

World Conference of Orthodox Leadership

The condition of Judaism in the Jewish world, as reflected in a number of the presentations we have heard at this Conference, reenforces my feeling that it is not easy, nowadays, to be an Orthodox Jew--certainly not a דתי or Religious Zionist or what in America today is called a Modern or Centrist Orthodox Jew. You often feel oppressed by both sides, קרח מכאן ומכאן, betwixt and between, "between a rock and a hard place," and feel like crying out, "אוי לי מיצרי ואוי לי מיוצרי." The old Yiddish expression applies with special relevance: עס איז שווער צו זיין א איד--but it is even more difficult to be a Jew who is passionate in his convictions yet moderate in his expressions, who pursues the goals of עם ישראל בא"י--with or without any underlying pre-Messianic assumptions--and who acknowledges that the "outside world" must be honestly engaged.

We are attacked, from certain quarters, for being slavishly loyal to the Torah heritage, supposedly marking us as uncultured and coercive Neanderthals, as benighted advocates of anti-democratic intolerance who preach and practice violence. At the same we are assailed from the other side as unqualified and illegitimate and not authentically Orthodox because we do not pay obeisance to self-anointed avatars of "ידעת תורה"; or because we believe in Torah U-Madda; or because we affirm that the State of Israel is no exception to the principle that nothing in this world escapes the notice and control of the השגחה העליונה; or for our insistence that כלל ישראל includes those who do not necessarily agree with us on every count.

But for whatever the consolation is worth--it was always thus. Since the beginning of the modern era, with the Emancipation and the Enlightenment, Jews were forced to take sides: either for or against modernity. And so those of us who felt that our integrity as בני תורה required that we believe in Zionism and שיבת ציון in cooperation with secular Zionists and the legitimacy of secular studies under the rubric of תורה ומדע--found that there was no place for us on the polemical map that had been drawn up by both extremes.

This exposed position resulted in an existential *angst*, a most stressful inner psychological tension. Thus, almost 100 years ago (in an article in גיליון 274 "המליץ" in 1899) the great Mizrahi orator, Rabbi Yitzhak Nissenbaum, cried out, אנחנו הציונים החרדיים נמצאים בין הפטיש והסדן. אין אנו יכולים ואיננו חפצים לוותר על אות אחת שבציונות. And another eminent personality, Rabbi Meir Berlin, complained that אנחנו המזרחיים נמצאים במצב הבלתי-נעים לעמוד בין שתי החזיתות. That groan, I am sure, you recognize quite well; we are no strangers to it--because it reveals an intra-psychic agony, a split of one's inner consciousness..

cc: R.H.P. Jonathan Sacks (England)

I confess: there are times that the condition of our people--politically, religiously, morally, culturally--inclines me to despair, ח"ו. And I ask myself: am I reading the situation correctly?

Should our condition not inspire realistic hopelessness? Well, consider this picture: a society that is virtually paganized, Jewish ignorance rampant, the people worshipping at every pagan shrine that happens to be fashionable, immorality and debauchery widespread, political murder and devious intrigue endemic, a deep and apparently unbridgeable split in the population--is this not cause for deep pessimism?

My answer is: No, it is not. Because the situation I described is *not* that of the late 20th century Israel or American Jewry. It *was* the condition of the Jewish people in the days of the Judges, only a few generations removed from Moses and Joshua. Read שופטים פרק ט'--that is where my word-portrait comes from: the dreadful reign of ירבעל בן ירבעל. Yet it was to be followed by the emergence of Samuel and David and Solomon, of תורה שבעל פה and the Sages... No, Jews do not and should not--perhaps *cannot*--despair.

The Sifre teaches: למה נקרא שמם אלהים אחרים, מפני שהם מאחרין הטובה מלבוא לעולם (עקב יא, טז). The term for idols in the Torah, *elohim acherim*, means not only "other gods," but: gods who delay--referring to the postponement of felicity and goodness in the world. Upon which Rav Kook comments: דוקא **לְאַחַר** את הטובה יש בכחם של מקלקלים ומהרסים, בישראל, ולא **לְאַחַד** את הטובה *delay* the advent of goodness and redemption, but they cannot cancel it altogether. That is bad enough, but no--never despair!

