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Confronting the Challenge of the Values of Modernity

A number of years ago, a *ba'al teshuvah* came to my office suffering from culture shock. Hailing from a fairly affluent family and raised in a Conservative congregation, he found the transition from a Midwestern university to the atmosphere of a *ba'al teshuvah* yeshiva rather difficult. He sought my help because—so he was advised—I was “a more liberal exponent of Orthodoxy.” We had a pleasant chat, I gave him some literature and invited him to come back for future conversations. When he returned three weeks later, he informed me that he was terribly worried about *me*. He was convinced that, since I resorted to contemporary categories of thought in my conversation as well as in my writings, I could not possibly espouse an authentic version of traditional Judaism. In other words, the mere fact that I utilized contemporary terminology and embraced some of the values of modernity automatically disqualified me from offering an authentic version of Torah.

This incident reflects a widely shared attitude that genuine commitment to Torah demands turning one's back on all the values of modernity. Many years ago, Mordecai Kaplan contended that those who subscribe to the Hirschian ideology of *Torah 'im Derekh 'Erez* deviate to such an extent from traditional Judaism that they should be dubbed “neo-Orthodox.” Similarly, Professor Jacob Neusner claims in a recent book that, notwithstanding their profession of loyalty to traditional Judaism, those elements of Orthodoxy which condone participation in modern culture practice a “selective piety,” which radically differs from the kind of Judaism which had held sway until the Enlightenment and the Emancipation.¹ In the opinion of these distinguished scholars, the only type of

Orthodoxy which is truly authentic is the one that one encounters in Meah She'arim, Williamsburg or Squaretown. For them, any form of involvement in modern culture runs counter to the insistence upon isolation from the rest of the world, which, supposedly, is the hallmark of traditional Judaism.

It is, of course, not surprising that this view is widely accepted. After all, it reflects the basic outlook of what is called "the Yeshiva world," which insists that exposure to modernity and scientific methodology taints religious faith and interferes with the cultivation of a genuine Torah perspective. Right-wing publications such as *The Jewish Observer* repeatedly stress that the inability to guard ourselves completely against the intrusion of the corrupting influences of modernity represents one of the greatest threats to contemporary Orthodox Judaism.

One does not have to be part of the Yeshiva world to take this position. Meir Kahane argues in a similar fashion that the mere fact that one subscribes to such modern values as democracy and the dignity of human beings is evidence that one has been corrupted by modernity. In his opinion, a proper Torah perspective mandates calling for the adoption of the negative attitudes towards Goyim which are expressed in some *ma'amarei Hazal*. He, of course, arrived at his extreme views, which purport to represent authentic Judaism, by a process—to borrow Walter Kaufmann's expression—of "theological gerrymandering," which conveniently ignores whatever Rabbinic sources differ with his own position. But what matters for our purposes is that Kahane insists that to be considered an authentic Jew one must totally reject the entire value-system of modernity.

Significantly, the term "modernity" is no longer fashionable in religious circles. Years ago, we referred to ourselves as "Modern Orthodox." Today, we prefer the label "centrist," because the term "modern" evokes negative reactions. "Centrist," on the other hand, is a safer term. In the political arena, every one wants to be in the center because that is the position with the greatest electoral appeal. But even "centrist" Orthodoxy has become suspect. In many circles, there is a great desire for the "Amishization" of Judaism.

To be sure, unlike the Amish, even the opponents of Modern Orthodoxy are prepared to tolerate the use of cars and word-processors, and even of microscopes. What differentiates us from right-wing Orthodoxy is our acceptance not only of technology but also the belief that some important modern values should be appropriated as well. We are inclined to stress human responsibility and activity rather than passive submission or fatalistic resignation to our condition. The secularization of modern culture has brought about the emphasis upon the utilization of our rational faculties, human resources and energies to

fashion instruments to improve the condition of humanity. In contrast with the mentality prevailing during the pre-modern "age of faith" which placed exclusive reliance upon God and denigrated the efficacy of human action since human fate was completely in His hands, the modern mind emphasizes man's capacity to help determine the human condition. If you want to become healthy, you consult a doctor and do not merely recite Tehillim. To improve your standard of living, you go to work. By the same token, if you seek the improvement of the socio-economic or political condition of the Jewish people, you don't just fall back upon prayer but you engage in political action and attempt to build a Jewish state.

