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## *A SYMPOSIUM*

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### THE STATE OF ORTHODOXY

#### *Introduction*

In recent years the vigor as well as the image of Orthodoxy has been completely revitalized. Gone are the predictions of the inevitable demise of what was widely dismissed as an obsolete movement that could not cope with the challenges of the "Open Society." Orthodoxy has made such a remarkable recovery that its new self-confidence has regrettably generated in some quarters a deplorable sense of smugness and, occasionally, has given rise to a spirit of "triumphalism."

To be sure, parallel trends can be discerned in the non-Jewish community. Liberal churches are on the decline, while the ranks of Conservative and Evangelical churches are swelling. The upsurge of the Moral Majority is but another symptom of these developments. By the same token, the search for transcendence has led to a growing popularity of sects and cults which completely renounce the Western value system. It is a matter of speculation to what extent these trends are a reaction to the general malaise of Western society—the post-Vietnam syndrome, the urban, energy and ecological crises, and the ensuing sense of disenchantment with modern culture.

Within the Jewish community, additional factors have been responsible for the growing disdain for universal and, especially, liberal values. The impact of the Holocaust has revolutionized Jewish experience as well as thought. Moreover, resentment over the growing isolation of the State of Israel has given rise to a high degree of skepticism with regard to the benefits of modern culture. Having been turned off by the "world," the Jewish community proceeds on an inward course.

Orthodoxy, which by comparison to other religious movements

has made far fewer concessions to modernity, was bound to benefit from these developments. After all, it was the only religious denomination which had not succumbed to the pressure of reconciling Judaism with “the spirit of the time.” There is a general impression that Orthodoxy’s newly acquired status and influence must be attributed to the respect its “authenticity” commands. In some circles, authenticity is defined in terms of total insulation from modern culture—which reached its nemesis in Hitler and Stalin.

“Right-wing” Orthodoxy capitalizes on the disdain for modernity harbored by many who feel guilty over their own modern life style. Irrespective of their own practices, they idealize the “purist” right-wing approach which to them represents the highest form of Jewish authenticity. Modern Orthodoxy, on the other hand, is ridiculed by the right wing as an illegitimate hybrid issuing from the union between Orthodoxy and a basically incompatible modern culture.

In the face of the militancy of the right wing, considerable segments of modern Orthodoxy are in retreat. Symptomatic is the “revisionism” of Samson Raphael Hirsch’s ideology that is currently in vogue. In utter disregard of his stated position, it is claimed that Hirsch did not advocate his classical formulation of the synthesis between Torah and culture (*Torah im Derekh Erets*) as an intrinsic religious ideal. He allegedly resorted to it merely as an emergency measure in order to salvage those elements of the Jewish community that otherwise would have been completely overwhelmed by the onslaught of modernity.

What accentuates the self-doubt of modern Orthodoxy is the prevailing assumption that higher levels of religious standards are maintained in right-wing circles, who strive for ever higher levels of piety, because they are under no pressure to accommodate to the demands of modernity. This religious inferiority complex is reinforced by another factor. The very legitimacy of modern Orthodoxy is categorically denied in right-wing circles. But modern Orthodoxy does not reciprocate in kind. It shies away from any monopolistic pretensions. It is satisfied with claiming that it constitutes one of many legitimate versions of Orthodoxy. From the perspective of this limited “religious pluralism,” representatives of modern Orthodoxy accept as valid any approach to Jewish life which acknowledges the supremacy of the halakhah.

An additional source of the growing self-doubt plaguing modern Orthodoxy is the misconception that the very readiness to encounter modern culture is by itself a sign of spiritual inferiority. Unfortunately, a vital point made by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik many years ago is as yet not fully appreciated. In his view, the alleged “modera-

tion" of modern Orthodoxy need not point to spiritual inferiority. Instead, cogent religious reasons rather than a readiness to compromise may dictate the adoption of a "middle of the road" instead of an extremist position. When Maimonides espouses the "middle of the road" approach, he is not swayed by the practical common sense attitude associated with a man of affairs. He advocates this course for purely religious reasons; moderation reflects the attempt to resolve the dialectical tension between conflicting religious values.

Another problem facing modern Orthodoxy is the lack of adequate self-definition. It has not as yet been clarified what should be the relationship between modernity and Orthodoxy. Should modern Orthodoxy merely attempt to preserve a commitment to Judaism while simultaneously living in two distinct worlds, or should modern Orthodoxy strive for a confrontation, if not integration, between Torah and the cultural values of modernity?

It was against this background of conflicting trends within a polarized American Jewish community that *Tradition* invited a number of Orthodox rabbinic and intellectual leaders to respond to the list of questions that follows.

