

RELIGION

MODERN ORTHODOXY IN CRISIS

By Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks, M.A.

Something is happening to Orthodoxy in America. But what? To find out, *Tradition* magazine (1) recently devoted an entire issue to 'The State of Orthodoxy', inviting a number of its leading thinkers field to supply their responses to some hopefully revealing questions.

A gesture of this kind deserves serious attention. It represents a sense of a significant moment in the normally undramatic processes of the Jewish mind. The last grand harvesting of opinions took place in the 60s, when *Commentary* magazine undertook a garnering of the field in its survey of 'The Condition of Jewish Belief'. That was the decade of iconoclasm and the ego-trip; of the Six-Day War and the *ba'al teshuva*; of drop-outs and drop-ins. It was a time of selfconscious

and turbulent redefinition. It made sense to ask: would Judaism care to comment?

What has prompted the latest survey of where-are-we-nows?

A premature kaddish

American Orthodoxy has woken to the fact that it was supposed, by now, to be deceased. *Tradition's* editor, Walter Wurzburger, introduces the symposium with these confident words: "In recent years the vigour as well as the image of Orthodoxy has been completely revitalised. 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'."

Modern Orthodoxy in crisis

Orthodoxy is alive and well; and most of the twenty-one contributors pay tribute to the achievements. Top of everyone's list of successes is education: the day school and yeshiva movements. Alongside them, and built on their foundation, are the ramified signs of a flourishing communal and cultural life: a prolific literature of books and periodicals, well-organised youth movements, *mikvaot*, an extensive *kashrut* network.

But learning dominates all. America has become a *makom Torah*. Lakewood Yeshiva grows and grows. *Kollelim* (advanced Talmudic academies) spring up in the unlikely places. The *Daf Yomi* (a co-ordinated daily Talmud learning programme) is wildly fashionable. In New York it can be followed by telephone, through the hour-long Dial-a-Daf service, whose several hundred lines are fully booked throughout the day. At another level, the Art-Scroll Torah publications roll off the production line to be fallen on by a hungry public. Learning has become - *barukh Hashem* - compulsive.

Of course, there are failures too. With a high degree of unanimity the respondents single out the worst: the lack of co-operation between the various Orthodox groupings, their failure to present a common front and their frequent undermining of one another's efforts.

Whose success?

Yet there is a strange undertone to the entire *Tradition* symposium. For while Orthodoxy is buoyant, one section of it - the so-called 'modern' Orthodoxy - is not. And what makes the discussion surreal is that its participants are all of the 'modern' persuasion.

Not intentionally. Wurzburger had included in his questionnaire just this pointed issue: "How do you view the resurgence of right-wing Orthodoxy? Does it portend the eclipse of modern Orthodoxy? Do you regard modern Orthodoxy as a philosophy of compromise or as an authentic version of Judaism?" Naturally, he sent it to all shades of opinion. Quietly and sadly he reports: "We were disappointed that no spokesman of right-wing Orthodoxy accepted our invitation."

What makes 'modern' Orthodoxy modern is something of a moot point. Yet it stands for a distinct cluster of values, including an openness to secular education, to contemporary intellectual challenges, and to what used to be invoked as the

motif-word of the movement: the 'synthesis' by which Judaism would continue to enrich its own self-understanding by its encounter with the best products of the Western mind.

It is this frame of mind that is in retreat. Mention of synthesis no longer stirs the heart or quickens the pulse. Indeed, as Wurzburger's questions suggest, the very word is as likely as not to be read as 'compromise'. The texts pored over by the new learning-hungry generation are not Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, nor Rav Soloveitchik's *The Lonely Man of Faith*, but the Talmud and the traditional commentaries to the Torah. Gone are the days of 'confrontation' and 'creative tension'. Existential angst is out. *Emunah shelemah* is in.

What began, therefore, as an exercise in self-congratulation quickly reveals itself to be an uneasy soul-searching. Orthodoxy's new-found vigour derives from a set of attitudes not shared by any of *Tradition's* symposiasts, whilst those who represent new-old certainties are in no mood to join the discussion.