Despite the psychological travail and spiritual loneliness of the founders of Religious Zionism I mentioned earlier, they persevered and they prevailed. And we must do the same and not worry that such tensions belie the truth or rightness of our *Weltanschauung*. Moreover, there is a deeper truth we must be aware of: I commend to your attention the words of the Tanya who wrote about the anguish of being caught in a spiritual tug of war between one's נפש הבהמית and his נפש האלקית--one's ubiquitous carnal desires and his nobler and purer self: ולכן לא יפול לב אדם עליו ולא ירע לבבו מאוד גם אם יהיה כן כל ימיו. במלחמה זו כי **אולי לכך נברא וזאת עבודתו** (תניא פרק כז). He is telling us not only that we ought courageously and graciously accept the situation, even if it is a life-long struggle--but that *this inner struggle and constant embattlement and spiritual torment is itself a form of עבודת ה', a way of serving God!* It is our *destiny*, not only our *fate*. And I believe this holds true not only for individuals but for communities, for movements, for a whole **ציבור** as well as for individuals.

It is imperative that we take that advice to heart. Our inner tensions and our temporary disappointments, and especially the attacks upon us from without, have implanted in us an attitude about ourselves that cries out for attention. I am worried by our poor self-image as Modern Orthodox, Religious Zionist Jews, and troubled by the fact that we allow ourselves to be victimized by recurrent attacks of pessimism. We are vulnerable to the sometimes fatal disease of self-doubt and fail to understand that inner tensions too are a

form--our characteristic form--of עבודת ה'. We suffer from an inner failure of philosophic nerve. We have been bullied into doubting our own שיטה, the one on which we have built our whole lives. When one or another of the sides that surround us shouts loud enough and long enough, we begin to wonder if maybe we were wrong all along, that others are right and we are in error. And there is nothing more deadly than that kind of pernicious self-doubt which, like a poisonous worm which begins to twist and turn and spew forth its noxious fluids, paralyzes a man's initiative and dignity and, finally, attenuates and compromises his integrity.

This, then, is a time for us to reaffirm our faith in our own most fundamental principles, and our confidence in the correctness of our convictions. Assailed by extremists of all sides, we must stand up with strength, with both the courage of our convictions and the conviction of our courage.

There *is* a time for self-questioning, even for a degree of self-doubt. Without submitting our ideas to constant scrutiny, truth will elude us and we will begin to believe our own propaganda. But this holds for the superstructure of our ideals; our fundamental convictions must, for a mature person, be accepted at one point in his/her life, and taken as givens. Besides, leaders must especially understand that their followers have no patience for endless conversations and want to bring their cherished ideals from the stratosphere of debate to the realm of action. So, now is such a time. The kind of Yiddishkeit we stand for must be reasserted at the very time it is assaulted.

The letter ע in the word שמע of ישראל is writ large, it is an עין רבתי. Why so? R. Samson Raphael Hirsch explains: It is large in order not to be mistaken for an א, for the word שמא means "maybe," "perhaps"; it is the sign of self-doubt, of hesitation, of unsureness. Such שמא is the very opposite of שמע, which connotes a commanding certainty and rightness.

So, no matter where the attacks come from, we must have the strength and the courage to proclaim שמע for our principles--שמע and not, Heaven forbid, שמא. Only if you begin with a wholehearted שמע will you be able to attain the ultimate goal of אמת--and it will be ויצב ונכון וקיים וישר ונאמן ואהוב וחביב ונחמד ונעים ויפה.....

Kenneth Clark concluded his massive study, *Civilization*, by stating, "It is lack of confidence, more than anything else, that kills a civilization." If what we have cherished as our interpretation of our "civilization," is to thrive and flourish, then we must rid ourselves of our שמא stance and return to a firm and self-respecting שמע attitude.

It is worth repeating what I reported to a meeting in this holy city of Jerusalem a number of years ago. A rabbi of a [prominent synagogue in New York was having trouble because of some *kannaim*. He was not a student of the Rav זצ"ל, and so he asked me to introduce him and obtain an interview with him. I did so and, upon his return, he reported that he poured his heart out to the Rav, who listened quietly, without comment. When the rabbi was finished, the Rav raised his head and said: in the end of this week's Sidra we read that

ויעקב הלך לדרכו ויפגעו בו מלאכי אלקים...So, my advice to you is to emulate our Father Jacob: if your goal is to do what is right in the eyes of הקב"ה, if you want to encounter the angels, follow your own way, the one you believe to be the right way, and look neither to the right nor to the left--only be yourself...

Yet we do live in a rather closed society and cannot ignore others in it. So, while holding our heads high, we must still have lateral vision and we must do two things simultaneously: first, continue to study and reflect deeply and honestly on our own שיטה; and second, engage our fellow Jews of other persuasions and be prepared to defend our thesis and attack opposing ones.

