

Norman Lamm: Halacha Doesn't Change Like Fashion

by Rabbi Norman Lamm—Reprinted from the January issue of "The Jewish World".

Orthodoxy is not a movement within Judaism, no, it is Judaism itself. Orthodoxy is the sole legitimate heir of Judaism, and if it has any faults, these are not the faults of Orthodoxy as a movement but rather those of contemporary Judaism.

Certainly there are faults. The chief fault lies with that wing within Orthodoxy which has run away from history, which has shut itself off from the world, which refuses to come to terms with changing reality, which has made "splendid isolation" its watchword while awaiting the arrival of the Messiah. Yet there is another wing within Orthodoxy, too, which proclaims that, although the Jewish people as a people does not indeed follow the ordinary course of history and is not subject to the standard laws of history, and therefore cannot be "normal" in the true sense of the term—nevertheless it should not decline to partake in history. This trend in Orthodoxy has grown especially strong in the United States. The great difficulty facing the Jew today is that of living in both worlds—a difficulty which has found concrete expression in the way of life of the State of Israel—but most Orthodox Jews in the United States have already learned how to live in both worlds, and the introduction of combined programs of secular and religion education is one proof positive of this.

As for *convenience*—that is a relative notion. Personally, I find it very convenient to be an Orthodox Jew, because I find it convenient to be at peace with myself as a whole Jew. But he who defines convenience not in terms of making peace with himself but rather with the pleasures of the moment, with easy life, will doubtless find the Conservatives more convenient, and even more so the Reform. Convenience of this kind has been one of the great American principles (at least until three years ago), and, as Rabbi Yehuda the Pious used to say, "As is the custom of the Christians, so too is the custom of the Jews. . . ." The success of the Conservative and the Reform is based mostly on love of comfort. The reason for the fact that a large section of American Jewry has been turning

away from Orthodoxy is not that they have tasted of religion and found it wanting—they have never tasted of religion at all, and therefore have no idea of the nature of goodness and the nature of the good life.

The Conservatives and the Reform argue that they have a *harder* time, because they are obligated to wage a constant battle for harmonizing religion and life. This is a wholly specious argument. What kind of battle is it when your sole concern is to adjust to life rather than to grapple with it, when the supposed warriors declare in advance the victory of the alleged demands of life, in the name of which they sacrifice in advance the principles of religion? Do they really grapple with the issues of science? No, they merely uncritically, try to adjust religion to science. We, too, have begun to grapple with these problems. For us, to be sure, this involves both mental struggle and long meditation—because we are not prepared to give up the fight in advance. We have an organization of young scientists, both men and women, with a learned periodical, where an effort is being made to come to terms with modern science in the spirit of our religion, the underlying principle however being the unchanging authority of the Halacha.

The interviewer: The Torah was handed down by Moses on Sinai—but was the Halacha too handed down by Moses?

Answer: By its very nature, the Halacha is unchangeable. It is not a passing fad: rather it embodies the changeless law of life and man, the eternal element in the relationship between Man and God, and Man and Creation, which remains forever true. Why should it be necessary to alter truth? Does an eternal truth become less true with the passage of time?

The interviewer: In order to determine what is and what is not eternal in Jewish religion it is necessary to have rabbis endowed with the quality of eternal greatness. Do you find within yourselves the power to decide what is and what is not eternal, and by this power also to meet the issues of the present?

Answer: It isn't possible to answer all questions. Even the scientists themselves cannot answer all

questions. But I do admit that we have not managed to do everything. . . .

The interviewer: For lack of time, capacity, or will?

Answer: Perhaps there hasn't been sufficient awakening to the need for solving the problems. But it is also true that the education of the younger generation takes most of our time and attention, and the instruction of our kids in yeshivot is an immense undertaking in its own right.

The interviewer: In that case you are liable to graduate from the yeshivot a lot of kids who are well-versed in the Torah but are quite unprepared to meet outside reality, which is out of touch with the Torah. . . . You criticize Reform, yet your own deliberate isolation creates a vacuum which cannot but be filled by Reform.

Answer: I plead guilty to this count. Personally, I have long maintained that the way to fight Reform is not merely to impeach them, but to start devising our own solutions to the problems. In fact, rather than fight Reform, we should struggle with reality. I must also admit that there is a measure of personal timidity evident among the Orthodox, but such timidity is a natural and maybe, at times, even a healthy phenomenon: the dangers of fear and cowardice are perhaps no greater than those of reckless "courage." For courage and exertion are not necessarily proofs of real bravery. Timidity, however, becomes a morbid trait when, instead of serving its true purpose—which is to warn us against traps on the way—it prevents us from engaging in any activity at all. But in that case we should overcome it. Even then, however, not for the purpose of working *changes* in the Halacha, but rather for the purpose of fashioning new answers from ones. Today, unfortunately, a frenzy of change has overtaken everyone. As though the main thing were merely to change. But why should this be the most important thing? Suppose modern reality does not require all these changes? Has anyone ever bothered to make a truly complete study of both our Halacha and our reality, and come up with proof positive that the Halacha is bad for our age?

The interviewer: Have you,

the Orthodox, ever bothered to make a truly complete study of our Halacha and our reality, and have you come up with proof positive that the Halacha is good for our age?

Answer: Merely because it does not lie within our human power to make it complete, does not mean that we should make it partial. There is a short cut which is in truth a long way, an easy way which is in fact hard. But precisely because we do not have such power, we must guard the Torah zealously, and avoid the easy way.

And then you ask me: what am I doing here, in other words, why, as a Jew, am I not there, in the State of Israel? I look upon the reality of the State of Israel as a holy reality, but without any mythology. I look upon Israel as a Jews' State which, with God's help, may yet become a Jewish State. . . .

