ZERO RESPONSE THE RABBINATE

In the last issue of **L'Eylah**, *we printed a discussion about the rabbinate, headed, 'Reponse'. We invited participation from our readers, and expressed the hope that this would become a regular feature of the magazine. The article that follows is an explanation of why the experiment has not been continued in this issue.*

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Zero Reponse

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Ask rabbis to talk about the rabbinate in public and, so we thought, we would evoke a response. Who doesn't have strong ideas about his or her rabbi? When the sermon hits the 25-minute mark, you can always hear some ripe reflections about rabbinic eloquence. There are even some congregants — for whom a special form of semicha should surely be devised — who can give their rabbi's sermon for him before he has opened his mouth. The reaction when the odd, errant minister discards his canonicals makes it seem is if he had discovered a new form of streaking. Congregations love rabbis the way Abraham loved his father's idols; and their relationship tends to proceed along similar lines.

So we sat back and waited. And waited.

Silence. Zero. Zilch. Was there anyone out there listening? Had our rabbis succeeded in sending their congregants to sleep even without their personal presence, and at a distance of many miles? Was the lack of response a gesture of reverence towards to reverends, a reluctance to disagree in print with a man of the cloth? Or just a lack of interest?

Important Issues

There were and are issues of importance to be raised. For instance; a year ago rabbis had to live through a period in which they had the task of articulating their responses — on behalf of Torah values, and as representatives of *Am Yisrael*, — to the war in Lebanon. some were for, some were against. But many of them met with violent reactions from their congregants, whichever stance they took.

It was a difficult and confused period. The Anglo-Jewish community felt strongly, but it did not produce a clear reaction. Many felt the need for guidance at various stages of the way: as the 40-Kilometre zone was passed, during the bombing of Beirut, and especially after Sabra and Chatila, coming as it did both as a profound shock and at a time, between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, of maximum moral reflectiveness.

Orthodox rabbis, with one or two exceptions, were conspicuous by their absence from the media debate. Perhaps no-one invited them. But week by week they addressed as large a gathering of Jews as any major political figure at a public meeting. What they said was significant; for even silence was a political act.

Many of them must have been sobered by the result. There were instances, several of them, of congregants standing up and walking out, or shouting back. It was the kind of thing that does not happen in an Anglo-Jewish synagogue and at least some rabbis must vowed never to talk about politics again; never to take a risk in the pulpit; never to take sides.

The Rabbi and Lebanon

To stand in the pulpit is an act frightening poised between arrogance and necessity. Someone must say something, but who has the right? A rabbi is not a politician — not meaning that he knows nothing about politics, but that he is not there to say the things that win votes. But what *is* he there to say ? On the one hand he speaks to the whole congregation, not to some sectional interest-group: he must find something that unites them. On the other, he is there as the voice of Torah, and must sometimes take the responsiblity of saying words with which no-one agrees.

The dilemma poised by *Shalom Galil* was considerable from all points of view. Nothing could have been said to unite the shades of opinion, so sharply were they divided. And what was the Torah's view — at least for those who had doubts about the campaign — when loyalty to one's people conflicted with one's perception of Jewish values? There was nothing to guide the guides. But no escape either. For the rabbi, right then, there was no middle ground between moral courage and moral cowardice.

What is interesting in retrospect, at least to this observer, is that nothing was made of it. No coverage; no comment. The Anglo-Jewish community had — like every other Jewish community — passed through a major moral trauma. And no-one was looking to see how it had come through. Naturally there is something almost indecent in comparing one man's conscience with another man's life and death choices. Israel was at war. Nothing else mattered at the time. But by now, a year and more later, the silence is embarrassing.

Press coments while the war was going on made heavy and sarcastic use of "Old Testament" references. The religion of vengeance; a code of cruelty; another war against the seven nations or Amalek. Well: what exactly was the reply? Few media campaigns can have so openly invited a religious response. What did the rabbis make of it? What did congregants tell themselves? What did they expect or hope to hear?

The news of Sabra and Chatila came through on the second day of Rosh Hashana. It must have set in motion extraordinary chains of thought: questions of relationship between personal and national responsiblity, between Jewish ethics and Jewish survival, between being criticised and criticing oneself. Where did they lead? The thoughts of each Jew in the synagogue over Shabbat Shuvah and Yom Kippur would have made utterly engrossing reading, had we had access to them. We didn't. They never crossed the threshold of silence.

Where did it leave the voice of religion? Many secularists had interesting things to say about how the war in Lebanon. Some were for, some were Many writers and journalists were reflective on the antisemitism or otherwise of the media. But the religious response came almost wholly from Israel. There, not here, were the authentic tones of debate.

Is our community adjusted to receive no signal between silence and sermon? Is there only talking at, not talking with? Has the fact that we are used to hearing our Judaism only through the medium of a sermon — with no right of reply — habituated us to a total loss of discussion?