On the first item, we at Y.U. are now working, and have been for some time, in conjunction with individuals and institutions that share our world-view . Thus:

- * We consistently encourage Aliyah, and send some 500 students a year to Israeli educational institutions that share our commitment to Religious Zionism.
- * We are creating a תורה ומדע literature--the *Torah Umadda Journal* and a number of volumes printed and scheduled for publication
- * In conjunction with KTAV Publishing Company, we have, over the past several years, established the Library of Jewish Law and Ethics and a new series on Jewish Thought, Kabbalah and Hasidism--many of which treat quite directly of the subjects that are unique to us, and others do so tangentially and indirectly
- * We helped found a think-tank, the "Orthodox Forum," which already has several significant volumes published on issues of importance to our approach to Judaism
- * Similarly, we inspired the founding of the "Orthodox Caucus," a more pragmatically oriented group of rabbis, academicians and, especially, laymen who are leaders, to implement our ideology in practice. They have so far initiated the pre-nuptial agreement to avoid the black-mail *agunah* situations, and they have resuscitated the Beth Din
- * In the wake of the Rabin assassination, I have appointed a Y.U. Commission on Judaism and Human Values, a group of distinguished educators, headed by an eminent alumnus of Yeshiva, which will explore *from the sources of our tradition*, the vexing problems of tolerance and democracy and what I prefer to call "the ethics of disagreement."

The second item, our encounter with others, presents somewhat of a problem: by ideological definition as moderates; we are for peace and cooperation and against מחלוקת and divisiveness. We work in the tradition of R. Joseph Caro who explained in his בית יוסף that the passage of איזהו מקומן was chosen for recital every morning because it is the only chapter in Mishnayot which contains no מחלוקת whatever. Yet, we often have no choice but to engage in polemics and controversy. But even if we do, it is not an enjoyable thing; it remains a dangerous experience.

And these dangers are becoming more evident day by day. The word that is tossed about with increasing frequency is *Kulturkampf*--the war between cultures. The term came into

vogue during the reign of Bismarck in the last half of the 19th century, when he led the Protestant struggle against the German Catholics. It was a battle between two religions, and it was not a desirable experience for any country. In the Jewish community, we hear the term מלחמת התרבות already in the early years of the 20th century. And in America, sociologists and legal scholars write openly of a *Kulturkampf* gathering force in our own days, except that it changed over from being a war between religions when John Kennedy was elected President, and became, instead, a war of moral views--abortion, homosexuality, sex education, authority, etc.--that cuts across religious lines. Such a *Kulturkampf* can rapidly deteriorate into a permanent, hate-laden split in the society, one that may be irreparable--and such danger is more real in Israel than in America, which is why we hear so often the ominous whisper, "civil war."

Are we on the brink of a cultural-moral *Kulturkampf*--both here and in the Diaspora? Indeed, part of our anguish is the fact that the situation is not that much different in Israel from what it is in the USA. For the "street" in Israel is much the same as that of New York or Chicago or San Francisco. Israel is becoming Americanized--and that is a tragedy. As חז"ל put it: (מדרש שמואל (בבב) פרשה כב) לא עשיתם וכטובים לא עשיתם--there has been far more assimilation of low, vulgar American culture, on the level of Michael Jackson and Madonna and other such gutter-icons, than imitation of the best and finest of American cultural creativity. And concomitant with this Americanization comes de-Judaization: a cavalier, dismissive, even contemptuous attitude towards Jewish tradition *especially by the intelligentsia in the academy and the media*.

But if the situation is nevertheless deplorable, and if we are reluctant to engage in מחלוקת, are we being inexorably driven into a *Kulturkampf*? חס ושלום! It is hard to overstate the dangers of a *Kulturkampf*, for it implies the unravelling of the social fabric because of the loss of a common language, the absence of some substratum of common identity.

The answer is that all sides, in so far as they are amenable to an engagement that is less than a *Kulturkampf*, must commit to *dialogue*--one that is dignified despite being in dead earnest, respectful albeit sharp, civil no matter what the temptation, and kept to words and ideas, and not to mutual destruction. I know that here have been attempts at such dialogue, by Gesher and other groups and individuals. But there must be more, and deeper, and more intensive dialogue. And they must be subject to certain stringent conditions.

