



The Ideology of Modern Orthodoxy

Saul J. Berman

The entire Orthodox community is still deeply engaged in the struggle to determine how a traditional religion — with its distinctive theology, values, laws, and culture — can preserve its identity and even thrive in the midst of a modernity whose science and values, whose secularization and democratization seem so clearly antagonistic to the Jewish endeavor.

Two separate experiments are currently in progress within the Orthodox community in response to this challenge.

The *Haredi* experiment starts with the assumption that the two worlds are so radically opposed that the only way to safeguard the Orthodox worldview is to maximize separateness. This required the development of a vision in which the ideal life is led entirely within the confines of the Orthodox community — men in *kollelim*, women at home, children in schools that reflect the desired uniformity of religious behavior. When economic conditions require adult departure from safe ground, the deviant experience should be minimized in time, in degree of intersection with the external world, and should not be granted any value for itself.

This approach further urges maximum separation from the external culture — negating of general knowledge except as a neutral tool; distancing from cultural currents such as democracy and equality; avoiding the mechanisms of transmission of the cultural values of the non-Haredi world; and generally maintaining an attitude of spiritual superiority toward outsiders of any sort.

The Modern Orthodox experiment begins with the assumption that Orthodoxy can preserve its integrity and passion, and even be enriched, by its intersection with modernity, and that the interaction will allow Orthodoxy to bring to the broader world a clearer vision of the grandeur of Torah. On the other

hand, this approach does not deny that there are areas of powerful inconsistency and conflict between Torah and modern culture that need to be filtered out in order to preserve the integrity of *halakha*.

Modern Orthodoxy is a difficult path that requires constant attentiveness to the maintenance of Jewish wholeness in the face of the distraction of material excess and pure self gratification. It is a path that requires filtering out the degraded values of the low culture while welcoming and integrating the advances

in knowledge and understanding being achieved in the high culture. It welcomes the opportunities created by modern society to be productive citizens engaged in the Divine work of transforming the world to benefit humanity.

What then are the distinctive convictions of this approach within Orthodoxy? While there is no perfect consensus, and diversity and debate related to these matters will certainly continue, the

following is my own description of the core elements of a Modern Orthodox approach.

1. Torah U'Maddah. While the Torah is entirely true, human reason applied to the study of all of reality can also produce truth. We are required to engage with and study both Torah and other knowledge in order to properly achieve love and fear of God. We are permitted to study any aspect of human culture that enriches our intellectual, spiritual, or aesthetic identities. However, where the application of these studies might lead to behavior that conflicts with Torah, we must submit to the authority of Torah. Engagement in this struggle is positive and results in a responsible learning, thinking, and spiritually vibrant community.

2. Jewish Diversity. Non-Orthodox denominations are realities that make positive contributions to the preservation and growth of Jewish identity. While we profoundly and irreconcilably differ on many theological and halakhic matters, we should maximize our

Orthodoxy can preserve its integrity and passion and even be enriched by its intersection with modernity.

cooperation with them, attempt to achieve mutual strengthening through the relationship, and strive to maintain the unity of the Jewish people.

3. *Medinat Yisrael*. The establishment of the State of Israel is a manifestation of God's active hand within Jewish history. The government and its laws are binding upon its citizens by virtue of their authority as Melech Yisrael, expressed in the form of a Jewish-democratic state. Jews in the Diaspora owe duties of economic, political and spiritual engagement, and support to the State of Israel.

4. *Women and halakha*. The Torah encourages and protects but does not mandate a distinctive role for women centered in the family, since both men and women need to view the family as the center of their lives. Changes and additions to the common practices of Jewish women of the past, when they are halakhically justifiable and potentially religiously enhancing, should be encouraged. Thus, advanced Torah study, tefilla groups, lay and professional leadership roles in congregations, and roles as decisors of *halakha* are to be pursued. Special creativity and effort must be applied to the elimination of women's distinctive vulnerability in situations of Jewish divorce.

5. *Da'at Torah*. The binding authority of a *posek* within his institution, or over individuals who have elected to submit to his authority, extends to all matters of *halakha*. On non-*halakhic* matters or public-policy issues, persuasive reasoning is the proper ground for decision making in a participatory process including both rabbinic and lay leadership.

6. *Chumrah*. There is spiritual value in severity in all ethical matters that affects the economic, social, or emotional well-being of other persons. Since the Torah values permissible material pleasures as vehicles for the experience of religious joy, severity ought be avoided where it would unnecessarily reduce the experience of permissible pleasures.

7. *Outreach*. Outreach to non-affiliated Jews is the fulfillment of the mitzvot of Talmud Torah and love of God. The goal is to aid them in becoming the best possible Jews they can be at that point in time. The means used must respect the autonomy of the other and must not demean the possible choice of affiliation with non-Orthodox movements.

8. *Jew and Gentile*. Non-Jews are created in the same image of God as Jews. All non-Jews are to be viewed as *gerei toshav* (observers of the Seven

Noahide commandments), toward whom our obligations in all economic and ethical matters are the same as those we have toward other Jews, with the narrow exception of priority for fellow Jews in matters of *tzedakah*. Such is also the status of people who are not Jewish by standards of *halakha* (e.g. persons of patrilineal Jewish descent or who converted not in accordance with *halakha*) but who are married to Jews and engaged in leading a Jewish life.

9. *Holiness in Productivity*. The Torah is a sacred guidebook, intended to help us actualize God's values in the conduct of our productive lives. The ultimate goal is not just that we be experts in the manual but that we implement it with integrity in our daily lives as we attempt to make the world better through childrearing, promoting justice, producing and marketing beneficial goods, providing services that improve peoples' lives, helping heal physical and emotional illness, teaching knowledge, truth and values, and through our loving and caring relationships with family, friends, and strangers.

While Modern Orthodoxy differs from the approach of *Haredi* Orthodoxy on most of the issues above, we remain united with them in the theological and halakhic commitments that are at the core of our common tradition. Each of these two experiments is experiencing great success in certain areas and intense problems in others. Both approaches would be better served by a cooperative spirit in which each attempted to help the other maximize its strengths and deal creatively with its weaknesses. A similar spirit should animate all of the varied segments of the Jewish community.

Rabbi Saul J. Berman is Director of Edah, whose Second International Conference, "The Quest For Holiness," will be taking place on Sunday and Monday, February 18-19, 2001, in New York. For information go to www.Edah.org.

We've Moved!

The *Sh'ma* office has moved to
90 Oak Street, Newton, MA 02464.
Telephone: (877) 568-SHMA (7462)
E-mail: susanb@jflmedia.com