We were disappointed that no spokesman of right-wing Orthodoxy accepted our invitation. We were, however, favorably impressed by our respondents' remarkable openness to the positive contributions made by the right wing. It was also refreshing to note that modern Orthodoxy has managed to eschew the rigidity of a monolithic stance and has avoided the pitfalls of triumphalism in its approach to the non-Orthodox community.

**Walter S. Wurzburger**

## THE QUESTIONS

1. *Do you believe that recent developments warrant the triumphalism exhibited by important segments of Orthodoxy which predict the total disappearance of non-Orthodox movements?*
2. *What do you regard as the basic challenges facing the Orthodox movement?*
3. *Are there common elements shared by the diverse groups comprising Orthodoxy or is Orthodoxy merely a coalition of separate movements held together only by common opposition to non-Orthodox groups?*

4. *How do you view the resurgence of right-wing Orthodoxy? Does it portend the eclipse of modern Orthodoxy?*
5. *Do you regard modern Orthodoxy as a philosophy of compromise or as an authentic version of Judaism?*
6. *How do you view the current teshuvah phenomenon?*
7. *How should Orthodoxy respond to the State of Israel?*
8. *What have been Orthodoxy's greatest achievements and greatest failures on the American scene?*

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**Marc D. Angel:** (1) Orthodox Jews should be especially reluctant to make predictions about the disappearance of any segment of Jewry. How many times have we heard predictions of the disappearance of Orthodoxy? Yet Orthodoxy has survived and even flourished. It is the height of arrogance and self-righteousness to forecast calmly the demise of non-Orthodox movements. That they may be suffering from decline may be shown to be true by empirical means. That this decline cannot be stemmed is a statement none of us should answer with confident certainty.

Even if it could be shown that non-Orthodox movements would unquestionably disappear, this would hardly warrant any sense of "triumphalism." On the contrary, we should be frightened by such a possibility. With all our theological differences, yet we are part of one Jewish people and work together in so many ways for the benefit of the Jewish community here, abroad, and especially in Israel. It is not a happy prospect that the overwhelming majority of American Jews will lose their Jewishness. It is also extremely unlikely that vast numbers of the non-Orthodox community will move into Orthodoxy in the relatively near future.

(2) Orthodoxy faces a variety of challenges which might be considered as being basic. One of the major problems is intellectual openness. Right-wing Orthodoxy tends to be certain in its beliefs and pronouncements. It leaves little room for openness to contemporary intellectual life. Because of the growing influence of the right-wing movement, many Orthodox leaders are frightened. They do not want to make statements which may be criticized by their right-wing colleagues. Modern Orthodoxy has lost its confidence and has gradually been surrendering its leadership to the more singleminded and vocal right-wing movement.

Orthodoxy has a tremendous fear of change, and has no satisfactory mechanism for dealing with change. Whether in matters pertaining to the status of women, or conversion to Judaism, or in so

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one cannot share it, as a legitimate part of diversity on these issues reaching back to the conflicts of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai as well as Rabbi Akiva and their contemporaries. On the other hand, those committed to religious Zionism should make greater efforts to encourage *aliyah* and to emphasize the centrality of Israel in synagogues and schools. They should also advocate the separation of religion from party politics and the independence of the Israel Rabbinate from state control—partnerships which may have been useful in the past but are now obsolete and counterproductive.

(8) Though now somewhat more distant from the American scene, my impression is that Orthodoxy's greatest achievements lie in its educational intensity, turning it into the only segment among America's Jewish tribes which no longer has to worry about survival in quantity or quality. Orthodoxy's greatest failures are to be found in its fragmentation and consequent impotence as a cohesive force to match and overtake the communal effectiveness of the non-Orthodox, notably in matters of national concern, ranging from Zionist policies to welfare agencies and from Jewish studies programs at universities to the governance of Jewish hospitals. The image of American Jewry, at least from the distance, is still overwhelmingly secularist, the phenomenal advances of the Orthodox element being all but obscured by internal rivalries and short-sighted policies. Yet, in the long run, the failures are bound to be outweighed—and corrected—by the achievements.

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**Shnayer Z. Leiman:** What follows is an attempt to take seriously the dictum of the rabbis that the intensive study of a brief text is preferable to the superficial reading of an extensive text. Thus, this discussion focuses primarily on questions 2 and 8.

