Shalom, and welcome to our new blog. I hope to use this blog to share my thinking on a variety of topics, and to elicit your responses, comments, questions.

I want to begin by describing why I established the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, in October 2007. From 1969 through 2007, I had the wonderful privilege of serving as rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel, the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in New York City (founded 1654). During those years, I also served in many communal capacities—as President of the Rabbinical Council of America; President of the Rabbic Alumni of Yeshiva University; Chairman of the Rabbinic Advisory Committee of the Jewish National Fund; President of the Commission on Synagogue Relations of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies; and as officer and board member of many communal organizations. I believed that Orthodox Judaism had an important message for all Jews—and for all humanity. I believed that many Orthodox Jews shared this vision.

As years passed, though, I became increasingly troubled by the growing narrowness within Orthodoxy; the rise of extremism and fundamentalism; the disengagement from the non-Orthodox Jewish community and from non-Jewish society as a whole. Orthodoxy was slipping into a sect-like orientation, rather than seeing itself as a world religion. Orthodoxy was becoming more conformist—in thought, behavior and dress. An authoritarianism arose that de-legitimitized views not "acceptable" to the self-appointed thought-police.

Various efforts to bolster modern Orthodoxy did not result in grand success. The pendulum had certainly shifted "to the right". While this shift has resulted in some positive things, it has also resulted in many negative things. I asked myself: when I must face the Master of the Universe in 120 years, He will ask me what I did to help keep Orthodox Judaism on an even keel, to help Jews experience Orthodoxy as an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive world religion. These questions nagged at me with ever greater pressure when I saw how poorly the Orthodox rabbinate was dealing with the issue of conversion to Judaism, the agunah issue and so many other issues of vital importance.

I decided to establish the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals as a vehicle for creating a counter-balance to the growing narrowness and extremism within Orthodoxy. Through our website and journal, Conversations, we publish articles that expand the framework for thought and discussion within the Orthodox community. We want people to feel that they have a right—and responsibility—to voice their opinions. We want to foster open and responsible discussion on a wide range of issues, and to combat the authoritarianism that has gained so much ground in our community.

The Institute has been a catalyst for the establishment of the International Rabbinic Fellowship, founded by Rabbi Avi Weiss and me. Our goal is to bring together Orthodox rabbis from throughout...
the world, to empower local rabbis, to maintain "safe space" where rabbis can voice opinions honestly and without fear of ostracism. We have about 150 rabbis in our group, and we continue to grow. We have made important connections with fellow rabbis in Israel who share our concerns.

The Institute has established a University Network to serve as a resource for university students. Our Members Forum provides a "safe space" for serious discussion among Institute members. We are hoping to launch a serious publication program, that will include books and educational materials.

I believe there are many thousands--even hundreds of thousands--of individuals who believe in a vibrant, creative Orthodox Judaism. Yet, for reasons to be explored another time, they have not come together as a confident force that can reshape the direction of contemporary Orthodoxy. I am hoping that the Institute will grow in membership and in financial resources, so that it can serve as a meaningful and positive influence in the unfolding of Judaism's future.

So far, I am pleased with the positive steps we have taken and with the enthusiastic support and commitment of so many individuals from throughout the world. But we have a very long way to go.

I invite readers to share their ideas and ideals, how they think we can move ahead in developing an Orthodox Judaism which is intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive. I look forward to hearing from you, and learning from you.

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