

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein and the Haredi World

Class 19

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1. Shlomo Zuckier, Facebook Post, 04.16.18, accessible at

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=782091781982564&id=100005452486362

Today marks the third Yahrzeit of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, ztz"l.

Encomia for Rav Aharon often describe him as the paragon of Modern Orthodoxy, an idyllic manifestation of a Torah u-Madda ideology, the Modern Orthodox Gadol.

On one level, these descriptions are true. Rav Lichtenstein – his doctorate from Harvard combined with his impeccable Brisker credentials, with Halakhic piety set alongside deep ethical commitments – certainly succeeded in setting the gold standard in this realm, both by ideological formulation and by example.

But that was not how Rav Aharon viewed himself. He was not a Modern Orthodox Jew, nor was his prime allegiance to Torah u-Madda, and one wonders whether the Procrustean sarcophagi he decried are not defining his legacy as well.

Rav Aharon viewed himself as an Oved Hashem, plain and simple. He committed his very being to serve God, to study Torah, aspiring to emulate the Divine and achieve moral greatness.

That's not the province of any movement or denomination in particular; hopefully, it's the goal of any committed Jew.

As Rav Lichtenstein himself maintained, no community offers fully optimal conditions for pursuing this goal.

Some communities may be better at educating for Torah study, others for civic duty. Some streams may succeed at thinking complexly, others at lovingly performing Chesed, and yet others at spiritual connection.

But why define oneself within a particular approach, if none has a monopoly on spiritual success?

His primary commitment theological rather than sectarian, Rav Aharon did his utmost to bridge between Torah communities, always remaining open to the Haredi world, and respecting those to his religious left for what they brought to the table as well.

Tellingly, if you consider Rav Lichtenstein's eulogies for Rav Hutner, Rav Ahron Soloveichik, the Rav, Rav Moshe Feinstein, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, in each one, Rav Lichtenstein emphasizes how they transcend the Haredi-Modern Orthodox divide. Even if some lived squarely in one community, their commitment was to Kelal Yisrael. Forced ascription of communal affiliation unhelpfully boxes in these great-souled men, who bestrode facile sectarian distinctions like a colossus.

It takes a person of true vision, of deep religious insight, to cut past political pandering and aim directly at religious greatness. To utilize the institutional vehicles for what they offer, but to dream beyond.

While he certainly had his differences with the standard Haredi position on a variety of issues, this did not stop Rav Lichtenstein from urging his community to learn from their successes. In fact, rather than congratulating his votaries for following his path, he urged them to consider where they might come up short compared to others who traveled a different road.

Certainly Rav Aharon has not been the only one in recent decades to take a broad view of what his true community should be defined as. But while many others bridged worlds by living in one while holding ideological commitments to another, Rav Aharon not only inhabited his world but, overwhelmingly, followed and shaped its values as well.

What Rav Aharon did that was so unique was to live fully in the Dati Leumi and Modern Orthodox world, to champion the values of appreciating complexity and of civic duty to the Jewish state and people – and to do so while simultaneously transcending the petty divisions between his sociological community and that of the Haredim.

On this Yahrzeit, I commit to internalizing Rav Lichtenstein's message: To focus on Cheshbon ha-Nefesh rather than political self-congratulation, to acknowledge the values and successes of communities unlike my own, and to see the Torah world – and the Jewish world at large – as one people, unified, aspiring for a common goal.

Yehi Zichro Baruch.