The interviewer: Why not with your help as well?

Answer: With my help also. . . . But it seems to me that I also help by being right here. . . . I am raising here a generation which will not be alien to the State of Israel, and without a new generation imbued with Israeli con-

sciousness in the Galuth, the survival of the next generation in Israel itself would be in danger. I myself, like all religious Jews, consider my being in the Galuth—even prior to the establishment of Israel, let alone since then—only temporary. True, I am not settling in Israel, but by rescuing Jews for Judaism I do, in the final analysis, settle them in Israel. And while I am not settling in Israel, my son will settle there and so will my students. I teach them to be Jews, and settlement in Israel—aliyah—is a meaningful part of "being a Jew." And it is no accident that aliyah from the United States to Israel is confined mostly to Orthodox Jews. This is so because we are the only ones here in the United States who are not ashamed to state that we live in Galuth. . . . True, I admit that there is a terrible contradiction here. If I am to draw the right conclusions, then I must advise all of them to settle in Israel. If I avoid making such a plea directly, it is because I am afraid that no one will listen. I therefore prefer to devote my time to matters in which success is better assured—to deepening the ties with Judaism, which eventually will lead on to Jerusalem.

Contributing Editor

Orthodoxy and Buber

by Fred Gorsetman

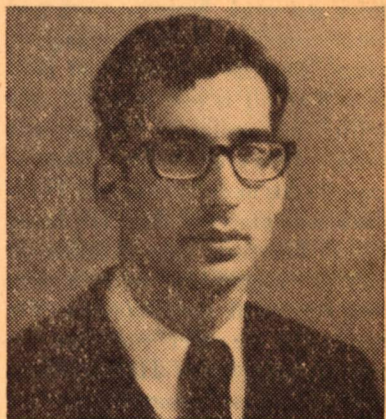
Why Martin Buber was never really accepted or even appreciated by the Jewish community at large has often appeared as a bizarre trick of fate. Although he wrote for the world at large, Buber still considered himself firmly rooted in Jewish thought and tradition. Often he spoke of the glory and rightness of the Hasidic movement, but never had he been received by the movement as a follower. As an avid Zionist, he lived the last twenty-one years of his life in Israel, yet except for a few myths and followers, did not achieve noteworthy distinction by those Jews. Instead he was searched out, lauded, and perhaps glorified by certain Protestant existential theologians.

To understand why Buber, certainly one of the most influential Jewish philosophers of our time, has been rejected by his people requires two fields of investigation, first his essential theories and second how they were received by the various Jewish groups.

Often quoted yet even more often misunderstood, Buber's essential philosophical themes are the I-IT and the I-Thou symbolism characterizing the relation and interaction between man and man, and man and G-D. The I-IT relation, the more mundane manner to approach the world, expresses the desire of man to manipulate, exploit or merely encounter for self gain another person or object. It need not be evil, rather mechanical and often productive, resembling the aloof and objective detachment of a scientist to his work.

Man, however, has one other alternative in which to view the

world, namely the I-Thou. Here neither the I nor the Thou seek the use of the other. Further each derive an understanding of self through the dual involvement. Buber's own I-Thou sensation found him as a child petting a horse of which he had grown quite



Fred Gorsetman

fond. Suddenly he sensed his hand and could feel it touch and move as if he knew its existence. Although he continued doing the same act still the act was intrinsically different.

In both the I-IT and the I-Thou, Buber concerned himself most with the relation between two persons or objects. His philosophy, in fact extends only within the hyphen that connects both partners and permits the relationship. Although in the I-IT, man by his purpose and action indicates the relationship with the I-Thou, no one or thing can begin or induce the experience of togetherness, rather this sensation initiates from the outside, from the hyphen, from G-d.

In Hasidism, Buber felt he had discovered a community in which

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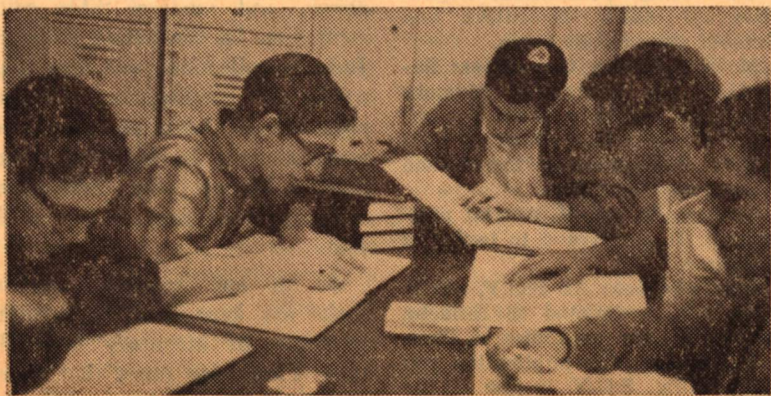
Reflections on a Year in JSS

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realization of the strong bond between *Am Yisro-el* and G-d. The James Striar School, however, represents a revolution against the very ignorance which Talmud Torah has helped to foster. I, as a JSS student, can only marvel at the success that Rabbi Besdin and his staff of dedicated rabbis have had. A program which started out with a handful of interested young men has ballooned into a vibrant school of over 200 students. I am also gratified by the fact that I am able to consider my Jewish heritage and religion on the same mature in-

tellectual level as those concepts of a secular nature. I finally look to JSS as one of the many innova-

tions necessary to stem the tide of the much talked about problem of the vanishing American Jew.



JSS students in the Beit Hamedrosh. . .

Bill Levy