To be sure, the Yeshiva world is so immersed in pietism that it cannot appreciate the intrinsic value of science and technology and the application of human resources towards the transformation of the world. The only thing that really matters to achieve *tikkun ha-'olam* is the study of Torah and meticulous observance of the *mizvot*. Science hardly matters. As Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler expressed it so strikingly, scientific laws are basically irrelevant because everything depends solely upon the *rezon ha-bore*. Since God controls the laws of nature, there are, in effect, really no laws but only miracles.²

To be sure, some segments of the Yeshiva world are somewhat less antagonistic to science and technology. They may be prepared to sanction the study of natural sciences, especially for economic reasons. Others may even reluctantly tolerate the social sciences. But they will not recognize the legitimacy of the spirit of modernity with its emphasis upon individuality, the primacy of conscience and the role of human initiative in creating a better society.

It must be realized that Orthodoxy nowadays contains two opposite approaches. On the one extreme we have the position of the Hatam Sofer that *hadash 'asur min ha-Torah*. Any form of innovation, any concession to modernity, any deviation from the traditional life-style is the very antithesis of Torah. On the other extreme, we have the position of Rav Kook who maintained that *be-hadash yitkadesh*. Embrace the new by all means, but do so selectively. Make sure that the *hadash* can be integrated within our religious perspective, not only without doing violence to that perspective but actually contributing to its enhancement.

It is not surprising that Rav Kook's teachings have been widely misrepresented because this was also the fate of numerous other seminal thinkers such as the Rambam, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch and, *yibadel le-hayyim tovim arukhim*, the Rav (Joseph B. Soloveitchik). The Rambam's views have been so distorted that it has been argued that his statement in the next to the last chapter of the *Moreh Nevukhim* where he maintains that those who only study Halakhah but are ignorant of

philosophy are like the individual who reaches only the gates of the palace but is unable to enter it, could not possibly represent the views of the Rambam but must be a forgery. Moreover, in most Yeshivot today, the first two chapters of the *Mishneh Torah* and all of the *Moreh Nevukhim* are totally ignored so that the real Rambam is totally forgotten in these circles.

A similar fate has befallen Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch. The absurd view is advanced that Hirsch himself did not believe that *Torah 'im Derekh 'Erez* represented a religious ideal, but that he advocated it solely as an emergency measure (*hora'at sha'ab*) to prevent the total assimilation of German Jewry. This misrepresentation of Hirsch is largely due to the fact that several *Gedolim* of Eastern Europe who were unalterably opposed to any exposure to secular studies felt compelled to explain Hirsch's approach as being only a concession necessary at his time to save his German co-religionists. But anyone familiar with Hirsch's writings will recognize that Hirsch himself believed that his religious approach was not merely a necessary evil but rather a superior brand of piety, לכתחילה and *not* בדיעבד. In his famous speech delivered at a celebration in honor of the German poet Schiller, he enthusiastically praised the poet for having enriched our Jewish religious consciousness by articulating the ideals of human progress, equality and dignity in such a splendid manner.³

Unfortunately, Rav Kook's real views have also been completely distorted even at his own Yeshivat Merkaz Harav. Moreover, some of the followers of Gush Emunim invoke Rav Kook's legacy to justify their chauvinistic policies in utter disregard of the universalistic and humanistic dimension of his thought.

Of late, Rav Soloveitchik's views have also been subjected to a similar treatment. Until a relatively short time ago, certain elements of the "yeshiva world" simply ignored the Rav because they could not condone his positive attitude towards science, technology and various other facets of modern culture. Nowadays, a different strategy is employed. It is claimed that the Rav, too, basically adopted a negative attitude towards modernity, but that his disciples misrepresented his views. The fact that the Rav's writings reveal an openness towards modern culture does not matter at all to those who advocate this revisionist approach which does violence to the Rav's basic *weltanschauung*.