The end of the Dream

This is an about-turn well worth pursuing. None of the thinkers expresses the sense of disorientation with greater anguish than Dr. David Singer, whose contribution deserves quotation at length.

Here is his confession as the lonely man of synthesis: "I am (may God have mercy on me) a modern Orthodox Jew, and thus a man without a community. Having crossed a bridge into the modern world, I now find myself stranded there together with a handful of Orthodox intellectuals while the Orthodox community as a whole goes marching off in a traditionalist direction (the widely noted 'move to the right')."

To an undergraduate of Yeshiva University in the sixties, Singer writes, the mood was quite otherwise. Modern Orthodoxy was about to sweep all before it. "Who in his right mind could spurn a form of Orthodoxy which held out the promise of a successful integration of Judaism and Western culture, tradition and modernity, Jewish and American living?"

Twenty years later he looks back with unmistakable bitterness. "What went wrong? Why did the dream of a modern Orthodox utopia turn to ashes? For a time I was convinced that modern Orthodoxy had failed the acid test: it had been tried and had been found wanting. Now I

know better: modern Orthodoxy did not fail, it never happened. With few exceptions ... the spokesmen for the movement had been engaged in an elaborate charade. While they talked bravely about modern Orthodoxy representing the true ideal of Torah ... they really regarded it as a survival strategy - this was America; in America one had to compromise; and that compromise was secular studies. In their heart of hearts, most modern Orthodox leaders felt guilty about what they were saying and doing. Their model of authentic Jewishness remained that of the East European yeshivah world - a total absorption in Judaism's sacred texts. Hence, when Orthodox traditionalism reared its head, the spokesmen for modern Orthodoxy immediately retreated."

This retreat figures, too, in the remarks of Emanuel Rackman, widely regarded as the figurehead of the modern Orthodox grouping. Why is it, he asks, that the attitudes of the group are so little to the fore, and that its advocates are 'as inaudible as they are invisible'? His answer, with undisguised distress, is that a process of intimidation has been at work: "One of the causes for the reluctance to articulate and publish has been the tragic 'McCarthyism' in Orthodox Jewish life which silenced many modern Orthodox in the past and will continue to silence them until terrorism dies not only in the political arena but also in the religious sphere."

Modernity in Orthodoxy has lacked the courage of its convictions. Lacked the courage, for Rackman. Lacked the convictions, for Singer.

The search for certainty

Singer admits defeat: "We are pathetically few in number, lack a sound institutional base, and are largely without leadership". His final judgement is that "History, almost certainly, has passed us by."

To what, then, do *Tradition's* spokesman attribute the success of their counterparts, those forms of orthodoxy that have spurned the flirtation with modernity?

First, they cite the general tendency in world religions away from liberalism and an accommodation with secularity. Walter Wurzburger speaks of "the sense of disenchantment with modern culture"; Rackman, of "disillusion with science and the spirit of free enquiry".

Second has been the impact of the holocaust as the refutation of the Jewish dream of living in a harmonious interchange with the non-Jewish environment. Sir Immanuel Jakobovits: "Western

civilisation's betrayal of the Jewish people during the Holocaust period .. was likewise bound to generate an unconcern, if not disdain, for the non-Jewish world, including - among the Orthodox - a pronounced antipathy to all secular pursuits."

Thirdly, the optimism which so dominated nineteenth century thought has been left in ruins by the twentieth. We scavenge for fragments of certainty in the wreckage. Many find them not in the soul-searching of the Jew who inhabits two worlds, but in the willed consistency of the Jew who recognises only one. "In an insecure world, many crave security and, without a doubt, blind faith provides more security than does the travail of the intellectual who seeks God as Maimonides did - in doubt and anguish, in awe and trepidation" (Rackman).

Fourthly, modern Orthodoxy has failed to generate its own leaders. Different thinkers place their emphasis at different points: but the effect of their observations is cumulative and damning. For Rackman the problem is that "the modern Orthodox produced many Jewish intellectuals, but not primary and secondary school teachers for the day schools to which they send their children." Aharon Lichtenstein is troubled by the absence of leadership at the highest level. American Orthodoxy has produced its scholars and rabbis, but "almost no indigenous *gedolim*, neither in the narrower sphere of halakhah nor in the broad realm of public leadership, and no first-rank creative thinkers or artists."