Orthodoxy's remarkable penchant for survival is due largely to the profundity, resiliency, and ultimately the sobriety of its teaching. Such diverse figures as Maimonides, Naḥmanides, and R. Judah Ḥasid in the medieval period, and Rabbis Samson Raphael Hirsch, Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin, Ḥayim Soloveitchik, Abraham Isaac Kook, and Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz in the modern period reflect the incredible richness and latitude of Orthodox Jewish teaching. And precisely because throughout Jewish history critics from within had the courage to criticize constructively and revitalize Jewish religious life without compromising its essential characteristics, Orthodoxy's

continued religio-intellectual existence—whether in rabbinic, rationalist, kabbalistic, ḥasidic, musar, or Zionist garb—was never really threatened. Despite the dire predictions of sociologists and demographers who mistakenly insist on relating rising intermarriage rates with a waning Orthodoxy, we may rest assured that Orthodoxy will survive. The issue is not the survival, but rather the quality, of Orthodox Jewish life. What will Orthodoxy look like in 2082? Or, better, what should Orthodoxy look like in 2082? To respond to the latter question is to undertake to shape the future of Orthodoxy, no mean task, yet one we cannot avoid. We must take a close look at ourselves, list our virtues and vices, and address ourselves to transforming vice into virtue. Orthodoxy's triumphs are self-evident to *Tradition's* readers and need not be rehearsed here. They are celebrated often enough in the Orthodox press. Orthodoxy's failures are less evident, perhaps because they are less pronounced, perhaps because we prefer not to acknowledge their existence.

Some of Orthodoxy's more blatant weaknesses are listed and discussed, however briefly, below. No significance should be read into the ordering of the weaknesses listed. Often interrelated, they are listed separately only so as to provide convenient handles for the reader to grasp as he attempts to confront a particular weakness. I offer no easy solutions, but surely the beginning of any solution is an awareness of the problem.

*Rabbinic Leadership.* An entire generation of rabbinic leadership was obliterated during the Holocaust. The confluence of intellect, piety, personality and practical wisdom that characterized the likes of Rabbis Ḥayim Ozer Grodzenski, Menahem Ziemba, and Elhanan Wasserman is no longer to be found. The vast majority of pre-Holocaust rabbinic leaders who survived the Holocaust, such as the Ḥazon Ish and Rabbi Aharon Kotler, have long since departed. The few who remain are in their eighties (and beyond) and can no longer be expected to take up the cudgels of the wars of the Lord. While these elders live, a much younger generation of rabbinic leadership will hesitate to assert itself. If Orthodoxy is to thrive, that younger generation—two generations removed from its predecessors—will have to assume enormous responsibility *now*. Despite its youth, and despite the discontinuity between generations brought about by the Holocaust, the new rabbinic leadership will have to win the confidence and support of the various segments of Orthodoxy, especially the laity, no easy task. Without a new and vigorous leadership, Orthodoxy risks drifting aimlessly into the 21st century and ultimately becoming the fossilized religion its worst detractors already make it out to be.

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*Rabbi/Rosh Yeshivah Dichotomy.* Whatever other problems plagued their rabbinates, Rabbis Jonathan Eybeschutz, Aryeh Leib Gunzberg (the “Shaagath Aryeh”), and the Ḥatham Sofer did not have to share their base of power with the local *rosh yeshivah*. They functioned simultaneously as rabbi and *rosh yeshivah*. Indeed, it is alleged that Rabbi Ḥayim of Zanz ruled that a rabbi who does not function as *rosh yeshivah* cannot pass for the officially appointed rabbi of a given town or city. The division of labor between rabbi and *rosh yeshivah* is a modern phenomenon. In theory, the dichotomy should allow for a healthy specialization that could advance the interests of Orthodoxy on many different fronts. In fact, the dichotomy has led to tensions that serve to undermine Orthodox unity and power. The tensions range from trivial matters such as who should perform the wedding ceremony—rabbi or *rosh yeshivah*—to the much more serious issue of which group shall assume primary responsibility for providing Orthodoxy with the leadership it so sorely lacks.

*Lay Leadership.* One of the great triumphs of contemporary Orthodoxy is that it has produced a committed and enlightened laity, that is the graduates of the Hebrew day school movement and of the various institutions of higher Jewish learning. Concomitant with this triumph is an egregious failure: Orthodoxy has yet to develop the communal structures that would allow it to tap the strengths of its laity and to channel the laity’s boundless energy constructively, so that Orthodoxy’s strength could be self-perpetuating.

*Sense of Community.* Despite the pious lip service paid to the notion of Jewish brotherhood, there really seems to be no sense of community among Jews living in proximity to each other. The *shtetl* is gone, so too the *kehillah*, and the social constructs that have taken their place, whether synagogue or Jewish community center, are pitifully inadequate. The proliferation of *shtibels*, the waning of the synagogue as the central social institution of Jewish life, and burgeoning institutional rivalries all serve to aggravate the problem. Not only is it possible, it is perhaps commonplace for a Jew in modern times to live in virtual isolation within a thriving community of 10,000 Jews and more. Can a community of “lonely men and women of faith” perpetuate itself as a community?

