

"MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL"
Reflections on Orthodoxy in Politics

At the end of our Sidra, Moses is commanded to construct the laver and its base out of brass. Where is he to get the material from? The Torah says: במראות הצורבות, from the mirrors, made of burnished copper, which the women had donated at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

An old tradition has it that these mirrors were a point of contention between Moses and the women (thus making Moses the first Jewish leader to have a problem with "women's rights"). He refused to accept the mirrors, because he considered them a token of vanity, a quality which has no place in the Sanctuary. However, the Almighty interceded on behalf of the women, and insisted that the mirrors be accepted. The reason, as quoted by Rashi, is that the women used these mirrors to make themselves attractive, thus enabling the continuation of Jewish family life even in the bitter circumstances of Egyptian slavery.

I suggest a modified interpretation of that controversy between Moses and the women. The mirror is not only a specifically human invention, but it also elicits a special response. Ethnologists tell us that most animals, in looking into a mirror, believe that they are facing some other member of the same species. It is only man, and the higher primates such as chimpanzees, who recognize that the image they see in the mirror is -- oneself.

Thus, the mirror is a symbol of viewing oneself in the eyes of another; it represents the capacity and tendency to see oneself as others do.

It is for this reason that Moses refused to countenance a mirror in the Temple. To be concerned with the impression one makes on another is an insult to authenticity. Moses demanded of his people to act on principle, not for effect; out of conviction, with no concern for "public relations"; because they believe in what they do, not because others approve. He wanted substance, not image; persuasion and not projection. The mirror represented what the sociologist David Riesman, in our days, has called "other-directedness," and this Moses considered inauthentic.

A similar thought comes to us from the Kotzker Rebbe. When the spies came back from Canaan and the majority reported to Moses and the Israelites that they could never conquer the land because the inhabitants were giants, they said: **והיינו בעינינו כחגבים וכן היינו בעיניהם**. "We were in our eyes as grasshoppers, and so did we appear in their eyes." The Lord was incensed, and Moses considered their report unforgiveable. But what was wrong with the statement? Were they not telling the truth -- that they considered themselves little grasshoppers compared with the giants whom they met? The Kotzker Rebbe answers: when they said that they appeared in their own eyes as grasshoppers, they were merely reporting a fact. But when they added the last three words, **ובן היינו בעיניהם**, that this is how we appeared in their eyes, then they had reached the nadir of inauthenticity: they began to be concerned with their appearance in the eyes of the others! A true person of principle is never concerned with the impressions he makes on others.

And yet, God wanted the women to prevail, and he forced Moses to accept their **מראות הצובאות**, the mirrors. Why? We are here taught something of the greatest significance. Principle alone, in and of itself, is sometimes inadequate. Along with principle must come another element, that of relationship, founded on the importance of other human beings. Relationship means that the I and the Thou are bound together in such a way that each is not only concerned about the other, but also sensitive to how the other views him. If the I truly respects the Thou, then the I will also be concerned as to how the I appears to the Thou.

Principle alone, without relationship, can subvert communication and can sometimes devour itself. Principle pursued without concern for others can bring society into disarray. In seeking to build, it can sometimes destroy. More than once in human history has the fire of righteous passion consumed its advocates and turned life into ashes -- in the name of high ideals. Principle by itself shuns the mirror and considers it a violation of its integrity. Relationship needs and uses the mirror to reinforce its sensitivity.

The French dramatist, Jean-Paul Sartre describes, in one of his plays (I believe it is "Les Mouches"), a house full of every delight. This house is -- Hell. The

inhabitants may have whatever they wish, of every material pleasure, every intellectual indulgence, all that their heart desires. Only one thing may they not have -- a mirror. For all eternity, they cannot look at themselves, they may not know how they appear to others. That, Satre tells us, is Hell.

That is why the women offered the mirrors to the Temple. Moses as the prophet, as the איש האמת, the man of uncompromised integrity and unimpeachable authenticity, could not abide a mirror, the symbol of moral weakness and compromised principles, in the Sanctuary. But the women knew that there can be no life, no family, no society, without relationship; and there can be no relationship without sensitivity to the effect we have on others.

Thus the great principle of Kiddush Hashem, the sanctification of God's Name, is an expression of sensitivity of reputation. God, as it were, demands that we be concerned with how He is received by the people of the world. It is a kind of sacred public relations: we must always act in such a manner that God is revered and when we do -- that is a sanctification of His Name. Should we act in such a manner as to bring God's Name into disrepute, then we have performed Hillul Hashem, we have desecrated Him. Hence, sensitivity to how others look at us is not altogether invalid; it has its place in the Sanctuary of life.

So that God voted in favor of the women, and insisted that Moses accept the מראות הצניעות; but in a gesture to Moses and his high advocacy of personal autonomy in matters of principle, He did not demand that the mirrors become prominent ^{but} that they be used only for כיוור וכו', the laver and its base.

The lesson for us is urgent indeed. It tells us that, at all times, we must live in a constant tension between principle and relationship, between truth and peace, between personal and ideological authenticity and the concern for communal harmony. We must always maintain the balance, always remain within the dialectic, yielding neither the one nor the other. If we do not take the mirror into the Temple, if we insist upon pure principle alone, we run the risk of alienating all potential worshippers and keeping the Temple empty. If we are concerned only with relationships, only with communal peace, only with maintaining harmony, then we have abandoned all principle and given up on Truth. If we are over-concerned with the mirror, then we have converted

the Temple into a beauty parlor, we see nothing but ourselves and each other, and we have lost our souls.

