

Contemporary Challenges
for Modern Orthodoxy

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DIVIDING LINES

The divide between Modern Orthodoxy and the Haredi world incorporates far more issues than are portrayed in standard descriptions. Ideologues tend to focus on attitude to secular education as the burning issue for American Orthodoxy and approaches to the State of Israel and army service as the essential debate in the Holy Land. Yet the hashkafic differences extend more widely and more deeply. Other dividing lines include issues pertaining to women, attitudes to gentiles and to other Jewish denominations, *daas Torah* (or the role of the rabbi), the credence given to human ethical intuitions, the relationship between human initiative, the natural order, and divine providence, and willingness to include communal and personal needs as a factor for halakhic leniency.

I submit this expanded list both as a means of fully appreciating the range of issues and as a way of digging to the heart of each matter.

Certain arguments logically depend upon previous debates. For example, the question of army service strongly connects with positions regarding the balance between human efforts and Divine providence. Who truly protects *Medinat Yisrael*—those patrolling the Lebanese border or those studying in *kollel*? The secular studies debate links with the question of how we view gentiles. If we see them as beings with parallel spiritual and moral striving, it makes sense to look to their brightest lights for wisdom and guidance. If we see gentiles as essentially different from Jews, all the more so if we depict them as somehow of an ontologically lower order, their thought should have little relevance. Our approach to women's issues stems partially from the weight granted to ethical intuitions about equality and justice.

This framework can aid our analysis of the current state of Modern Orthodoxy and help us understand plans and prospects for the future. We shall begin with the current shortcomings and potential pitfalls of our movement and then turn to our relationship with those on the right and on the left. Other writers, most notably R. Aharon Lichtenstein,¹ have enumerated similar weaknesses, but the list bears a fresh look.²

OUR COMMUNAL DIFFICULTIES

R. Yeḥiel Weinberg noted long ago that those lacking genuine idealism can use R. Samson Raphael Hirsch's *Torah im Derekh Eretz* approach as a means for enjoying two worlds, that of Heaven and that of Earth.³ From this perspective, Modern Orthodoxy stands for eating at fancy kosher restaurants, watching significant hours of TV, and identifying easily with the surrounding culture while remaining entirely guilt-free. Such a Modern Orthodoxy does not call for passion, commitment, or striving for religious excellence. I trust that I need not argue why such a vision represents communal failure. Unfortunately, too many of those who identify with our movement think in these terms, to some degree or another.

I once tried to convince a very fine *ba'al teshuvah* college student at a midwestern campus to come to the Modern Orthodox yeshiva I taught at rather than a competing Haredi institution. In response, he pointed to a wonderful undergraduate fellow who cared passionately

about *tefillah* and *Talmud Torah* and basically said: “Other students view this fellow as the local Modern Orthodox star, but he is publicly not *shomer negi’ah*. How can I align myself with your movement?” I brought other factors to bear but was forced to admit that his point had bite.

While our community’s levels of Torah study and mitzvah observance have risen considerably in the last thirty years, we still have a long way to go. Why should high school students who care deeply about halakhah often feel estranged from the dominant social atmosphere in many of our yeshiva high schools? Why do our adults not think more critically about the trashy novels they read or the mindless movies they see? These questions should trouble us and motivate some attempted response.

Even the aforementioned communal improvement sheds a critical light on our movement. Whereas a quorum could not be found in the YU *beit midrash* during evening hours in the 1950s and early 1960s, it currently pulsates with the sounds of a room full of vibrant Torah learning. Yet how many of those voices identify with the tenets of Modern Orthodoxy? Unfortunately, some of these students have come to associate a more committed Orthodoxy with our brethren to the right. No doubt, we could criticize their search for a more simplistic message, but an honest appraisal should force us to confront the communal weaknesses that drive these students toward a more Haredi approach.

Some of the above can be attributed to an insufficient number of Modern Orthodox educators, particularly outside of the American Northeast. Modern Orthodox high school students in Chicago, Miami, and Los Angeles may be more likely to study *gemara* and *humash* with Haredi educators than with the Modern Orthodox. Perhaps our community remains too driven to achieve the pinnacle of American success through graduating from the best law or medical schools. In many Modern Orthodox communities, the assumed standard of living requires more income than a small pulpit or a high school teacher’s salary can provide. Though prestige and salaries for educators have improved, many parents still dissuade their talented sons and daughters from the path toward becoming *klei kodesh*.⁴

A friend of mine, who taught in a predominantly Sefardi school, once sat in a meeting with parents objecting to Ashkenazi dominance among the school's teaching staff. After several minutes of such complaining, my friend asked the crowd how many of them wanted their sons to become educators. When no one raised a hand, my friend said: "Well then, your children are going to have Ashkenazi *rabbeim*." We can direct a parallel argument against our own community. If we want our messages sufficiently broadcast, we must encourage our children to enter communal work.