*Spirituality.* No traditional aspect of Judaism has been so eroded by the modern American ethos as its spirituality. Whereas our grandparents saw God everywhere, our children see Him nowhere. The synagogue, once a house of prayer, has been transformed into a social center. A spiritually moving experience in a modern synagogue is as likely today as was the splitting of the Red Sea in antiquity. In

many synagogues, the public reading of the Torah—originally intended to challenge and instruct the listener and to provide him with spiritual sustenance—has become a chore to be dispensed with as swiftly and painlessly as possible. Too often rabbinic sermons resemble political editorials one would expect to find on the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times*. Despite a captive audience, some rabbis refuse to transform the sermon into a vehicle for teaching Torah, inculcating piety, and providing the spiritual sustenance necessary for the Jew to make it through the week. In some synagogues the spirituality that once accompanied the joyous celebration of a *Simḥat Torah* has been rendered meaningless by celebrants who neither study Torah nor support its study by others. Introspection—a practice highly valued by medieval Jewish ethicists—is foreign to the contemporary Jew. Yet such is the strength of Judaism that its spirituality lives on despite the secularist onslaught. Unfortunately many have fallen, the battle continues, and spirituality will prevail only if Orthodoxy is sufficiently determined to see it do so.

*Jewish Education.* No aspect of Judaism is rendered more lip service and less support than Jewish education. Teachers' salaries are ludicrous; school administrators—the best of whom earn a living wage—are beleaguered by boards of education, boards of directors, and irate parents who are persuaded that they know more about Jewish education than any administrator who would deign to work for them. Indeed, talented teachers and competent school administrators could well be placed on the endangered species list. So too could teacher training programs. The attrition rate of teachers and administrators—if it could be calculated—would stagger the mind while serving as an indictment of the Jewish community. Such a calculation would not even take into account the many talented young Jews who are driven away from the Jewish educational field before they get there. Ultimately it is the Jewish community that must set its own priorities; and how many parents would look with pride on their son the Jewish teacher or rabbi? Only when dignity is restored to the profession of teaching will Jewish day schools and high schools attract the talent necessary to deliver the quality education Orthodoxy seeks. Space limitations do not permit a discussion of quality education itself, for example, the ideal curriculum, methods of instruction, library resources, research and publication projects, and school finance. There is need for improvement in all these areas. But the bottom line is that there can be no quality Jewish education without inspired and talented faculty and administration. One suspects that until Orthodoxy resolves the recruitment of personnel problem, there will be time enough to address the other aspects of quality Jewish education.



These, then, are some of the more salient failures and challenges confronting Orthodoxy as it approaches the turn of the century.

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**Aharon Lichtenstein:** As an expatriate who enjoys direct contact with Orthodoxy in America only in the course of brief annual visits, I respond to *Tradition's* invitation with a measure of diffidence. If proverbial wisdom can be twisted, I approach the questions it has posed endowed, I hope, with a transient's perspicuity; and yet I feel sadly bereft of the sense of immediacy so essential for measuring a pulse or perceiving nuances. Nevertheless, as the questions are by and large general—and since, moreover, most are, *mutatis mutandis*, no less relevant to the Israeli than to the American scene—I trust the response will be to the point.

Any assessment of the current state of American Orthodoxy must relate to two distinct issues: (1) its position *vis à vis* schismatic movements, and (2) the degree of its success or failure in coping with challenges which confront American Jewry as a whole. With respect to the former, it is clear that over the past two decades the relative strength of Orthodoxy has been considerably enhanced. This change is due, in part, to the decline of Conservative and Reform Judaism, many of whose traditional constituents have either become totally disaffected or have moved in the direction of consistent halakhic living. In large measure, however, it stems from the resurgence of Orthodoxy itself. Much to the dismay and disbelief of our adversaries (and, quite candidly, weren't there some premonitions among our adherents as well?), it has turned out that the projections of our anticipated demise were not only premature but quite simply erroneous. Revitalization has been perhaps most clearly manifested in the growth of advanced (and often protracted) Torah study; and the development of this area probably constitutes our greatest single recent achievement. How many truly believed, 20 years ago, that the yeshivah proper would today be the heart of Yeshiva University, its *bet midrash* filled to capacity, evening after evening? I wonder if even Rav Aharon Kotler ztl, visionary as he was, thought that close to a thousand *b'nei Torah* would now be learning in Lakewood.

Moreover, the growth has not been confined to major centers, yeshivot having sprung up in what were once regarded as spiritual steppes; nor has it been purely quantitative. The quality of Torah learning has been enhanced, as regards both depth and scope, and