It seems to me that these revisionist tendencies are in large measure attributable to an insistence upon a monolithic approach to Judaism and the refusal to legitimize any form of pluralism, in spite of the fact that throughout Jewish history a variety of divergent approaches were condoned by the traditional Jewish community. I for one maintain that Halakhah is capable of accomodating a variety of approaches which

represent equally valid versions of the tradition. Without seeking to delegitimize any expression of Halakhic Judaism, I personally prefer those readings of our halakhic tradition which seek to confront modernity instead of dismissing it.

It is interesting to compare the Rav's stance towards involvement in the culture of the world and his attitude towards technological progress with that of his ancestor, Rav Ḥayyim of Volozhin. Significantly, both attach great significance to the fact that the Torah begins with Bereshit. Both emphasize that this points to the need for man to emulate divine creativity. But for R. Ḥayyim the kind of human creativity that is required is confined to the development of spiritual realms through the study of Torah and the meticulous observance of *mizvot*. In his *Ruah Ḥayyim*, R. Ḥayyim resorts to purely Kabbalistic categories for his definition of creativity. The Rav, however, defines the human task of creativity in keeping with the modern emphasis upon the utilization of science and technology to carry out the Biblical mandate of *vektivshubah*.⁴

We can thus note two different conceptions of the human task based upon different interpretations of the Rabbinic statement, מיום שחרב בית המקדש אין לו להקב"ה בעולמו אלא ארבע אמות של הלכה בלבד (Berakhot 8a). One can adopt R. Ḥayyim's view and maintain that the study of Halakhah in the narrow sense of the term is the only intrinsically valuable activity. As he explains in his *Ruah Ḥayyim*, even such questions as, "what is the proper way that man should choose?" is really not a question to be pondered in the Bet ha-Midrash. It is only when one is outside of the Bet ha-Midrash that such a question should be entertained. The Rambam, on the other hand, defines the ארבע אמות של הלכה in much broader terms. In his view, it refers to the entire range of human conduct and not merely to the relatively narrow area circumscribed by formal Halakhah.

I am inclined to think that R. Ḥayyim's narrow definition is largely prompted by his anti-Ḥasidic polemic. It was in a sense an overreaction to the Ḥasidic denigration of the value of halakhic learning which resulted from its focus upon the subjective personal experience of communion with God and the ensuing relative indifference to formal halakhic study. It must be borne in mind that R. Ḥayyim's mentor, the Gaon of Vilna, did not share such a negative attitude towards non-halakhic subjects. After all, the Gaon is quoted by one of his students as having said: כפי מה שיחסר לאדם ידיעות משארי החכמות לעומת זה יחסר לו מאה ידות בחכמת התורה. To the extent that a person lacks knowledge in other "wisdoms" will he be lacking one-hundred fold in his knowledge of Torah. חכמה is required in order to understand Torah, כי התורה והחכמה נצמדים יחד, for the two are intertwined and must be studied together.⁵ It is, therefore, quite apparent that his student rejected this more open approach to *hokhmah*

only as a response to the specific historical reality which he confronted, i.e., Hasidut.

The need for familiarity with science and technology becomes obvious when we realize the demands of a universally acknowledged *mizvah*, i.e., medicine. A ben-Torah who is a doctor would not be allowed to say, "I only practice Talmudic medicine and reject the medical procedures developed in the modern era." It is commonly accepted that *nishtanu ha-dorot* and that, therefore, one may not utilize the medical prescriptions of the Gemara under contemporary conditions. The *mizvah* of ורפא ירפא (Ex. 21:19) can only be fulfilled through acknowledging the advances of modern technology and medicine.