2. RAL, Hands Across the Ocean: A Review of Rabbi Aharon Feldman's The Eye of the Storm, Jewish Action, Spring 2010, accessible at [https://jewishaction.com/books/reviews/hands across the ocean a review of rabbi aharon feldmans the eye of th/](https://jewishaction.com/books/reviews/hands%20across%20the%20ocean%20a%20review%20of%20rabbi%20aharon%20feldmans%20the%20eye%20of%20th/)

Few contemporary roshei yeshivah have been endowed with the capacity to write a volume such as *The Eye of the Storm*; and of the coterie that could, many, if not most, are probably disinclined to venture the undertaking. We are therefore somewhat beholden to Rabbi Aharon Feldman—a talmid chacham of repute and the head of Yeshivat Ner Israel of Baltimore, an illustrious Torah center that has contributed much to further the cause of serious learning and implementation of Torah in North America—for having mustered the ability and the determination to cope with the issues herein discussed. Moreover, he has articulated his positions with vigor tinged with passion, fusing personal conviction with public policy, with an eye to giving vent to the force of his personality and attitudes. If I may intrude a personal vein, Rabbi Feldman's persona arouses in me latent but very warm memories. We were classmates during 1942-1943 in the shiur of Rabbi Yaakov Bobrovsky, zt"l, at Talmudical Academy of Baltimore—I, a spindly nine-year-old immigrant of limited social skills and of dubious acculturation; he, a bit older, firmly entrenched in both a home of Lithuanian rabbinic stock and in his native American milieu. We were both eager, and bright; he, beyond that, to me, a tower of strength. He befriended me and invited me frequently to his home. I still fondly recall the chilling warmth of joint sledding in Druid Hill Park on Sunday afternoons. As my family moved to Chicago after a year, the friendship gradually dissipated. There was virtually no further contact of note—not even when, some years later, we both found our tents simultaneously pitched under the aegis of mori verabbi, Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, zt"l, at Chaim Berlin. But the memory and the appreciation linger...

The targets of the critique are first and foremost, Zionism, feminism and, to a lesser extent, aspects of Chabad, with sectarian denominations such as the Reform and Conservative movements omitted, deemed as unworthy of serious discussion. For our purposes, I shall focus on the first two as the most prominent.

The brunt of the attack is borne by Zionism, and, understandably so, inasmuch as, on the one hand, it is described as “the most successful of all modern movements” (p. 2), and yet, on the other hand, it is perceived as wholly devoid of Jewish significance or commitment. Hence, the reality of its status as nevertheless “enjoying the unstinting support of the vast majority of religious Jewry” (p. 3) seems enigmatic. This anomaly is both befuddling and threatening, as it raises the specter of mass apostasy and the prospect of resultant retribution, variously described in Tanach. Hence, we are told that in order to ward off potential calamity, it was essential to reject the Zionist ethos in toto. “It is out of love for the Jewish People that I found it necessary to expose the vacuity of Zionist ideology” (p. 3).

And yet, I remain befuddled. Let me state flatly and clearly, that, on this front as on several others, I share Rabbi Feldman's vision and his priorities. Fundamentally, we grew up with similar values and have both retained and intensified our commitment to Torah values and their place within personal and communal life. Still—or perhaps, therefore—I ask: At one end of the spectrum, is it indeed desirable—or even possible—to engage in a foray of utter denial of Jewish worth to what the Zionist enterprise, albeit regarded as a monolithic behemoth, hath wrought? Must we, may we, be so radically judgmental as we deplore certain lapses in religious motivation and result? Is the reclamation of Eretz Yisrael, accompanied by gradual progress towards rov yoshvehah alehah, Jewishly neutral? Can we blandly overlook the infant country's commitment to kelitah, arguably the most monumental initiative of post-Biblical chesed, as if only atheists and Christians valued caritas?

And at the other end of the spectrum, we encounter “efforts to bring the Jewish People back to the values of the Torah” (p. 3). But is this to be motivated and energized solely by the danger that engenders love? Aren't we, Rabbi Feldman and myself as well as our fellow religionists, charged with the duty of tikkun olam in the spirit of Malchut Shamayim, rather than as a Marxist Utopia, simply and purely because that is the Will of the Ribbono Shel Olam?...