What message will we broadcast? As I understand Modern Orthodoxy, it strives to make discerning judgments about the broader world of culture, extracting the great wisdom found there while rejecting themes antithetical with our religious worldview. Which aspects of contemporary culture create estrangement with Orthodox Judaism, and what deeper factors lay at the root of each cultural danger? Let us begin the quest for improvement with an analysis of the challenges facing our community on both the popular and the intellectual level. Since our Modern Orthodox world interacts with the broader society on the levels of both lowbrow and highbrow culture, each requires separate analysis. Modern Orthodox Jews watch movies and TV, utilize the Internet, and pursue university educations. What challenges currently face us in each realm?

Western democracies deserve respect for their capacity to incorporate different ethnic and religious groups and their ability to combat discrimination and despotism. Particularly in America, Jews should express gratitude for the treatment they have received. Nonetheless, the Modern Orthodox Jew must think critically about many aspects of this world. Western society's sexual morality conflicts sharply with traditional Jewish values, and we need to affirm our worldview in an uncongenial environment. Technological achievement generates a culture of instant gratification lacking the patience to think in terms of long-term goals. For example, we want our Torah learning neatly packaged, preferably in English translation. Modernity enables leisure time for all segments of society but lacks the ethos of justifying how we utilize that time. While concern about *bittul Torah* can reach exaggerated proportions, a good deal of that ethic should

permeate our approach to free time. The positive value of equality has a negative mirror image called relativism. Western society's promotion of freedom sometimes degenerates into the idea that all ethical and religious choices share equal validity.⁵

POPULAR CULTURE

Each decade provides fresh distractions that make the question of using time constructively an increasingly pressing concern. YouTube and Facebook make it possible to spend endless time in front of a computer watching videos and keeping up with every acquaintance we ever met. Kierkegaard writes that modern man stimulates himself to avoid introspection and thought in the way that American settlers once banged pots to keep the wolves away.⁶ Constant artificial stimulation is the enemy of inwardness and depth. Internet addicts also dedicate their time to blog reading, in theory an avenue for more serious discussion. However, the rapid pace and current nature of blog conversations mean that they often consist of anonymous voices criticizing others without developing an argument: "X has been wrong for years and should be replaced." Such comments do nothing to improve communal discourse and, when done under the cloak of anonymity, reveal a lack of courage and decency.⁷ Some bloggers write more thoughtfully, but the pressure to constantly produce renders extended thinking about ideas and formulations almost impossible.

In my article "Modern Orthodox Arguments Against Television,"⁸ I argue that our communal values should make us especially wary of this medium. We believe in increased Torah study and leadership opportunities for women, rejecting an approach which views women as pretty faces that should remain in the kitchen. Yet what perspective on women does Hollywood provide? Does acting talent or female beauty play the greater role in becoming a media star? Why do actresses hitting middle age find their choice of roles diminishing? While many of these points apply to male actors as well, the objectification of women is still far more prevalent in society. TV and movies send us a constant and not particularly subtle message that, ultimately, looks are what truly matter.

Furthermore, we believe in becoming educated about the world around us, but watching television only hinders that goal. Neil Postman has convincingly argued that TV as a medium for serious content has been an abysmal failure. *Sesame Street* has taught children the alphabet, but where are the shows that contribute beyond the first grade? Nor does the TV news fare any better. The brief time allotted to any news story combined with the dominance of the visual (a burning building always beats a story about the budget) means an absence of ideas presented with any depth.⁹

The problems of Modern Orthodox overexposure to this culture extend beyond the barrage of images of sex and violence; they also include a steady diet of mindlessness, passivity, and short attention spans. Note how the medium of movies invariably negates the possibility of extended conversation. The visual medium demands movement, and people stand still when they converse. When Hollywood converts books such as *The Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter* into movies, interesting dialogue gets cut in the interest of longer action scenes. In addition to the above, too many of our adolescents enter the culture of following the private lives of movie stars, including divorce, dysfunctional families, and outrageous behavior geared toward remaining in the headlines. Instead of disgust with this world, our high school students participate in the voyeuristic following of the rich and famous, something antithetical to *Torah u-Madda*.