Let me suggest four such rules of conduct for the ideological dialogue between Judaism and secularism. I found these rules in a slim volume, in the course of some research I was doing on the Hasidic-Mitnagdic polemic. It is called משיבת נפש (Warsaw: 1900) and it is a plagiarized version of an earlier work called וכווח רבא which, in turn, is a plagiary of מוצרף העבודה--and which is pseudepigraphic: it is not what it purports to be, and the author's name is fictitious. Despite such a questionable pedigree, the introduction contains the following sensible, reasonable rules for the conduct of the dialogue between Hasidim and Mitnagdim and which we might well use in the context of our situation. They are:

- * אהבת ישראל--for all Jews...no hate, and carry on the dialogue with Jews...And it must relate to the issues and not be *ad hominem*.
- * להסיר כעס מלבך--no shouting, no threats, no purple rhetoric. The debate should be what sociologists call "convictional" rather than "emotive."
- * אל תבקש גדולה לעצמך--remove your ego from the equation; try to be objective and understanding of your opponent. And, if you make a mistake--*admit it!*
- * שלא לאהב את הנצחון--no triumphalism, no attempt to win debater's points, only a mutual search for אמת ושלוש--if not the whole truth that I espouse, then at least a mutual peace that benefits all sides

Too many Orthodox Jews maintain that you aren't permitted to engage in non-hostile conversation with people you regard as אפיקורסים or who are otherwise theologically flawed. But I disagree--and I prefer to follow the lead of no less an authority than the Maharal of Prague who taught the following (at the end of his *Be'er ha-Golah*):

It is proper, out of love of reason and knowledge, that you not [summarily] reject anything that opposes your own ideas, especially so if [your adversary] does not intend merely to provoke you, but rather to declare his beliefs. And even if such [beliefs] are opposed to your own faith and religion, do not say [to your opponent], "Speak not, close your mouth." If that happens, there will take place no purification of religion. On the contrary, you should, at such times, say, "Speak up as much as you want, say whatever you wish, and do not say later that had you been able to speak you would have replied further." For one who causes his opponent to hold his peace and refrain from speaking, demonstrates [thereby] the weakness of his own religious faith... This is therefore the opposite of what some people think, namely, that when you prevent someone from speaking against religion, that strengthens religion. That is not so, because curbing the words of an opponent in religious matters is naught but the curbing and enfeebling of religion [itself]. . .

For the proper way in order to attain the truth is to hear [others'] arguments which they hold sincerely. It is wrong simply to reject an opponent's ideas; instead, draw him close to you and delve deeply into his words. . .

Surely, after 400 years it is time we took that message to heart.

At the last convention of the American Agudath Israel, a leading member of its מועצת גדולי התורה delivered an address, published last month in the Agudah's house organ, in which he bemoaned the fact that:

except for the heroic efforts of the *Kiruv* movement...there is no *relating* in any way between us and [the *Chilonim*], except for verbal stone-throwing at one another. There is only a state of war, hot or cold, a total breakdown of communication. Even in the atmosphere of hostility and attacks upon religion that we experience, our responses cannot be limited only to ideological warfare. There are also additional ways. Especially at this time, when emotions are beginning to subside... may I humbly suggest that the

leaders of *Charedi* Jewry consider ways and means... to speak to the people, to engage them in serious dialogue, to convey *our* message, *our* vision, the message and vision of Torah thought, as it applies to the entire society; to reach out to the entire family of Jews in the spirit of "We are all the children of one man." We are still, after all the fighting, one brotherhood of people. We must express the words that will serve to dispel the hatred, that will move and open minds and hearts that are at present warped by prejudice... It would certainly be a *Kiddush Shem Shamayim*

These are wonderful words--eloquent, mature, moderate, thoughtful, responsible--and we should all answer *אמן* after them. Let us heed this call for genuine dialogue (and not just a disguised *kiruv* effort, admirable as that may be) and do so together, as a united religious Jewry, in an open and honest approach to the *Chiloni* world; all of us-- *חרדים*, *דתיים*, *חילוניים*--will benefit from it. No one will have to relinquish his own principles and values, and all will serve the cause of *אהבת ה'*, *אהבת ישראל*, and *אהבת התורה*. And if not that, perhaps at least *חרדים* and *דתיים* can begin to talk with each other as fellow Orthodox Jews, as co-workers for Torah, each in his own way, in friendship and peace. If these words were meant and accepted in this spirit, it would mark a new and high point in the resolve of all Orthodox Jewry to work together in facing and perhaps avoiding the emerging *Kulturkampf* with the secularist Jewish community. It would allow us to achieve a marvelous balance between *שלום* and *אמת*, reconciling peace and principle.