Appraising the change

The *Tradition* symposium leaves us with the impression of an articulate and sensitive group of modern Orthodox thinkers, conscious that the energy and growth in Orthodoxy has moved elsewhere. A group of attitudes is in eclipse.

To be sure, there are criticisms in plenty of the narrow certainties of ultra-orthodoxy, its complacent dismissal of the non-Jewish world, its non-involvement with the rest of the Jewish community, of its occasional ethical lapses; above all, perhaps, of its failure to come to terms with the State of Israel.

Yet no-one denies its vigour and internal strength. Nor should we underestimate the degree to which, in Sir Immanuel Jakobovits' words, "the ascendancy of right wing over Modern Orthodoxy . . ." seems to defy both logic and history". It has, after all, turned on its head the trend that wherever Jews faced challenge from an open secular culture they chose to meet it head on,

and opted for disengagement only when it was forced upon them. The retreat from 'synthesis' has taken place at the very moment when conditions were most favourable to it. Liberal, pluralist America has provided the curious backdrop for a slide into insularity.

An outcome wholly unexpected. The Conservative and Reform movements had been waiting for Orthodoxy to collapse. Modern Orthodoxy, in its turn, was waiting for the right-wing to join it as it experienced the inevitable process of Americanisation. Meanwhile the patient, unaware of the prognosis, continues in a state of health that is the envy of its elective pall-bearers.

This calls for serious rethinking: for no less, in fact, than an act of *teshuvah* on the part of modern Orthodoxy. Where does it go from here?

Against the backlash

Not straight back into the past. There are sane voices here, warning against simple remedies. Nahum Rabinovitch points out, for example, that the *teshuva* movement - one case in which Judaism has been a beneficiary of the revolt against secularity - should be seen in its full perspective. Jews have been "caught up in cults of various kinds, and I am not sure that even the majority of Jewish seekers have found the *teshuva* movement."

The post-holocaust disdain for Western culture may also be - he suggests - a flight from reality: "A virile response to the shattering experience of the Holocaust affirming our will to survive, together with a nostalgic romanticization of a vaguely remembered Eastern Jewish way of life" has led to the "development of enclaves within which there allegedly obtains a life style patterns after a real or imaginary Eastern European model whose painful inner contradictions do not yet need to be faced."

The search for certainty also evokes mixed reactions. Emanuel Feldman says of what he calls the 'black-hat world': "It is self-confident, not apologetic, not defensive. It is clear-eyed; it knows who it is, and where it wants to go; its leadership preaches, and more importantly lives lives of total commitment and authenticity."

But others are less positive. David Berger speaks of "disappointment bordering on embarrassment at the intellectual constriction and naivete" of the same 'black-hat' minds. Emanuel Rackman goes so far as to say that "the attitudes and positions of the extremists have the fewest precedents in

ancient and medieval Jewish history". Nahum Rabinovitch, too, challenges the idea that doubt and tension are inauthentic Jewish stances, "as if authentic Judaism is or ever has been monolithic, unaware of the conflicting demands of body and soul or love and justice ... To use the study of Torah as an excuse to refrain from taking cognizance of the real world is not only an abdication of responsibility: it is an implicit disavowal of the power and relevance of Torah."

Nor is it certain that great leaders are to be found *anywhere* in the Orthodox world today. Michael Wyschogrod gives an idiosyncratic analysis. The various failings of contemporary Orthodoxy can be summed up, he says, in the *kind of person* it produces: "It is one thing to generate codes which spell out conduct commanded by God. It is another thing to produce holy people." He believes that Judaism survives as a healthy organism in virtue of its *Zaddikim* - holy men whose love of fellow Jews and of all creation softened the otherwise harsh contours of religious externalism. We do not have them today, or not enough of them. And because of this "a certain hardness of heart" has become endemic in Jewish life. It manifests itself here in a mixture of cynicism and self-righteousness; there in a sullen defensiveness; culturally in the Orthodox fascination for science and its abandonment of art; and in traditional learning too, with its current cold preoccupation with *halakhah* as against the rich totality of Torah.