I would like to go one step further. One cannot confront any contemporary halakhic problem without an understanding of today's technology. After all, the Torah is supposed to be a תורת חיים. The story is told that when the famous Rosh Yeshiva of Kamenetz, Rav Barukh Ber Leibowitz, was asked a question about the kashrut of a chicken, he first was unable to identify the organ in question. When told it was the *kurkevan* or the innards, he instantly recalled the numerous intricate *sugyot* dealing with the problem of *mahat bi-kurkevan*. He admiringly fingered the innards exclaiming, "is this the holy *kurkevan*?" and then turned to the Dayan and said, "You make the decision."

We cannot train a whole generation of modern Jews, especially *rabbanim* who have to rule on technical questions, by saying to them, "We insulate ourselves; we don't have to understand any of these matters." It doesn't make sense. How can you *pasken* a *she'elah* regarding the use of electricity when you don't understand how electricity works? The Rav always said that he had a problem *paskening she'elot* on electricity because he did not know if electricity should be understood in accordance with the undular theory or the quantum theory. One cannot resolve halakhah without understanding the nature of the phenomena involved.

One might argue that this only means that one must be acquainted with modern *technology*, using a microscope for example, providing it has nothing to do with the modern *value system*. But both Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Rav Kook knew that there is a great deal of positive value contained in modern attitudes of dignity, human understanding, and rationality. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch went so far as to coin the term "inner revelation."⁶ Obviously, where the Torah does legislate behavior, we cannot reinterpret it if it conflicts with our modern value system. But whenever the Torah is silent, we can embrace many modern values, because that is one of the ways in which God reveals Himself.

This is not a very novel doctrine. The Meiri makes a very beautiful statement in analyzing the requirement of those present at the death of

an individual to rend their garments. The Gemara explains that this is necessary because the death of a person is comparable to the burning of a *sefer Torah*. Just as one has to perform *kri'ah* when witnessing the burning of a *sefer Torah*, so too must one do this act when in the presence of the death of a human being.⁷ What is the connection between a human being and a *sefer Torah*? The Meiri explains that just as a *sefer Torah* teaches us many laws, so too is the human heart capable of discerning and comprehending many obligations.⁸ A startling statement—in a sense, a human being serves the same function as a *sefer Torah*.⁹ The human heart can discern a variety of obligations which are not explicitly contained in the Torah.

A corollary of this is that sensitivity to modern values enables us to reach a certain level of understanding wherein some obligations will be interpreted differently than they were heretofore. One example of this can be found in a comment of the *Maggid Mishneh* on a statement in the Rambam regarding the laws of *bar mezra*. According to halakhah, if a person has property to sell and there is someone whose property abuts his, the neighbor must be given preference. What is the source for this? The *Maggid Mishneh* explains:

וענין דין בן המצר הוא שתורתנו התמימה נתנה בתקון מדות האדם והנהגתו באמירת קדושים תהיו. והכוונה בו כמו שאמרו חז"ל קדש עצמך במותר לך. שלא יהא שטוף אחר התאוות. וכן אמרה ועשית הישר והטוב והכוונה שיתנהג בהנהגה טובה וישרה עם בני אדם. ולא היו מן הראוי בכל זה לצוות פרטים לפי שמצות התורה הם בכל עת ובכל זמן ובכל ענין. ובהכרח חייב לעשות כן. ומדות האדם והנהגתו מתחלפות לפי הזמן והאישים. והכמים ז"ל כתבו קצת פרטים מועילים נופלים תחת כללים אלו ומהם שעשו אותם בדין גמור ומהם לכתחלה ודרך חסידות והכל מדבריהם ז"ל.⁹

The definition of "right and good" may change from generation to generation. In other words, religious behavior need not be totally stagnant; there can be an evolution here as well.