As we might have anticipated, the sharp discussion proceeds apace—passionately expressed and cogently written, with the message that, whatever may govern competitive sports, here a gender handicap is out of the question—clear and implicit. Regrettably, however, the critique itself while generally on the mark and impressive, does not always meet the relevant standards. Surprisingly, some flaws are particularly problematic in the context of halachic discourse in two respects—that of general theory and that of detailed application. As regards the former, for instance, we are told that, “It is a fundamental principle—although often unknown or ignored—in determining Jewish

law that halachah is determined by the cumulative decisions of generations of commentaries and decisors. Thus, an opinion of the Rishonim, when codified by the major later authorities, is inviolable” (p. 4). Dominant? Certainly. But flatly and categorically definitive? A question to be asked. I vividly recall hearing the summary of mori verabbi, Rabbi Aharon Soloveitchik, zt”l, of this issue’s parallel controversy between the Ba’al Hama’oer and the Rabad, as to whether Rishonim could disagree with Geonim: “If one has broad shoulders, he can contravene Rishonim. The Sha’agas Aryeh disagreed with Rishonim in many places.” Of course, the prerogative of challenge, if it exists, is not fully or routinely available to all, and is reserved for subsequent halachic leadership. In practice, it is therefore of miniscule application: and in this respect its intrusion into the controversy in which Rabbi Feldman’s adversaries have here become embroiled is of minimal moment (although the situation may differ when Rishonim were themselves divided on an issue). The argument per se, however, is important, and entails a measure of questionable overkill. Can any halachist familiar with the historical tergiversations of bein hashmashot, pregnant with practical relevance, accept this apodictic generalization at face value? An overall directive, assuredly. But sweepingly comprehensive, hardly.

This point is linked to a related tendency. In confronting issues of pesak, Rabbi Feldman repeatedly assigns greater gravity to recent summary decisors, be they even of relatively lesser stature, than to primary Rishonim, whose specific opinions on a certain matter may have been sidetracked. This tendency is, admittedly, not without foundation, and Rabbi Feldman can justly point to the formulary halachah kebatrai as its Talmudic source. However, the principle does not stand alone and can be overridden by other germane factors, personal stature included. The Mishnah in Eduyot (1:5) implies as much when it explains that rejected minority opinions are retained as part of the corpus of Torah, precisely in order to sustain the prospect of reversal by a later qualified beit din. The dustbin of history is not always so voracious.

Finally, if I may, I close as I opened— on a personal note. Dear Reb Aharon: That pair of juvenile prattling sledders is now well past seventy-five. Each has, besiyata diShmaya, in successive contexts, respectively, learned much Torah and has been blessed with the ability and the circumstances to enable reaching out and personally transmitting to others that which we have been endowed. It stands to reason and is, presumably, mandated by joint mission, that our worlds meet and attain mutual fruition. As we both painfully know, however, this occurs all too rarely.

Must the walls that separate our communities and our institutions soar quite so high, the interposing moat plunge quite so deep? Shall we never sled again?

3. Rav Aharon Feldman and Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, “Dear Reb Aharon,” *Jewish Action*, Summer 2010

Dear Reb Aharon:

The warm and friendly comments at the end of your intelligently wrought review (“Hands Across the Ocean: A Review of Rabbi Aharon Feldman’s *The Eye of the Storm*,” spring 2010) that were written directly to me compel me as well to address you in the same way.

I enthusiastically accept your invitation to go sledding, or at least meet together, once again. You deplore the fact that a wall separates us, which does not make this possible. I think you are being overly pessimistic...

[discusses points of disagreement]

Nevertheless, I still believe we will be able to overcome it. Both of us grew up and have been nurtured in the laps of gedolei Yisrael. Both of us have spent our lifetimes in a quest for the truth of Torah. How long can this wall withstand such force?

In the meantime, I am looking forward to our meeting.

With affection and deep respect,

AHARON FELDMAN

Dear Reb Aharon:

I was gratified by the tone and substance of your response to my review, and am particularly pleased by your evident readiness to engage in a measure of dialogue. As you note, given our joint background, commitments, and priorities, that would, hopefully, be conducted in a spirit which could focus, constructively, upon our ability, and that of our talmidim, to foster our common cause of advancing avodat Hashem, personally and communally, rather than upon reciprocal and competitive fault-finding denigration...