A summary of this tirade against television might state as follows: We could imagine saying to a Haredi interlocutor: “Modern Orthodoxy’s advantage is our ability to cull the wisdom found in Bradley’s philosophy and Yeats’s poetry.” Could we imagine saying: “Modern Orthodoxy’s advantage is our ability to watch *Friends* and *Desperate Housewives*?” The time has come for a widespread communal effort to minimize intake of the vacuous elements of popular culture.

No doubt, some readers will accuse me of intellectual elitism that unrealistically expects every carpenter and plumber to read Kant and Kierkegaard in their spare time. Furthermore, exhausted parents coming home from a long day at the office lack the energy to decipher *The Waste Land* or *Lyrical Ballads*. They need some mindless entertainment to unwind after a day of arduous work. I accept the

point. Indeed, too much *Torah u-Madda* literature focuses exclusively on the intellectuals, leaving out what this ideology means for the bulk of its adherents. Yet, my rejection of much of popular culture still stands. Modern Orthodox Jews do not only watch enough TV and movies to regain their strength, they spend numerous hours watching TV as an end in itself, often failing to make discriminating judgments about which shows to watch. Furthermore, many options stand between the poles of *The Critique of Pure Reason* and *Days of Our Lives*.¹⁰

A good deal of worthwhile literature does not tax the brain excessively. Some intelligent writers, such as Oliver Sacks and Stephen Jay Gould, excel at conveying important ideas to a wide audience in an engaging manner. Historical biographies may also serve a similar role, as can novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Cry, the Beloved Country*. A person need not be a great intellectual to read many critiques of modern society, such as that of Neil Postman mentioned above. Thus, one option consists of lighter yet meaningful reading.

The identical concern should motivate a new kind of Torah literature as well. We need to produce a literature true to our ideals that does not deny nuance and complexity but still can be read by those who do not recognize words such as “*Weltanschauung*” and “ontological.” Perhaps Modern Orthodox intellectuals have been too quick to dismiss such literary endeavors. I confess to having directed negative comments toward summaries of R. Soloveitchik’s writings such as the volumes of R. Abraham Besdin. Such negativity is overdone. Many people will not finish *The Lonely Man of Faith*, but they will benefit from reading R. Besdin’s summary. We should produce more examples of this without oversimplifying to the point where our message gets lost.

Of course, other options for constructive use of time exist beyond the world of reading. We could turn off the TV and the Internet in order to play a board game with our children, converse with a friend, or become involved in a communal charity project. Our community should internalize the value of needing to justify how we utilize our time. The broader culture remains unconcerned about this issue, an arena in which we need to part ways with the surrounding culture.

Torah u-Madda for those less interested in the Western canon can also find expression regarding professional life. Earlier, we

discussed encouraging the best and the brightest to enter the world of education and the rabbinate. We should also emphasize choosing a profession, or selecting a role within one's profession, that enables constructive engagement in *yishuvo shel olam*. Helping professions such as medicine, psychology, and social work easily lend themselves to such engagement. Many other professions depend greatly upon what a person decides to do with his or her degree. Lawyers can help large companies make money; they can also service the disadvantaged. Advertising usually entails trying to convince people to acquire something they truly do not need; yet these skills and training can also be directed toward good causes.

These contributions also depend upon university education. If we view a job solely as a means of supporting a family, then the nature and quality of the job become insignificant. Selling poor-quality watches or advertising for a cigarette company puts food on the table just as well as any other job. However, if we grant religious value to the quality of a person's professional endeavors, then a new purpose to university studies emerges. University training enables greater contributions to the parochial Jewish community and to the broader society. Such concerns should become a bigger part of our communal discourse.¹¹

Clearly, the preceding argument does not diminish the value university education plays in simply enabling our community to support itself. Since families need feeding and communal institutions require support, we should applaud endeavors that promote our ability to make an honest living. At the same time, we can encourage the attempt to find meaningful professional expression beyond the goal of making money.