So we must hold on to both elements. We must, of course, never give in on matters of principle; but good relationships too are a principle of Judaism. What you are counts most; but what you look like to others is not entirely an insignificant consideration.

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It is for this reason that I am distressed by certain recent developments in the Orthodox community both here and in Israel.

The "Who Is a Jew" issue is unquestionably an urgent and vital issue. I have spoken and written about it before. The halakhic definition of Jewishness must prevail, for we here deal with the most fundamental principle of our existence: who we are and what we are. Principle must be firmly maintained in this issue.

I therefore regret that the Conservative and Reform movements have gone fishing in muddy waters, pressing their claims at a time of weakness for the State of Israel. The Reform are especially guilty of unmitigated chutzpah when they demand recognition of the validity of their conversions, when they have not yet instituted any discipline over their own members who officiate with ministers of other faiths in mixed marriages, in which the Jewish partner has not been converted even by Reform standards. And the Conservative movement would have been better advised not to align themselves with Reform for narrow partisan advantage.

And yet, the use of the mirror, as we have defined this symbol, would have suggested to the Orthodox community not to press for new legislation in the critical aftermath of the Yom Kippur War. The problem has been with us for a long while, and would sooner or later have to be resolved. The point is, was this the time to do it?

I do not fault the Rabbinate. When Rabbis are asked questions in Halakhah, they must answer. But this was not the time to submit the question to a halakhic decision. We have complicated a national crisis at a time of such tenderness and delicacy that we have, in the long run, lost more than we have gained even were we to succeed in revising the legislation in

order to conform to halakhic norms. The result has certainly not been a Kiddush Hashem. Our appearance to others is not that of Jews who are concerned with the survival of the State. What we gained in the magnificent heroism of the yeshiva students on both fronts in the Yom Kippur War, we may have lost because of poor timing after the Yom Kippur War.

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Orthodoxy in the United States seems to be on the verge of making its own error. For many years prior to 1954, Orthodox Jews accepted as a matter of fact that they are a part of the large Jewish community in the United States, and they did not consider that they compromised their ideological integrity because of it. In that year, eleven ^{אדמו"רים} (heads of yeshivot) issued an edict prohibiting membership in mixed religious groups. There was considerable merit to their position, and one cannot, of course, dismiss it out of hand. Yet it had consequences that have not necessarily enhanced the cause of Torah in the American Jewish community.

The major problem focused on members^{hip} in the Synagogue Council of America. This organization is a "roof organization," consisting of six groups: the rabbinic and lay organizations of the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform movements. Its purpose is not to decide on inner Jewish religious questions. Its function is to represent the common interest of the religious Jewish community towards the outside world. In order to be sure that the Synagogue Council of America never violates a halakhic principle, the rabbinic Orthodox group (the RCA) and the lay Orthodox group (the UOJCA) have veto rights over the Synagogue Council of America's decisions -- as do the other constituents.

The right wing of Orthodoxy has demanded secession from the SCA. It must be understood that the importance of the SCA in this respect is primarily a matter of symbol. To stay in or to get out of the SCA is really representative of a larger question: shall Orthodoxy practice co-existence or separatism; cooperation or withdrawal? Shall we "go it alone" because cooperation implies recognition of the validity and legitimacy of the Orthodox philosophies; or shall we work with^{and} within the total Jewish community, without in any way implying our sanction of these non-Orthodox approaches?

For many years, this Rabbi and leading members of

this congregation have fought within the councils of the UOJCA to remain in the SCA as a symbol of the fact that we are in and part of the Jewish community; that we can disagree firmly but respectfully; that we can be tough without being rough; that we can and should be aggressive, without ever being offensive; that we can reconcile principle and relationship, using the מראות הצובאות (the mirrors) of which we spoke.

This past week, the Board of Directors of the UOJCA decided by majority vote to suspend membership in the SCA until the National Convention of the UOJCA, in November, will decide to break off with or resume participation in the SCA.

Pristine-pure principle has prevailed, and relationship with the rest of the Jewish community is beginning to unravel. The majority asserted its ideals, in all good conscience, but failed to look into the mirror, failed to consider the dangerous consequences when the rest of the Jewish community begins to take offense at what it will consider a gratuitous insult.

Those who voted to opt out have not consulted the mirror of the מראות הצובאות. If they did look into any mirror, it was probably the wrong one: the mirror of the fairy tale in which the queen looks into the mirror and asks, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" Maybe the magic mirror answered "You are," but the מראות הצובאות would not have responded with a snow-white image.

The decision of the Board of the Union gives reason for great regret. This is especially true because the Union has made historic contributions to the welfare of the Jewish community in general and Torah in particular. It has brought a creditable structure of kashrut into what has previously been chaos. It has created, through the National Conference of Synagogue Youth, a vibrant and vital and far-reaching youth program which has won many young people back to Torah. It has accomplished all these things without throwing the gauntlet before other groups. I am sorry that it has now seen fit to choose for separatism rather than cooperation. One can only hope that at its National Convention in November, this grievous error will be corrected.

Who knows but that perhaps that is why מראות הצובאות were placed one בְּיָד יְהוָה, the mirrors were used for

the construction of the laver and its base, so that when the worshipper came into the Temple and took a good, long, deep look at the mirror, he would see himself as others do -- and realize that he was imperfect, that he had to improve himself before making demands of others, that he had to wash his face and cleanse himself.

It is a good way to keep clean.