[discusses points of disagreement]

In all likelihood, we do disagree with respect to the propriety and/or wisdom of acknowledging the partial merit of spiritual adversaries, or of cooperative endeavor in the pursuit of common cause. Surely, however, we harbor sufficient subtlety to differentiate between such limited recognition and a genre of total legitimization with which, out of misconception or passion, we are, evidently, occasionally charged.

I regret the confusion but it in no way dims my enthusiasm for continued dialogue. Quite the contrary, as we, and our respective associates, acquire greater knowledge of each other, we could deepen our understanding as well.

Bevirkat haTorah vehamitzvah,

In appreciation,

AHARON LICHTENSTEIN

4. Letters: Rav Aharon Lichtenstein Remembers Rav Hutner, *Jewish Action*, Summer 2002

Rav Matis Greenblatt's sensitive and illuminating portrait ("Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner: The Vision Before His Eyes," Summer 2001) of our mutual *rebbe*, served both the *Rosh Yeshivah* (as we all called him) and the readers of *Jewish Action* well. On the one hand, it has enlarged the spiritual bounds of a public to whom he was, unfortunately, insufficiently known, and parts of which were distanced by his presumed *Chareidi* identity—as if his capacious soul could be so neatly categorized! On the other hand, it has deservedly enhanced his reputation as both a masterful *gadol* and a preeminent educator.

5. RAL, "A Portrait of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach ז"ר," *Leaves of Faith I*, p. 247 (orig. Fall 2015, *Jewish Action*)

Rav Shlomo Zalman was, in effect, the Israeli Reb Moshe Feinstein ז"ר. This equation does some injustice to each, as it ignores particular qualities that energized and enriched their lives and beings. and yet it related, surprisingly, to major elements regarding role, status, personality, and perspective that were critical to their positions as *gedolim* of our generation. Both were Roshei Yeshiva for decades, and yet were preeminent as untitled *poskim*. Both fused humility and authority, and both sought, by precept and example - by what they did and what they refrained from doing - to promote harmony and diminish confrontation. In the specific area of *psak*, each dealt with the cutting edge of modern issues, particularly as regards medicine and technology; and each approached *she'eilot* animated by sensitivity to human concerns as well as fidelity to Halakhah. Finally, while both were deeply rooted in the haredi world throughout, they maintained genuine rapport with the full range of the Torah community.

6. RAL, "Take Rav Soloveitchik at Full Depth," *The Forward*, March 12, 1999

Finally, the shallowest cut of all is the attempt to pigeonhole the Rav within the confines of a current narrow "camp." At the recent Edah conference, a paper decrying right-wing revisionism concerning the Rav was widely circulated. Surely, however, left-wing revisionism – in the form of convenient conjectural hypotheses regarding what would have been his position with regard to certain current flashpoints – is no less deplorable. Had the Rav been compelled to choose between what Ms. Kessler describes as the "fervently Orthodox yeshiva world" and its denigrators, there is not a shadow of a doubt as to what his decision would have been. The point is, however, that he did not want to make that choice, and he did not need to make it. He sought, as we should, the best of the Torah world and the best of modernity. For decades, *sui generis* sage that he was, the Rav bestrode American Orthodoxy like a colossus, transcending many of its internal fissures. Let us not now inter him in a Procrustean sarcophagus.