Here, at least, were questions to which some answer was badly needed.

Canonicals

Or take another issue, absurd by comparison, but apparently — judging by the reaction of some rabbis and laymen — the burning theological concern of our time: canonicals.

It was here, to tell the truth, that we received our only reaction. Mr Phineas May, of the Jewish Musuem, sent us some of his delightful cartoons illustrating the evolution of rabbinic dress, from clerical collar to sports jacket ("Now you cannot tell a man's a rabbi — unless you know he is one!"), along with the strange phenomenon, as yet unresearched by anthropologists, of the shrinking yarmulka and the expanding chazan's hat.

Uniform of Garment?

And a solitary letter. Rabbi Frank Lewis M.A., rav of the New Synagogue, Egerton Road, writes:

"Rabbi Grunewald's statement in defence of canonicals, that 'there is a long-standing tradition, already mentioned in the Talmud, for rabbis to wear distinctive clothes so that they should be

more easily recognised and identified' should not be allowed to pass.

"The professional rabbi did not emerge until several centuries after the close of the Talmud. Presumably when he says 'rabbi' he means *'talmid chakham'* — a doubtful equation to say the least.

"There is indeed a good deal in the sources about the clothing of a *talmid chakham.* But none of it has the remotest connection with canonicals, a special uniform worn at services (not even all services these days) and not otherwise. There is, of course, a source for the wearing of a special long robe amd cap by the *sheliach tzibbur* when leading the prayers.This is the widely quoted responsum of MaHaRaM Mintz (Resp. *MaHaRaM Mintz,* 1; cf. *Mordechai, Bava Kamma,* 107). I suspect that as the perception of the Rav's role changed, and the rabbinate became an association of Ministers and Preachers, he began to be dressed up as a chazan.

"Perhaps what Rabbi Grunewald had in mind was the passage in *Derekh Eretz*: "A*talmid chakham* is regonised in four things: His pocket (ie., how he conducts his business affairs), his cups (ie., his drinking habits), his anger (ie., whether he is easily provoked) and his enwrapment (ie., his clothes; *Derekh Eretz Zuta*, 5)." Far from being badges for easy recognition and identification, these are the most striking external characterisitics of the particular lifestyle of the *talmid chakham.*

"The clothing of the *talmid chakham* should be spotlessly clean (*Shabbath* 114a), modestly covering his flesh (*Bava Bathra* 57b). His outer garment should be long (*Bava Bathra ibid.)* But not so long that it trails on the ground (*Shabbath* 113a). This is reflected in Rambam's statement: 'A *talmid chakham's* clothes should be clean and pleasant. It is forbidden for there to be any stain or grease on his clothes. He should not wear court-dress such as golden or purple garments at which people stare, nor pauper's clothes which disgrace their wearers, but decent clothing of average quality. His flesh should not be visible through the fabric like the fine linen garments which are made in Egypt, nor should his garment trail on the ground like those of the haughty, but they should reach his knees, and the sleeves to the beginnings of the fingers' (*Hil. De'oth* 5:9)

"Obviously fashion has changed through the centuries, but it must be admitted that the frock-coats of the *Roshei Yeshiva* and some *rabbanim* do seem to fall within the limits of this description. Similarly there is an ancient and well-established tradition for a married *talmid chakham* to wear his *tallith* over his head (*Kiddushin* 8a, 29b; of. *Magen Avraham* to *Orach Chayim* 8:3).

"Those who wax eloquent on the question of canonicals might do as well to recall the statement of R.Hiyya bar Abba to R.Assi: Why are the *talmidei chakhamim* of Babylon so finely adorned? Because they are not *bnei Torah (Shabbath* 145b). Rashi explains: 'They are not learned like those of Eretz Yisrael, who are respected on account of their Torah. They (the Babylonians) achieve respect by their clothes which make them look important.

"A gown cannot make any utterance learned, profound or even interesting. If it is, it will stand on its own merits. If it is not, the gown will not cloak the fact. In any case, some hesitation is not out of place. 'R.Yehudah quoted Rav as saying: He who, though unworthy, puffs himself up to don the cloak of a *talmid chakham,* is not included within the boundaries of the Holy One, blessed be He' (*Bava Bathra* 98a)."

In conversation one tends to hear the oddest of arguments for canonicals. Someone will express the fear that if rabbis do not wear the regulation dress, they will appear in the synagogue wearing — heaven help us — brown pullovers and hideous ties. Another will say, 'But rabbis wouldn't **look** like rabbis any more'. (What is it to look like an actuary, a surveyor, a leader-writer?). The overt arguments are usually at the level of etiquette.