ACADEMIC CULTURE

The need to make better judgments about the broader culture exists with regard to intellectual currents as well. Some fairly dominant trends in contemporary academic circles cannot be reconciled with Orthodox Judaism. I refer not to specific conflicts with the biblical narrative that emerge from fields such as evolutionary biology or archaeology. A greater problem stems from much wider trends and the overarching

intellectual climate. This climate destroys standards, since it denies objectivity, truth, knowledge, and goodness. From this perspective, all historical accounts reflect self-serving narratives. Richard Rorty tells us that we cannot say that democracy is morally superior to fascism; we can only assert that we prefer it.¹² Followers of Jacques Derrida insist that since no boundaries guide the interpretation of texts, we can explain them as we see fit.

Having despaired of the quest for goodness and truth, we naturally reinterpret those who claim to base their actions upon moral and religious ideals. These lofty terms truly cover a self-serving quest for power and influence. Thus, Michel Foucault understands the worlds of politics, society, and culture as discourses of power intended to enable those in power to maintain control. Perpetuating the idea of a canon of great literature reflects white European males locking women and minorities out of the party. “Great books” courses fade into oblivion.

No doubt, my account focuses on the more extreme versions of prevalent trends; other thinkers critique these excesses. Charles Taylor writes of the absence of positive vision in Foucault.¹³ Thomas Nagel,¹⁴ Bernard Williams,¹⁵ and others have subjected Rorty’s rejection of truth to vigorous critique. Terry Eagleton ridicules the excesses of postmodernism.¹⁶ At the same time, the trends I list are currently in academic vogue. Literature departments include more deconstructionists than followers of I. A. Richards, while philosophy professors are far more likely to identify as postmodern than as existentialist or Kantian. History professors use loaded terms such as “narrative” that already lead the discussion away from a search for historical truth. Without knowing the precise popularity of these intellectual trends, we can express concern about their influence.

These positions are incompatible with Orthodox Judaism, which traditionally affirms certain beliefs as true, which roots its communal identity in assertions about historical events, and which thinks seriously about the meaning of sacred texts in the hope of uncovering explanations authentic to the words and spirit of their authors. Modern Orthodoxy must make good judgments about which currents will pull it along as it encounters university studies. Clearly, the

solution cannot rely upon instructing our students not to read Rorty or Foucault. Instead, Modern Orthodox thinkers can contribute to a literature highlighting the flaws in postmodern and deconstructionist thought and develop other models for our conceiving of the world. We frankly admit that proving the truth of certain propositions is not as straightforward as medieval authorities believed and yet still maintain our ability to affirm truths. Many secularists participate in such a project, as do Christian writers such as Alvin Plantinga¹⁷ and Peter van Inwagen.¹⁸ Among other strategies, this critique will point out the self-defeating nature of thoroughgoing skepticism, and that essential aspects of our language and thought presuppose some objective reality. Furthermore, few will want to affirm the full expression of the extreme position when asked whether Deborah Lipstadt and David Irving represent two relativistic narratives about the Holocaust equally entitled to claims of truth and goodness.

The existence of problematic academic trends does not pose a reason for abandoning the *Torah u-Madda* enterprise because we are under no obligation to focus our attention on currently popular works. If our students will benefit more from reading Aristotle, Aquinas, Orwell, and Auden, let us encourage them to do so irrespective of what their professors assign. Furthermore, it is our very encounter with regnant intellectual positions that enables us to critique them accurately and incisively. Sometimes those who are uninterested in non-Jewish thought may end up more influenced by such works. Haredi minimizing of the distinction between *peshat* and *darash* and their frequent reinterpretation of the benevolent motivations of gentiles or secularists may make us wonder who has been more influenced by cynical skepticism. The ArtScroll phenomenon indicates that the desire for instantaneous solutions has penetrated the Haredi world as well.

Though these broader trends strike me as the most pressing problem, we also need to confront the challenges to our historical and literary assumptions regarding *Tanakh*. I am in sympathy with Shalom Carmy's argument that successful study of Torah while working with our own methodological assumptions is a far more powerful argument for Orthodox Judaism than fighting our opponents to a draw regarding

biblical criticism or archaeology. In addition, constantly responding to critics distracts us from creative and productive tasks at hand.¹⁹ At the same time, some Orthodox scholars need to show that these battles can be fought to a draw, or perhaps even won. Otherwise, we give our students the impression that we have no effective response to these challenges.

My presentation has focused on the negative forces in highbrow and lowbrow culture, so the picture naturally looks bleaker than it truly is. The outside world still offers many opportunities for religious growth. The great books still exist, and I draw inspiration and insight from them on an almost daily basis. Some of the progress made in areas of science and technology enables the acquisition of skills that significantly reduce human suffering. With good judgment, we can utilize all the good the world has to offer while rejecting what merits rejection.

