for high school education than it has in the past. Elementary day school yeshivot by themselves are simply inadequate.

Indeed, our community is mature enough to make a new and special effort to see to it that more of our young people continue their advanced Torah studies on the college level. I am pleased at all the yarmulkes that one sees on the campuses of Columbia, NYU, Harvard, Princeton, and elsewhere. I am pleased at the number of observant young women at Barnard and Radcliffe. I am delighted that many of them attend an occasional sheur. I am even more pleased that Yeshiva University, through Yeshiva College and Stern College for Women, still offers the maximal combination of Torah U-Madda, of full Torah learning combined with a comprehensive undergraduate liberal arts and sciences education. I wish that more young people would recognize the need for more systematic and consistent talmud torah on the college level.

The message that the Orthodox Union must impart to all its constituents, and which they must engrave on the agendas

of their individual communities as priority number one is: chinukh, education! Much as I love Israel, much as I rue the imminent return of the Sinai to Egypt, much as I dread the possibility of the redivision of Jerusalem, I will say this and proclaim it from the rooftops: the future of Jewish people will be decided not by who owns the sands of Sinai, but by how many and what quality young people study in Jewish schools where the Torah of Mt. Sinai is taught; that the fate of Judaism will be fashioned not by whose flag flies over East Jerusalem, but by who is attuned to the devar ha-Shem, the word of the Lord that issues from Jerusalem! We have lived without Jewish sovereignty over Jerusalem for some 2000 years or 100 generations; but our history provides hardly any example of the continuity of Judaism beyond three or four generations of Jews without Jewish practice and learning and scholarship.

If we want priorities, that is our single most important priority.

III

OUTWARDS

So much for the inward directions that we must take. Let me now adumbrate some of the principles that ought to guide us in our relations with the outside world.

We must recognize the grim situation in which we exist: progressive erosion all about is, even if there is an intensification at the core. The article in Midstream a year ago predicting effective withering away of Jewish population of the United States by 2076 has not scared us enough. I am not a sociologist, and I am incompetent to evaluate the methodology and sampling used by the author. But, clearly, a combination of shrinking demography, rising intermarriage,

rampant assimilation, and a deadening ignorance spell disaster for our people. We are in the midst of sustaining a vast assault on both the quantity and the quality of our people and our faith. Amongst too many of our fellow Jews, the elemental cohesiveness of the Jewish people is beginning to unravel.

But although the future seems grim, indeed, it is by no means hopeless. I recall what Justice Louis Brandeis said when he was asked what he thought of the inevitable; he said, "I'm opposed to it"...

Our current perilous situation was not unanticipated. For decades we, and those who preceded us, have been warning the Jewish community of the dangers of ignorance and non-observance of the tenets of halakhic Judaism. Yet, we dare not take satisfaction from seeing our warnings realized. Woe to us if we are the only ones who survive. We cannot exist only for ourselves. We do not have the moral right to assume that, if the continuation of other Jews is problematical, we will cut ourselves off from them in order to save ourselves.

For too long, we have left the concern for Kelal Yisrael to others, the non-Orthodox, as their exclusive domain. For too long, we have given others the impression that we are parochial, narrow, and unconcerned with others.

There are two principles which ought to define our relationships with non-Orthodox Jews, each uttered by a great medieval Jewish philosopher. R. Saadia Gaon (Emunot Ve'deot

3:7) taught אין אומתנו אלא בתורה --

"our people is a people only by virtue of the Torah." Torah is the absolute, Israel is contingent. Later on, R. Yehudah Halevi (Kuzari 2:56) wrote: אך לילא בני ישראל לא היתה
 מורה בעולם -- "Were it not for the Children of Israel, there would be no Torah in the world." The values here are reversed. Now, I submit, we must accept both. We must not yield on a single halakhah of all of Torah -- and must not abdicate a single Jew, let alone whole communities of Jews.

When I addressed the OU Convention in this city 12 years ago, I maintained that we were fighting the wrong enemies; that we were still attacking Conservative and Reform groups, when they were no longer the real "enemy." I identified the latter as secularism and the various secularist Jewish agencies, some of which defined their greatest mission as fighting, in the public arena, the Day School movement.

Now, a decade later, that is no longer true. We are, I believe, entering a post-secular age.

The real problem with which the organized traditional community must wrestle in this coming period is not the threat of heterodox groups or secularist Jewish organizations. Rather, it is the social and communal and moral chaos that results from a gaping void, a noetic vacuum that gnaws at the innards of our young, that agitates the minds and hearts of a whole generation of our people, who have not been exposed to the God of Israel and the Torah, and who no longer have as a substitute what the assimilating Jews of

our generations had, namely, a national consensus of a secularized "Americanism." Since Vietnam, this secular religion has become unstuck and undone. Hence, the proliferation of cults, one crazier than the other, into which a disproportionately large number of Jewish young people have been sucked. In this phenomenon of unconnected Jewish souls searching for some transcendent anchor in a universe of values and meaning, lies our great promise -- and our great danger. If we turn away from the rest of the Jewish community, if we allow ancient rivalries and ossified jealousies to determine our policies, we shall be fighting the wrong enemies; we shall be tilting against windmills while the earth opens up and swallows the best, the finest, and the most sensitive of our young. We have a sacred responsibility for all Jews, no matter where they belong or what their perceptions.

I would not want you to think that I entertain a pessimistic view of the future. I am worried -- that is true. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote that "it is the business of the future to be dangerous." And indeed it is. But a Jew never despairs.

Ani Maamim be-emunah shelemah -- that we will make it, that we will survive -- perhaps as a smaller group, but as a more dynamic force; that Torah will not perish and the Jewish people will not vanish; that God did not pluck us out of the camps and the ovens -- of what Elie Wiesel calls the Kingdom of the Night -- and bring us back to the land of

our fathers, restored to the dignity of Jewish independence, only in order to smother us in freedom and affluence. The crisis we are undergoing is a grave one -- but we shall survive it and we shall be Jewishly and civically and humanly creative.

Ultimately, it depends on us -- with our meager resources, our weariness, our feeling of depletion. But there is no one else to do it. The "Chazon Ish" once wrote in a letter:

וְאֵינִי מֵאֲמָר שֶׁ
הַדְּבָרִים הַלְלוּרִים, וְכִי כִנְחָה
לֵב בְּעֵצָה.

"I have always found things difficult; I have hardly ever found anything easy." Certainly, the task of ushering in a period of renaissance for Torah is difficult. It is not easy. But it must be done.

IV

We talked about our directions as a community and as an organization. We spoke of panim, our "faces" directed inwards and outwards.

But ultimately, a collectivity is determined by its constituent parts. A community cannot progress if its individuals do not have the will. An organization can go no place if its members lack zeal.

This means, in the final analysis, that the future of Jewish life in this country, and abroad, depends on us as individuals. And here too the word panim is crucial.

The " *pana nae* " tells us that the word *pana* can be read not only as panim but also as penim: interiority, inwardness, insideness. So does he interpret the word panav, in the Birkhat Kohanim: *pana nae* , May God cause His inwardness to shine upon you and ignite your own inwardness, to give you depth of spirit and mind and insight.

Such penim can be achieved only through the study of Torah. Only by means of Torah can we penetrate beyond the superficial panim and attain the depth, the intensity, the fullness of a rich interiority, of a vibrant inner life.

My hope and prayer, as we head into the next decade, is that our panim be courageously directed to our own community and outward to kelal yisrael as well; and that as individuals, we achieve the blessing of penim.

pana nae , May God direct His inner will and love toward us and evoke our own human penim, *pana nae* , and grant us, the State of Israel, and all the world, the blessing of shalom.