Four challenges to modernity

And yet, what is missing from this American self-analysis is real self-questioning. Painful issues have not been confronted, perhaps because they are too painful. At this juncture of Jewish history it is possible to formulate propositions which are both shocking and yet born out by the evidence. It might clarify the dilemma of Orthodoxy to do just that: to spell out four challenges to modernity. If they are true, everything we have gained since the Emancipation is an illusion. But if they are false - how else are we to explain the malaise of modern Orthodoxy?

(1) *There is no Jewish-secular synthesis:* Whenever Judaism had the chance of exposure to another culture, it was enriched by the contact and gave back much in return. The exposure did not, of itself, threaten the continuity of the Jewish people. The cultural alternative was *another faith*

- Christianity or Islam - and our age-old obstinacy barred that kind of exit.

But secularism is not another faith. And what could be more tempting than the image of a society without divisive commitments, dedicated to personal fulfilment and the harmless pursuit of pleasure? Modern Orthodoxy not only failed to foresee the collapse of liberalism in Germany of the 1930s: it failed to foresee the effects of the *triumph* of liberalism in America. The issue can be crystalised in a single blunt question: *Is there an argument against intermarriage that can be stated in terms consistent with a liberal, pluralist ideology?*

The paradox is this. Pluralism makes Judaism a legitimate option. But at the cost of making it only an option. There are others. And secularism for the first time

Judaism without marrying into anything else.

Modern Orthodoxy sought to show that Jewish belief and practise was compatible with all we know in philosophy, the sciences, the humanities. But there is no way of legitimating Judaism without at the same time legitimating its legitimator: in this case, the disciplines of secularity. And if they confer their blessing on Judaism, they confer it on many other things as well.

The project of synthesis cuts both ways. Judging not in terms of intellectual scruple but of Jewish survival, we may be forced to listen to the voice which calls for an education in which *non-Jewish modes of looking at the world and existing in the world do not enter as a possibility*.

(2) *There is no marriage possible between Western lifestyle and Jewish law:* The catchwords of communal doomwatchers - divorce, intermarriage, the collapse of the family - all have a déjà-vu ring about them in the context of Jewish tradition. They are problems central to our historical experience, and classical Judaism has a well-rehearsed formula of response.

In essence that formula consisted in tracing the psychologically critical beginning of a process, and legislating against it. Hence the programme to prevent marital collapse was the powerful group of laws clustered around the concept of *tehorat hamishpahah*; the programme against intermarriage was another group of laws preventing, amongst other things, eating and drinking together with non-Jews.

Not surprisingly, these are among the least popular and least practised of Jewish laws these days. The entire premiss of much of Biblical and

most of rabbinic law - if you do this, it will lead to that - is at odds with liberal ideology. That adultery may begin with a handshake, or intermarriage with a glass of wine, strikes us as Jewish neurosis: the theme for a Jewish joke rather than an axiom of social programming.

The liberal assumption is that we are all responsible adults, and can be relied on to adjust our short-term conduct to our long-term values. The halakhic assumption is that it just doesn't happen like that - at least not with values that come under strain. Intermarriage and marital breakdown just are, often as not, terminal states of a process that began with acts that seemed harmless enough.

Liberal programming would prescribe a combination of education in Jewish values, and - where things went wrong - counselling. Halakhic programming prescribes a fastidious and total discipline of personal conduct extending into seemingly trivial areas. Wherever living in wider society put pressure on particular Jewish laws - making them seem obscurantist, old-hat - this would constitute an early warning signal that a major area of Jewish life was ultimately under threat. The response would be the building of 'fences' and cultural disengagement.

An over-reaction, it always seems. Does mixed dancing really result in divorce? Does eating fish in a non-Jewish restaurant really lead to intermarriage? Does living in the wide world really mean disappearing into it? The classic Jewish answer is Yes to all three questions. We can enjoy the best of both worlds, but only for a while and at a price.

(3) *The Jewish future is threatened by the pursuit of reason:* From Saadia Gaon onwards we have assumed that Jewish faith was compatible with reason. The central question of Judaism is, however, no longer rationally answerable. And the key to this proposition lies in demography - in the Jewish birth-rate.