CHALLENGES FROM THE LEFT

Beyond our internal challenges, we also confront issues from left and right. The vicissitudes of history reveal the foolishness of predictions, but this does not free us from the responsibility of some looking ahead, and I will explore a potential development. It may be that the bulk of the Conservative movement is heading toward a merger with Reform. They have already capitulated on egalitarianism; homosexuality and patrilineal descent may soon follow. If this trend continues, the right wing of the Conservative movement will be forced to look for a new home. Some will join “halakhic egalitarian” institutions such as Machon Hadar, while others will end up sociologically forced into Orthodoxy. We need to think about how to welcome such individuals while still not allowing their positions on Divine authorship of the Bible or on homosexuality to achieve Orthodox legitimacy.

The previous discussion highlights two charged issues, homosexuality and egalitarianism, that often prevent others from identifying with Orthodoxy. Our most articulate and intelligent thinkers need to address these issues. Regarding the former, we should encourage attempts to discover successful versions of reparative therapy but remain open to the possibility that they simply do not

work. Conversations with several students struggling with such inclinations exposed me to people desperately wanting to be part of the *frum* community while confronting impulses they, and their therapists, have not successfully altered. Once we realize that people struggling to balance their homosexual urges and identity with the dictates of Orthodox Judaism are not rebelling against God or simply weak of will, we need to express great sympathy for them. We can show empathy and understanding even if we cannot alter the basic halakhic prohibition.

Women's issues provide a forum with more potential flexibility even as full-fledged egalitarianism stands firmly beyond the boundaries of Orthodoxy. We can articulate a moral vision that denies total egalitarianism as an absolute ethical mandate. As long as our tradition allows every man and woman sufficient avenues of religious expression, restrictions and lack of full equality need not cause any moral crisis. At the same time, our community could open up more possibilities for women without violating any halakhic or hashkafic norms. I confess that I find it hard to understand rabbinic objections to women delivering *shi'urim* in synagogue when our community has no problem listening to women speaking publicly in a host of academic, political, and communal settings.

Those who want to object to certain innovations on public policy or hashkafic grounds certainly have a right to do so. Our halakhah is not a totally insulated technical code divorced from questions of religious worldview and communal need. However, rabbis must be forthright about these concerns rather than create poor halakhic arguments to prohibit things truly permissible. The laity is knowledgeable enough to ensure that such strategies will generate distrust and animosity toward the rabbinate. To take one example, solid halakhic arguments exist against women receiving *aliyot*, but only weak contentions prohibit women's *tefillah* groups. Those who want to oppose the latter on extra-halakhic grounds should say so clearly.

Radical feminism can prove destructive to family life and our traditions, but feminism should not be made into a monster causing a constant circling of the wagons. Challenges of this kind have always motivated two different types of responses. Some rabbinic voices draw

more red lines in an effort to stop any movement in a problematic direction; others rely upon some flexibility within the halakhic system to meet communal needs. If we realize that almost all segments of Orthodoxy have benefited from changes in women's roles in the last century, we must seriously consider this second option. When I hear some voices proclaiming that they want contemporary Jewish women to be identical with their great-grandmothers, I am astonished. Do they truly want their daughters to receive almost no formal schooling? Acknowledging that some changes have enhanced Orthodoxy moves us away from a knee-jerk opposition to any innovation. At the same time, we cannot trample upon halakhic boundaries; ritual distinctions between men and women remain non-negotiable.

THE HAREDI ALTERNATIVE

The right provides a different set of challenges. The Haredim portray themselves as the only authentic expression of Torah, and they criticize the Modern Orthodox for lacking commitment and seriousness. The shift to the right in Modern Orthodoxy means that for some of our members, this critique has hit home. Even those remaining within the Modern Orthodox camp sometimes articulate the notion that authentic Judaism lies to their ideological right. We need to candidly admit the cogency of their criticisms, but by no means must our response consist solely of mealy-mouthed acquiescence. While the bulk of our energies should focus on self-improvement, we also need to articulate why we do not find joining the competition a tempting proposition. The Haredi world has impressive successes; it also has deep flaws, some of which inherently intertwine with its very positives.