But etiquette is always a screen for something else. In English society, it was classically a shibboleth of the class system. In the case of canonicals it was originally and undoubtedly an imitation of the Church: a gesture which announced in the strongest possible terms that with civil emancipation, Jews were as good as the gentiles when it came to the external trappings of religion. When one responsum writer in the nineteenth century speaks of the wearing of canonicals as "Acting like the gentile priests" (R. Moses Grunwald, Resp. *Arugat Ha-Bosem,* 31) he is not being controversial: in most parts of Western Europe and America, nineteenth century rabbinical dress was

consciously modelled on the clerical counterpart.

No Religious Significance

Presumably the motivation was well-understood. Canonicals had no *religious* significance. They were symptoms of social aspiration on the part of congregations, of a desire to be accepted as equals. Othewise it is hard to understand why they were not systematically opposed as *hukkat ha-goi*: "We should not follow the customs of non-Jews, nor imitate them in their dress . . .We may not wear a garment that is like one that is specially worn by them" (Rambam, *Hil. Avodah Zarah*12:1). Yet, by and large, the issue was not raised as such. Opposition to canonicals — as to sermons in the vernacular, and the use of choirs in services — came, when it did, primarily when these were seen as symptoms of Reform Judaism.

Why then do they raise such passion nowadays? The Jewish community has no need, any longer, to prove itself; to establish its arrival. To the contary: the twentieth century has taught the lesson already argued by religious and secular prophets a century ago, that cultural imitation is no antidote to antisemitism. Whatever might have been intended, it was seen as neither sincere nor flattery. Added to that, to suppose in the 1980's that following the models of the Church has any pragmatic or spiritual advantage is curious to say the least. Faced with shrinking attendances, loss of influence, and theological self-doubt, it is the Church that is turning to Judasim for guidance. We would serve ourselves and others better by recovering our authenticity.

Badge of Authority

Precisely because it is trivial, the subject of canonicals is interesting. What is said about them is an oblique way of talking about things which may be too painful to confront directly. They are a uniform. What they achieve is to make the rabbi look different. Like the uniform of a policeman or a ticket-inspector, they are a formal badge of authority. And authority needs its insignia only when there is a danger that it will not be recognised otherwise.

Those who oppose canonicals often have in mind the function of the rabbi as part of a sympathetic community. When the congregation is engaged in study, the learning of the rabbi needs no sign to announce itself. When it is wholly committed to halakhic practice, the rabbi's role as halakhic authority stands or falls by what he does and what he knows. In practice nowadays, mainstream synagogues recognise this without ever consciously articulating it. The rabbi does not put on his robes to give a *shiur*, or at daily services, or even on Shabbat except in the morning. The subcommunity that studies, or that comes to shul daily, knows its rabbi and respects the inward man. The gown comes out, by and large, only on the occasions when one suspects that there are present those who are not too sure what a rabbi is. The Jewish vicar? The man who says the prayer for the Queen?

So it would be interesting to know what really lies behind the Great Canonicals Debate. Are the protagonists ultimately arguing about the inclusiveness or exclusivity of mainstream orthodoxy? About how far one goes in making a gesture to the congregant whose attachment to Judasim is marginal and yet who remains a member of an orthodox synagogue? If so, it is an important subject. Anglo-Jewish orthodoxy has, despite and because of its lack of precise stances, retained the affiliation of the vast majority of the Jewish population. In terms of learning and intensity it cannot compare with its North American counterparts; but in terms of retaining orthodox loyalties it is vastly the more successful. How is this to be evaluated?

Or perhaps the argument is about something else, and is after all about culture. Is the great divide betwen those who see the Englishness of Anglo-Jewry as something still to be cherished, and those who, born after the holocaust and the State of Israel, have their doubts: not doubts about England but about the wisdom of chasing after someone else's values. It is, after all, not only Jews who are turning away from the idea of an Establishment culture. Almost every ethnic group has, in the last twenty years, begun to assert itself and search its past for lost identities. Oddly enough, those who have moved from the large synagogues to the small *minyanim*, who have

deferred university places for the chance to study at an Israeli yeshiva, may be more influenced by the mood of the secular world than their 'Anglo-Jewish' friends whose England may be the England of the 1920's.

In any event, it would tell us a great deal about ourselves if we could think through to the inner layers of our instinctive reactions. Why is it that a rabbi without his gown looks undressed? Or conversely, that wearing it he looks unJewish?

Rabbi's and Laymen

Or take, finally, another issue: the relationship between rabbis and laymen. There is more to be said than that there ought to be one.

The point is often noted that Anglo-Jewry is run by its laymen. From this flow all its failings. Equally, of course, from it flow all the achievements likewise. The reason? Congregants know better than rabbis what congregants want. Rabbis know what congregations *ought* to want. But they have no special expertise in making them want it.