Emil Fackenheim has suggested that after the holocaust a single dilemma overshadows the Jew: "Dare we *morally* raise Jewish children, exposing our offspring to as possible second Auschwitz decades or centuries hence? And dare we *religiously not* raise Jewish children, completing Satan's work on his behalf? My soul is aghast at this impossible choice, unprecedented in the annals of faith anywhere" (2). Elsewhere, he had famously described Jewish survival after Auschwitz as the 614th command: not to hand Hitler a posthumous victory (3).

Both he and Irving Greenberg (4) see the criterion of faith in our time as concentrated in the single issue: Do we, knowing what the Jewish people has been through, have the strength of conviction to raise future generations of Jews? By this criterion, the *sho'ah* has indeed shaken our faith to its roots. Through intermarriage, non-marriage, contraception and abortion, American Jewry has tacitly chosen its own extinction. With one exception: the right-wing of Orthodoxy, which has taken on itself the task of Job after the trial - again to have children and to go on living.

There are two kinds of knowledge which test reason to its limits: knowledge of the existence of God, and knowledge of what could constitute grounds for giving existence to a child. Jewish philosophy concentrated on the former; but the latter is no less an issue of faith, and is discussed in the rabbinic literature in at least four separate contexts (5). In each case the dilemma is seen as lying *between rationality and faith*. The faith that would oppose "letting the seed of Abraham come to an end of its own accord" (6) is not one that can be rationally analysed.

It is not surprising, then, that the only section of Orthodoxy - of the entire Diaspora - that is sustaining itself by its birthrate is that group whose religious convictions are not grounded in rational deliberation, but in a way of looking at the world which admits of no other possibility.

Judah Halevi had said in the *Kuzari*, more than 800 years previously: it would be the God of Abraham, not of Aristotle - of felt conviction, not of speculation - who would command loyalty in the face of risk and sacrifice (7). And whether the declining birthrate is a subconscious response to the holocaust or a conscious response to self-gratifying secularity, the analysis holds. That dominant strand of our intellectual tradition which enshrined Judaism as a religion of reason, is nearing its end.

(4) *Israel is robbing the Diaspora of its will to survive*: The most controversial of the four propositions, for there is perhaps no-one who would put it that way. Nonetheless, the Orthodox groupings who are flourishing in the Diaspora are those who are mentally at home in the Diaspora: *for they are all, at best, indifferent or ambivalent towards medinat Yisrael*.

This may be as it should be. The voices in Amos Oz's 'In the Land of Israel', disagreeing about everything else, came together in this - that the Diaspora should shut up shop as rapidly as

possible; the business was bankrupt. A *golah* which lacks faith in itself is perhaps the right kind of *golah* for our times.

Yet, for those who would spend even the shortest of times staying and leading, the dilemma is precisely akin to the headmaster of a school to which he would not dream of sending his children. How does he manage even the semblance of conviction; that is, the *kind* of conviction appropriate to his task?

The yeshiva and Hassidic leaders who maintain a studied indifference to *mitzvat yishuv ha-aretz* have survivalist logic on their side.

Can modernity survive modernity?

If these four propositions were to be true, they would amount to a comprehensive refutation of the faith of modern Orthodoxy: its attitudes towards education, culture, intellect and Israel. Our carefully honed sensitivities tell us they *cannot* be true.

But herein lies the heart of the matter. If the analysis is correct we are shaping towards a head-on conflict between *sensitivity* and *survival*.

Of course, the issues can be seen in other than these black-and-white terms; but the argument is not served by holding back from painful formulations. The *Tradition* symposiasts have done just this. They have defended modernity in its own categories; in terms of its own sensitivities. They have not asked whether it might be just too delicate a creature to survive.

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Notes:

- (1) *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, volume 20, no.1.
- (2) E. Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return Into History*, Schocken, New York, 1988, p.48.
- (3) *Ibid.*, p.22.
- (4) *In Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* ed. E. Fleischner, Katv, 1977, pp. 7-56.
- (5) See T.B. Berakhot 10a; Eruvin 13b; Baba Batra 60b; Sotah 12a and parallels.
- (6) Baba Batra 60b.
- (7) *Kuzari* IV, 16.