The current version of *daas Torah* prevents serious discussion of ideas because only one opinion can exist. No major rabbinic figure in the Haredi world publicly defended R. Natan Slifkin's approach to *Haza!*'s knowledge of science or R. Natan Kamenetsky's take on rabbinic biography despite the fact that both have deep roots in our tradition. A world that does not allow for debate and the exploration of different ideological positions produces shallow thinking by definition, since it curtails analysis of the strength and weakness of each position. *Daas*

Torah also prevents self-criticism, since every communal position becomes identified with rabbinic leadership, and thus any criticism of Haredi society transforms into an unacceptable attack on the *gedolim*. Such a climate renders reevaluation and communal introspection almost impossible.²⁰

A strong conception of authority which does not allow for debate and discussion generates even more pernicious effects. Given the negative potential within human nature, a system that does not provide for checks and balances or allow for criticism of the leadership opens the possibility that unscrupulous individuals will take advantage of their authority for personal gain. If every communal decision were made by rabbinic giants with the outstanding character of R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, this concern would recede. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Furthermore, the prospect of elderly rabbis being manipulated by their assistants opens up another possibility for abusing the system.

The utter absence of gratitude to God for the miracle of the Jewish state as well as to the secularists who made it possible stands as another blemish on the Haredi worldview. True, some secular Zionists sometimes speak in disgusting terms about Haredim, but I am not sure that the secularists fare better on the pages of *Yated Ne'eman* than the Haredim fare in *Ha'aretz*. Moreover, secular Zionism enabled the rebuilding of the world of the *yeshivot* after the Holocaust. It provides medical care and many other services even as it exempts an entire population from the army service necessary to protect the state. Even their public protests indicate Haredi comfort in the Jewish state. As the Brisker Rav pointed out to the Neturei Karta, those who truly viewed the Zionist government as tsarist Russia would be afraid to protest.²¹ Where can we find any Haredi expression of *hakkarat ha-tov* for this situation?

Other basic flaws include a lack of intellectual honesty which censors dissenting positions and unwelcome parts of history. Great rabbinic figures who did not adhere to current Haredi positions are either excluded from the pantheon (R. Soloveitchik and R. Kook) or distorted to match Haredi expectations (R. Hirsch²² and R. Yeḥiel Yaakov Weinberg). Even if we think such an approach works, the means matter in our religion, not just the ends.

The preceding paragraphs should not be our main focus; we cannot build an identity upon attacking other groups. Nonetheless, Modern Orthodox spokesmen need to explain why we prefer our path, an endeavor that sometimes involves noting the shortcomings of alternative models. I imagine a critic responding that doing so will mean our functioning in the very same way as the Haredi world we criticize. Can we resent their triumphalism while emphasizing the advantages of our approach?

I would answer in the affirmative. First of all, our educators will not cover up the rabbinic authorities who disagree with our positions. We will teach the many dissenting rabbinic voices even as we affirm the religious value of worldly wisdom and the State of Israel. Secondly, we will confess the dangers inherent on our positions as well as the advantages of other approaches. The complexity of life usually means that approaches include positives and negatives. Finally, we will attempt to learn from what other communities have to offer. If the Haredi world has more successfully internalized the need to avoid *bittul Torah*, we should admit it and go about trying to improve. In this manner, we can avoid excessive flag waving even as we argue strongly for Modern Orthodoxy.

If we truly believe in our philosophy, we should insist that the leaders and teachers of our institutions predominantly reflect that philosophy. It may be beneficial to include Haredi voices on our rabbinic staffs, but why should that choir include the largest number of members? Why do many Modern Orthodox parents who send their children off to Israel not consider the ideological direction of the *yeshivot* and seminaries? Some attribute this to consumer ignorance.²³ Others suggest that Modern Orthodox parents knowingly send their kids to Haredi instructors in the hope that the Haredi world provides greater assurance that the children will stay observant. If so, this phenomenon indicates a lack of confidence in our religious community. Fears about modernity and the *zeitgeist* help create a situation in which retreat from the world seems safer than confronting it.

The most important part of our current mission is not to insist on Modern Orthodox educators and point out flaws in the Haredi world but to improve the religious vibrancy of Modern Orthodoxy. To

the degree that we achieve this, the need to look elsewhere will recede. Better judgments about popular and academic culture and renewed emphasis on Torah and *mitzvot* can create a far stronger Modern Orthodoxy.