7. RAL, "My Education and Aspirations: Autobiographical Reflections of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, ז"ל," accessible at <http://etzion.org.il/en/my-education-and-aspirations-autobiographical-reflections-rav-aharon-lichtenstein-ztl>

Chaim Berlin was, of course, a *Charedi* yeshiva. R. Ahron, however, would not have described himself as part of the *Charedi* world. He had a sense, as did the Rav, ז"ל, that he transcended those categories, and I wish I could transcend them, too; but it's become more and more difficult to transcend categories. When I was your age, contact between the *yeshivot* on both sides of the fence was much more common than it is today. So, I look back with joy and gratification, a sense of indebtedness and gratitude, to the years I spent at Chaim Berlin. But I would not categorize its contribution to my development in terms of "getting to know the *Charedi* world." Through my mother,

particularly, I had the good fortune to be able to know some of its best exemplars, such as Rav Ya'akov Kamenetsky – who, to me, was an ideal. I knew the Charedi world anyway; what I gained in my years at Chaim Berlin was my exposure to the two *rebbeim* whom I mentioned, and some friends who remain close to me to this day.

8. Tovah Lichtenstein, “Countering Counter-History: Reconsidering Rav Aharon’s Road not Taken,” March 23, 2017, accessible at <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/commentary/countering-counter-history-reconsidering-rav-aharon%E2%80%99s-road-not-taken/>

I presented [at the Jewish Center] a very different understanding of the implications of Rav Aharon’s move to Yeshivat Har Etzion for the American Torah community. I claimed then, and reiterate now, that Rav Aharon’s influence on the American Orthodox community, be it called Centrist or Modern, was *because* he had moved to Israel. He and his Yeshiva sought out and attracted the best and brightest of American young men—and, eventually, young women—to partake of his Torah at Yeshivat Har Etzion and at Migdal Oz. His students were not limited to those who might have chosen to study at Yeshiva University. He was not limited by the particular institutional structure of Yeshiva University, its dynamics and complexity. He distanced himself from the American scene as he immersed himself completely in the task of building an institution that had as its motto not Torah and Mada but Torah and army service. This combination of involvement in a Jewish polity while single-mindedly pursuing Torah learning and values had a far reach and attracted those who would later study in a variety of educational settings. These young people returned to their homes and it is they who saw Rav Aharon as their “gadol.” The very fact that Rabbi Eleff embarked on his counter-history journey affirms Rav Aharon’s broad influence.

9. Shlomo Zuckier and Shalom Carmy, “An Introductory Biographical Sketch of R. Aharon Lichtenstein,” *Tradition* 47:4 (2015), pp. 14-15

R. Lichtenstein has, from time to time, taken positions on urgent public issues and has presented general perspectives on occasional matters. Invariably when he has lifted his voice, it has not been to cheerlead for those with whom he finds himself in agreement. Rather he has repeatedly called into question one-sided, often popular opinions. During the first Lebanon war of 1982, for example, after the Christian militiamen who enjoyed Israeli support massacred Palestinian refugees, R. Lichtenstein’s open letter to Prime Minister Begin, calling upon the government to investigate whether Israeli officials had failed to exercise restraint over the marauders, first appeared in the religious nationalist newspaper *HaTzofe*.³⁸ Some years later, when R. Elazar Shach publicly attacked secular Zionism, and labor Zionism in particular, during an Israeli cabinet crisis, it was to readers of the secular *Maariv* that R. Lichtenstein explained that his world was that of R. Shach and Ponevezh, and that he differed from his Haredi confreres primarily insofar as he insists on recognizing and celebrating the accomplishments of secular Zionism. Where others are tempted to magnify the gap between Religious Zionism and the Haredi community, R. Lichtenstein here went out of his way to define it narrowly. He revered and pursued personal relationship with major figures in the non-Zionist Orthodox community—most notably with R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, but with others as well—and has lamented the unwillingness of other Religious Zionist *rabbanim* to do likewise. Similarly, he has repeatedly criticized the inclination of Orthodox spokesmen to derive unholy comfort from phenomena of malaise in secular society, as if their decline were necessary for our self-confidence. The lesson, to at least some of his students, is that engagement in public affairs is sometimes a duty, but never an occasion to play to the galleries.

10. RAL, “Centrist Orthodoxy: A Spiritual Accounting,” *By His Light*

COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES WITH THE RIGHT

Let us begin with the examination of the light. What are the hallmarks of so-called Centrist Orthodoxy, and in what respect does it differ from its Rightist critics?