In commenting on the verse, ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש (Ex. 19:6), R. Naphtali Zevi Yehudah Berlin asks why we need such a prescription. After all, the Torah already has 613 commandments; what does this come to add? Why should the Torah have to explicitly command us to become a *goy kadosh*—a holy people? He answers that it is impossible for the Torah to legislate the appropriate human relationships for all possible circumstances. Therefore, the Torah gives us a kind of "elastic clause"; in any particular situation, we must do that which is mandated by the general religious requirement of responding to the demand to form a *goy kadosh*.¹⁰

Let us look at a practical example. The Torah recognizes polygamy, but it was abandoned in the Middle Ages because of the famous *takkanah* of Rabbenu Gershom Me'or ha-Golah in the tenth century. Apparently, he

came to feel that under the then prevailing conditions, polygamy was no longer the proper way to treat women. Similarly, he abandoned the concept of גט בעל כרחיה. The point is that new moral insights that have been developed in the world affect our Jewish religious practices.

In more recent times, when the Bais Yaakov movement started in Europe, there was tremendous opposition from the Ḥasidic community. How can one teach women Torah? But Bais Yaakov prevailed and today, at Stern College for Women, Gemara is already part of the curriculum. Why? Because tradition changed, and in our age it became accepted that women should be granted all kinds of cultural and educational opportunities. I would further argue that today it is wrong for a married man to say, "I'd like my wife to be totally ignorant. After all, the Gemara says the main function of the woman is to be attractive and produce a lot of children and to do weaving. I do not want her to involve herself in anything relating to modernity; no books, no newspapers, etc." Although this was acceptable five hundred years ago, women must not be treated in this fashion in our times because they have different expectations today. And those expectations can affect the *pesak* as to what constitutes appropriate behavior.

Many years ago, I gave a lecture in which I demonstrated that our attitude toward formal *pesak* cannot be completely insulated from our attitude toward the world at large. For example, if I were to ask a *she'elah* about certain halakhic issues, I would get completely different answers from Rav Aaron Lichtenstein than from the Rosh Yeshiva of Hevron or other right-wing yeshivot. If the issue related to returning Israeli territory for peace, Rav Lichtenstein would give a different answer than the Chief Rabbis of Israel. Why? Because exposure to various modern value systems obviously affects one's way of responding to halakhic matters.

In my opinion, exposure to modernity is also imperative in order to overcome the myopic attitude concerning the scope of halakhah that characterizes many segments of Orthodoxy. There are many areas such as problems involving ecology, nuclear war and social justice where no clear cut halakhic guidelines are available. But are we supposed to be indifferent to such issues? Are we not responsible for *yishuv ha-'olam*? A number of years ago, I discussed the need for religious responses in areas where no explicit halakhic guidelines are available. I described these purely subjective religious responses as "covenantal imperatives."¹¹ Since we regard Torah as a תורת חיים we must not pursue a policy of splendid isolation and abdicate our responsibility for the world. Rather must respond to the entire range of human concerns in the spirit of יהיו לשם שמים and bring to bear upon the issues of our time the resources of our tradition as well as a sensitivity to the needs of the age.

NOTES

1. See J. Neusner, *Death and Birth of Judaism* (New York, 1987), Chapter III.
2. R. Eliyahu E. Dessler, *Mikhtav me-'Eliyahu* (Bnei Brak, 1964) I, 177-83.
3. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Gesammelte Schriften* VI, 351.
4. See, for example, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition* VII (1965), 5-67.
5. See R. Barukh of Shklov, *Sefer 'Uklidus* (Hague, 1780), introduction.
6. See I. Grunfeld's introduction to *Horeb* by R. Samson R. Hirsch (London, 1968).
7. See Shabbat 105b.
8. Meiri, *ad. loc.*
9. R. Vidal de Tolosa, *Maggid Mishneh*, Hil. Shekhenim XIV:5.
10. See Rav N. Z. Y. Berlin, *Ha'amek Davar* on Ex. 19:6.
11. See my "Covenantal Imperatives," in G. Appel, ed., *Samuel K. Mirsky Memorial Volume* (Jerusalem, 1970), 3-12.

[For other formulations of this issue, see H. Soloveitchik, "Three Themes in the *Sefer Hasidim*," *AJS Review* I (1976), 311-25; A. Lichtenstein, "Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakha?" in M. M. Kellner, ed., *Contemporary Jewish Ethics* (New York, 1978), 102-23.—ED.]