MODERN ORTHODOXY IN ISRAEL

Until now, our essay has focused more on the American scene, although much of the discussion pertains to Israel as well. Obviously, the *dati leumi* world differs from American Modern Orthodoxy. Religious Zionists deserve great credit for their efforts in the army and their dedication to the Zionist project. Yet we should acknowledge that significant segments of this world do not see value in secular education, are comfortable with demonizing the non-Jew (a clear result of the Arab-Israeli conflict), and are uninterested in increasing Torah study opportunities for women. Furthermore, the withdrawal (or expulsion) from Gaza has moved many in the *dati leumi* world to an increasing feeling of estrangement from the state and secular Israelis. On the other hand, the more liberal Orthodox voices heard in the religious kibbutzim and in the halls of Israeli academia often lack reverence for halakhah and *ikkarei emunah*. Perhaps American *olim* will help amplify the sound of Modern Orthodox ideals within Religious Zionist discourse. At the same time, the impressive commitment of the *dati leumi* world to the destiny of *Am Yisrael* should force American Jews to seriously confront the challenge to leave Teaneck or Queens for the land of their ancestors.

THE NEED FOR GEDOLIM

One final issue merits discussion—the dearth of Modern Orthodox *gedolim*, a problem that plagues the Haredi world as well. What *maḥshavah* works of enduring value have been produced in that world since R. Hutner's *Pahad Yitzhak*? This may reflect a broader trend in American society. George Steiner contends that democratic society produces a leveling effect in which weaker students achieve more but stronger students are pulled down.²⁴ Paradoxically, the great expansion of yeshiva learning in the twentieth century may have led to an absence of excellence.

Modern Orthodox ideology adds another layer of challenge. Our best students are less likely to stay in *kollel* for extended periods because we preach engagement with the world. Moreover, we contend that *gedolim* who have never left the *beit midrash* remain ill-equipped to deal with a world that they know so little about. I think our position correct, but it generates a situation in which our finest students do not spend enough years in the *beit midrash* to achieve full mastery of our sacred literature. Perhaps we need to think about stipends enabling *talmidei hakhamim* already in the field for several years to take a break in order to sit and learn. In this way, such scholars can combine the benefit of worldly involvement with intensive study.

CONCLUSION

Rather than bemoaning our current shortcomings or pointing an accusing finger at others, let us redouble our efforts to address our myriad challenges. We need to inspire our community to passionate commitment in place of apathy, to far more productive usage of time, toward rejecting modern sexual mores and other pernicious aspects of the broader culture, toward a search for jobs that exemplify *tikkun olam*, and to encourage our most talented sons and daughters to enter the world of Jewish communal work. Our path is not easy, but nothing of authentic worth ever is.

NOTES

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1. R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "The Future of Centrist Orthodoxy," in *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Living* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2004), pp. 309–330.
2. Critics of my presentation will point out the lack of sociological studies cited and the impressionistic nature of my remarks. We currently lack such studies, and I do not think communal introspection should shut down until they exist. Moreover, such studies may suffer from problematic questioning or unrepresentative or insufficient sample respondents. Thus, studies help but do not eliminate the need for alternative modes of analysis. We can ask people with experience in the

community to note their impressions and see whether others concur. Over the course of seventeen years, I have taught Modern Orthodox students from ninth grade through post-university and have spoken in many Orthodox shuls. These encounters provide the basis for my assertions. Furthermore, the prescriptive elements of my analysis do not depend on the communal reality in the way that the descriptive aspects do.

3. R. Yehiel Yaakov Winberg, *Lifrakim* (Jerusalem: 2002), pp. 408–409.
4. The talent drain coming about because so many Modern Orthodox educators move to Israel also plays a role.
5. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), esp. pp. 25–43.
6. Cited in Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (New York: Norton, 1975), p. 67.
7. It seems a basic postulate of fairness that people criticizing others should themselves be subject to criticism. With few exceptions, those posting on blogs face no real danger or emotional distress; they remain anonymous solely so that no one in shul or at work will give them a hard time regarding what they write. This reflects a lack of courage.
8. See Yitzchak Blau, “Modern Orthodox Arguments Against Television,” *Tradition* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 53–71.
9. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (London: Penguin, 2006).
10. R. Yisrael Lipschutz legitimates the need for some levity and idle chatter but demands that these activities maintain a certain quality. See *Tiferet Yisrael Avot* 3:10, *Yakhin*, no. 67–68.
11. See David Shatz, “Practical Endeavor and the Torah u-Madda Debate,” *Torah U-Madda Journal* 3 (1991–1992): 98–149.
12. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
13. Charles Taylor, “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 152–184.
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