The Anglo-Jewish aristocrats who, a century or more ago, created the religious insitutions we have inherited, had for the most part little feeling for religion and less than a little knowledge. But they had an abiding respect for tradition and its dignities; and they made a Judaism that worked. Would rabbis have done likewise? Probably not; and this is a fact that the rabbinical mind naturally finds hard to digest.

It is the worst kind of hypothesising to try to imagine what Anglo-Jewry would have looked like now, had rabbis ruled. But it is what it is, for better or worse, because of its profound rootedness in lay decision-making. Curiously enough, what seems to have happened is that the architects of the Anglo-Jewish establishment acted, unwittingly as lay rabbis: they created their own sorts of fences, and their own kind of constitutional *Shulkhan Arukh*, with the result that the structure is as hard to change as a halakhic ruling. It has a permanence all of its own.

Religion of Laymen

The point rarely mentioned in discussions about the rabbinate is that Judaism is, since the destruction of the Temple, a religion of laymen. And it was from this that the *talmid chakham* derived his strength. The rabbi, too, was a layman. He worked for a living. He was involved in the world of the people he was seeking to influence. If he was not, this in itself undermined his authority. Hence R. Joshua's cutting remark to Rabban Gamliel: "Woe for the generation of which you are the leader, if you know so little of the troubles of scholars and the struggles they have to endure to make a living" (*B. Berakhot* 28a).

The fact is that a professional rabbinate is far more obviously against the spirit and letter of the halakhah, than is the wearing of canonicals. Of course the case was made and defended by great authorities, taking their lead from R. Shimon b. Zemah Duran (1361-1444; Resp. *Tashbetz*, I, 142-148; and see *Kesef Mishe* to Rambam, *Hil. Talmud Torah* 3:10; Rema, *Yoreh De'ah* 246:21). But the onslaught made on it by Maimonides (Commentary to the Mishna, *Avot* 4:5; *Hil. Talmud Torah* 3:10) leaves an indelible impression on the mind of whoever reads it. He could not have chosen more extreme or violent language in which to express his opposition; and the length to which many later authorities went to vindicate the practices of supporting scholars and paying rabbis is a measure, at least in part, of how stung they were by his remarks.

The debate belongs to history. Maimonides' primary concerns were that payment involved making it seem like any other profession":and perhaps too that it involved a loss of the independence that a rabbi must have ("It is better for you to earn one zuz as a weaver, or tailor, or carpenter, than to be dependent on the license of to earn one zuz as a weaver, or tailor, or carpenter, than to be dependant on the license of the Exilarch,", he wrote to his disciple, R.Joseph; *Iggrot Ha-Rambam*, ed. Kafih, p. 134). He was overruled by history, though his postion remains as an ideal to which many aspire.

But there is another concern, which may have been present in his mind, and is certainly highly relevant today. The rabbi, as educator and all the more as *posek*, must be rooted in the economic and social realities of those for whom he is responsible. This unstated axiom is implicit in almost every dimension of rabbinic law, based as it is on a

shrewd perception of human psychology and the strains to which the Torah is exposed in everyday life.

The great rabbis who cast their influence over their followers, almost infinite though their variety is, had standardly one of two avenues of access. Either they were deeply involved in the world of their disciples, able to give them advice in business as well as halakhah; or they functioned in closed communities. The Hassidic Rebbe is the paradigm of the one; the *Rosh Yeshiva* of the other.

The Professional Rabbi

The professional rabbi has neither. His community is open. And his life is relatively closed. Rarely does he have first-hand experience of the problems his congregants bring to him. And that may be why they bring them to him as a last resort ('When all else fails, try the rabbi. At least he should have the chance of failing, too.')

The lack of respect which the rabbi is accorded shows to some degree an authentically Jewish response on the part of congregants. When did rabbis ever have, in Judaism, an authority that was not built on the practical wisdom they had demonstrated? This, according to MaHaRaTZ Chayes, is the essential difference between the rabbi and the prophet: the rabbi has to make his case (*Torat Ha-Nevi'im*, ch.5). His limited worldly experience may make the rabbi's teaching and his ruling dangerously irrelevant. they may, indeed, lead him to rule incorrectly, if he is not constantly in touch with a genuine *posek*.

In a curious way, then, there may be some justification for the laymen who feel that they know better than the rabbi. Both are thrown together in the learning process: the laymen must learn Torah, but the rabbi must learn the problems of his congregation, the way they perceive them.

The issue has become accentuated in recent years from both directions. On the one hand rabbis are no-longer content to see themselves as employees, confined to pre-ordained functions in a system not of their making. On the other, the lay leadership of the community has arrived at a new openness to ideas, aware that what worked then is not working quite so well now. The moment surely calls for the evolution of exchanges from both sides: a breaking-down of the barriers, in which each must be prepared to learn more from the other than before.

Yet another reason why we were so disappointed at the lack of response to 'Response'.

There are issues here. Who will address them?

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