Broadly speaking, of course, our common purpose is identical: universally—“le-takken olam be-malkhut Shad-dai, to mend the world under divine sovereignty;” nationally—to realize our destiny as a “mamlekhet kohanim ve-goi kadosh, kingdom of priests and a holy nation;” personally—to prepare for the tripartite examination described in the gemara (Shabbat 31a): “Did you deal faithfully? Did you set fixed times for Torah study? Did you anticipate redemption?” It is important that we bear this community of purpose very much in mind.

When all is said and done, we should recognize and realize that what we share with the Rightist community far, far outweighs whatever divides us—although, in the nature of things, the focus within the community is upon the divisive element. I sometimes have the feeling that, with regard to perceiving that community, we are often somewhat remiss.

Ernst Simon, a professor of education at the Hebrew University, once remarked with reference to the dilemma of a religious professor in Jerusalem (remember, this was years ago), that “The people you can talk to, you can’t daven with, and the people with whom you can daven, you can’t talk.” For benei Torah, of course, the shared universe of Talmudic discourse, of havayot de-Abbaye ve-Rava, serves as a great cementing force. But even amongst benei Torah, many in our camp no doubt find it easier to talk, perhaps even to work, with an intelligent secular colleague than with a Karliner chassid, forgetting that the pleasantries attendant upon passing the time of day cannot compare with a shared vision of eternity. Surely we need to recognize, and the point can hardly be overemphasized, that our basic affinity is with those—past, present or future—to whom tzelem E-lokim, malkhut Shamayim and avodat Hashem (the divine image, divine sovereignty, and the service of God) are the basic categories of human existence. Nevertheless, important differences clearly do exist, and these relate to substance as well as to style, to strategy no less than to tactics. While an abstract eschatological vision may be common, its specific content may vary, and quite significantly so. While the ideal of “a holy nation” animates us all, its definition is far from agreed. And if we all labor with an eye to certain ultimate questions, we may—and do—differ greatly with regard to the respective weight to be assigned to them.

If pressed to define the primary area of difference between the various Torah communities, I presume we would get different replies depending upon whether the question were posed in the Diaspora or in Eretz Yisrael. In Galut, the litmus test probably still is the attitude to secular culture; in Eretz Yisrael, the attitude towards the state. Both are, however, clearly major issues in both places, and I would like to deal seriatim with each and then to analyze their common denominator.

[discusses secular education] ...

I am generally opposed to positing a single mold as the sole model for avodat Hashem, and I submit that, were it up to me, one could receive rabbinic ordination from Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan even if, like R. Akiva Eiger, he did not have a B.A...

Psychological sensitivity in those circles is grossly deficient. Just recall, if you attended the funeral of a great rabbi, how abstract, repetitive and inane the eulogies were. When R. Aharon Kotler zt”l passed away, there was what was considered at that time a huge funeral downtown. There was a long row of eulogizers—rashei yeshiva and rabbis—but the only person who began to give an insight into the fire which animated that giant was Irving Bunim, a layman. When one’s psychological sensitivity is lacking, the result is that much of Torah—whole parashiyyot and personalities in Chumash—are simply misread, in the sense of gilui panim ba-Torah she-lo ke-halakha (false interpretation of Torah), with a marvelous tradition of midrashim often distorted beyond recognition...

Second, with regard to areas of practical Halakha, there are differences over how far and how fast one should push in order to arrive at a kind of foolproof practice. How high should the “fence around the Torah” be raised, even when raising it too high has an impact on other values, and even when raising it disregards the impact which it has upon the standing of the kehilla, the basic (and if it is basic, it is in some sense centrist) community as it has existed from generation to generation? The mentality which is totally immersed in certain specifics may often lack the spiritual energy to involve itself in other areas and might not give these considerations sufficient weight. Minutiae are, of course, critical to halakhic thought and experience, and the adherence to standards in their implementation is an essential ingredient of any form of serious Torah commitment. But these need to be viewed, and, within certain limits, defined, with reference to general spiritual and axiological factors...