When our ancestors faced a military threat from Sisera, an implacable and dangerous enemy, the prophetess Deborah and the commander of the Israelite forces Barak ben Avinoam took counsel about the predicament of their people. *ויאמר אליה בלק, אם תלכי*. Barak insisted that Deborah join him in the looming battle. *עמי והלכתי ואם לא תלכי לא אלך*. What exactly did he have in mind? *אם תלכי עמי לשירה אלך עמך למלחמה*. *רבי נחמיה אמר: ואם לא תלכי עמי לשירה לא אלך עמך למלחמה* --(בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשה מ ד"ה ויהי כאשר) Barak insisted that Deborah promise to join him in the victory song after the battle, and only then would he consent to join her in the fighting.

That makes sense when the battle is against a mortal enemy, when the two sides are out to destroy each other utterly; then the war comes first, and the celebrations afterwards. However, in our days, as we prepare for an ideological encounter with our fellow Jews of far different persuasions than those we cherish, we face each others as brothers and sisters, who wish each other well and are as one beneath and beyond all ideological differences. *This* kind of *מלחמה* is at one with the *שירה*--the struggle and the celebration are the same, for the *מלחמה* is a form of *שירה*: the different sounds must blend together in one ultimate symphony; or, if you will, each side sings different lyrics, but the music is the same.

I cannot, in all fairness and honesty, leave this topic of divisiveness and ideological struggle without mentioning, far more briefly than I should, that not all is well, in this regard, in our own camp. I mentioned earlier the hopes that at least the *חרדים* and *דתיים* can learn to work together. Now let me plead to the *דתיים* to be civil and cooperative with each other! Some of us in the Diaspora are critical of our Israeli counterparts for the lack of *אחדות* in the *camp*--*Mafdal* vs. *Meimad*, *סיעות מכל המינים*, power struggles, the quest for positions of authority. I find such criticism, right though it may be, rather

blind. Before criticizing others, we ought to look in the mirror. American Modern Orthodoxy is not quite a paragon of intracommunal peace and love and dignity. I confess to you that I am often discouraged by the קטנות המוחין which befools our communal nest. I find the organizational rivalry to be petty and the personal agendas characterized by more ego than is absolutely necessary. It is distressing how good people, all committed to the same transcendently sublime cause, can cause each other so much grief. The time has come for us to practice ourselves what we preach to others. But--enough said.

It is appropriate, in this context, to conclude with the words of Rav Kook in his יעולת "ראייה": On the statement תלמידי חכמים מרבים שלום בעולם, that scholars of Torah increase peace in the world, he writes that it is erroneous to assume that universal peace is subverted by תלמידי חכמים who are fiercely independent in their views, each proclaiming a different opinion. He emphasizes the word מרבים, they *increase* peace:

הריבוי של שלום הוא, שיתראו כל הצדדים וכל השיטות, ויתבררו איך כולם יש להם מקום, כל אחד לפי עכו מקומו וענינו. ואדרבא, גם העניינים הנראים כמיותרים או כסותרים, נראו ... שרק ע"י קיבוץ כל החלקים וכל הפרטים ... דוקא על ידם נראה אור האמת והצדק ודעת ה' ויראתו ואהבתו ואור תורת האמת. על כן ת"ח מרבים שלום בעולם, כי במה שהם מרחיבים ומבארים ומילדים דברי חכמה חדשים ... שיש בהם רבוי וחילוק עניינים, בזה הם מרבים שלום בעולם, שנאמר וכל בניך למודי ה'. ... שכולם גם החפכים בדרכיהם ושיטותיהם כפי הנראה, המה כולם למודי ה', ובכל אחת מהנה יש צד שיתגלה על ידו ידיעת ה' ואור אמיתו. "ורב שלום בניך" -- לא אמר גדול שלום בניך, שהיה מורה על ציור גוף אחד גדול ... אבל הרבוי הוא רב שלום בניך. "אל תקרי בןך אלא בוגדך" -- כי הבנין יבנה מחלקים שונים, והאמת של אור העולם תבנה מצדדים שונים ומשיטות שונות, שאלו ואלו דברי אלקים חיים

Each opinion, within the legitimate bounds of Torah, has its own assured place--even views diametrically opposed to each other. The peace sages bring to the world is not monolithic; it is colorful, variegated, multifarious. They *increase* (the Hebrew word here implies multiplicity) peace, and that is why the passage emphasizes "your builders," for a structure is not erected of one but of many substances. The peace Torah recommends is not one of blase uniformity; it is a total clash of vigorous and pure principles, the totality of which gives beauty and endurance to Torah, to Israel, and to the world.

May it be His will--and our ambition--that such subtle but real and sublime vision of peace prevail not only amongst תלמידי חכמים but amongst all Jews, all Israel--and even amongst ourselves!