Having quoted myself previously with regard to the question of culture, I will refer you now to another article I wrote, dealing with the topic of attitudes towards Zionism within the American Orthodox community. In dealing with the differences between the adherents of and opponents to Zionism within the Torah world, I focused upon several major factors: conceptually, the extent to which man—and all of society collectively—should participate in the historical process; how partial successes or partial developments—half-way houses, if you will—were to be evaluated; how one perceived the specific reality of political Zionism; and to what extent was one ready and willing to work with secularists. All of these, I think, are significant factors in drawing lines between the pros and the cons.

But I think that in our context, another element may be added: in general, to what extent is one interested in the political order, the polis, and specifically, how much significance (if any) does one attach to the issue of Jewish sovereignty in Eretz Yisrael? Here, of course, there is a clear break between Centrists, who, animated by both Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik, stress the scope of Halakha and Torah as pervasive, touching upon every facet of human life, in the public sphere no less than the private, and those who are content to restrict themselves within their four cubits and care little about what flag flies above their yeshiva.

Speaking for myself, I am far from totally identifying with the official Zionist ideology. I have the privilege of being regarded in America as a bit odd for being a Zionist, and in Eretz Yisrael as being a little odd (at least within our world) for being suspect as not sufficiently Zionist. But, be that as it may, I would not go the full route with Rav Kook; I say freely that there are passages in which he writes of the importance of the state, its accomplishments and achievements, which bewilder me...

THEORY AND PRACTICE

Thus, the key issue distinguishing our approach from that of our colleagues on the Right is the question of whether to adopt an attitude of “everything is in Torah,” or to append, balance and round out. With respect to this issue, I think that we stand on solid ground. We have a position which need not be viewed as being the sole position, nor even be regarded historically as the majority position, but surely it is a sound, solid and legitimate position. I believe, therefore, that the problem confronting Centrist Orthodoxy today is not, or ought not to be, primarily ideological.

Even if our position is, in certain respects, a minority view among halakhic Jews, judged by either historical or contemporary reference, this need hardly dismay us. On some issues, there is no question that the kind of the position that I have outlined here has been a minority view. The question of general culture is, after all, quite old, and it is true: this position was in the minority at the time of the Rishonim and certainly in recent centuries in Eastern Europe. But no one questions that it is legitimate. In other areas, with regard to the fullness of life as opposed to constriction, I think we stand on the high ground: historically, ours has been the majority view. Those who now present constriction as an ultimate ideal represent the minority view.

Be this as it may, I believe that the light by which we walk is a reliable guide—not the sole guide, but a thoroughly legitimate one. Our question, then, is: How well and how faithfully do we, as a community, walk by it? Our problem is not on the conceptual level, but rather on that of implementation, both operational and experiential. We will turn next to this question, the second component of our cheshbon ha-nefesh.

DIALECTICAL TENSION OR TEPID INDIFFERENCE?

Ideally, vibrant centrism should issue from the dialectical tension between diverse and, at times, even divergent values. Centrist Orthodoxy, specifically, can be powerful only when the concern for Torah remains passionate and profound, but is then supplemented by other elements. It can succeed when we can honestly state, by analogy with Byron’s statement (in “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage”), “I love not man the less, but nature more,” that, in comparison to others, we love not Torah less, but derekh erez—in the full, rich sense of that term—more.

It is precisely here, I am afraid, that our cheshbon ha-nefesh begins. How much of our Centrism indeed derives from dialectical tension, and how much from tepid indifference? Is our commitment to talmud Torah truly as deep as that of the Right, but only modified in practice by the need to pursue other values? Do our students devote as much time and effort to talmud Torah, minus only that needed to acquire culture or build a state? Comparisons aside, let us deal with specific educational issues: What has all the time wasted on television, the inordinate vacations, a system of religious public schools in Israel which shuts down at one or two in the afternoon, to do with culture or Zionism?

Cannot one acquire both, in schools geared to the hilt for maximal Torah achievement? On the contrary, success in talmud Torah on the part of those who maintain a multiple vision requires greater tenacity, more devotion and more diligence, than among devotees of the monochromatic, who speak, in a phrase much beloved by the Right, of producing only shemen zayit zakh, the purest olive oil. But does that exist?

The children in Centrist summer camps today do not waste away their summers because they are busy mastering Bach or Euclid. They generally abstain from Torah study because their parents, or the community out of which they spring, do not consider talmud Torah, perhaps Judaism in general, as that important. So long as this is the case, we are indeed in serious trouble. The challenge which confronts us is how to build a community which is

passionately committed to Torah, but understands the need for *gereira*. So far, this has proven to be a difficult and elusive task.

In part, it is the fault of the community; it is less committed, less involved, less engaged. But, we are here at a moment of *cheshbon ha-nefesh*: Is it only that? Are the community's leaders and educators blameless? A man who is a near and dear friend of mine, a *maggid shiur* in a certain *yeshiva*, once asked me: "How can a student in my *yeshiva* have any respect for the *rosh yeshiva*, how can he have any commitment to Torah, if every time he walks into the *rosh yeshiva*'s office, he finds him not bent over a *Gemara*, but reading *The New York Times*?"...

Without passing judgment on this particular encounter, let us ask ourselves: What is the more acute problem in our Centrist community? I submit that, on a competitive basis, we might do better in the area of learning than in the area of prayer. I knew a man who was identified as an Orthodox rabbi but, ideologically, was essentially Conservative. Someone once asked him, "Why don't you identify with the Conservatives?" His response was, "How can I go to the Conservatives? They don't cry at *Ne'ila*" (the final prayer on *Yom Kippur*). Let us ask ourselves: Does our Centrist community cry sufficiently at *Ne'ila*?

It is only by instilling this kind of passion that we can avoid the lapse of Centrism into mere compromise. There are times when one must compromise, and this itself is an issue between us and the Right: How are we to gauge the qualitative as opposed to the quantitative element? They are the champions of the qualitative, *shemen zayit zakh*—adherents of the position which, in a magnificent sentence in his *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau presented that, "It is not so important that many should be as good as you, as that there be some absolute goodness somewhere; for that will leaven the whole lump." We have a much greater commitment to the quantitative element, to reaching large segments of the community, even if we only reach them partially and the accomplishments are limited...

Granted that, our challenge is to see to it that indeed we maintain our position with depth and gusto. Given our constituency, of course, we cannot instill many of our students with the optimal level of love of Torah; we know from where they come. But, within our overall community, and surely within its leadership, such a level should exist. Woe unto us, if the only choice lies between tepid compromise and arrogant *kana'ut*.

A couple of years after we moved to *Yerushalayim*, I was once walking with my family in the *Beit Yisrael* neighborhood, where *R. Isser Zalman Meltzer* used to live. For the most part, it consists of narrow alleys. We came to a corner, and found a merchant stuck there with his car. The question came up as to how to help him; it was a clear case of *perika u-te'ina* (helping one load or unload his burden). There were some youngsters there from the neighborhood, who judging by their looks were probably ten or eleven years old. They saw that this merchant was not wearing a *kippa*. So they began a whole *pilpul*, based on the *gemara* in *Pesachim* (113b), about whether they should help him or not. They said, "If he walks around bareheaded, presumably he doesn't separate *terumot u-ma'asrot*, so he is suspect of eating and selling untithed produce. . ."

I wrote *R. Soloveitchik* a letter at that time, and told him of the incident. I ended with the comment, "Children of that age from our camp would not have known the *gemara*, but they would have helped him." My feeling then was: Why, *Ribbono shel Olam*, must this be our choice? Can't we find children who would have helped him and still know the *gemara*? Do we have to choose? I hope not; I believe not. If forced to choose, however, I would have no doubts where my loyalties lie: I prefer that they know less *gemara*, but help him.