Is Modern Orthodoxy "Borderline Reform?"--Guest Blog by Rabbi Alan Yuter

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Israeli MK’s Mockery of Modern Orthodox Misses The Mark

by Rabbi Alan Yuter

MK Aryeh Deri derided Modern Orthodoxy as “Borderline Reform” as reported by Israel TV’s Channel 2. This head of the Haredi Sefardic political party, Shas, has served a prison term for criminal corruption, hardly a badge of honor for an Orthodox spokesman we would expect to be committed as a matter of conscience to “doing what is right and good” [Deut 6:18]. According to the Sefardic jurist and philosopher, R. Moses Maimonides, “One may only speak with praise of one’s fellow, and in no way speak derogatorily regarding one’s fellow” [De’ot 5:7].

While it is Halakhically permissible to be critical when dealing discretely with professional assessments, a Halakhically committed Jew is required to respect the image of God that inheres in the other, which is expressed Halakhically by the concept of human dignity, kevod ha-beriyyot [bBerachot 19b and elsewhere]. But to issue a gratuitous slur is, according to Jewish law, criminally scandalous. If Modern Orthodoxy violates Talmudic law, the law being violated needs to be cited. Policy is not Jewish law. People may prefer different politics, policies, or ideological positions.

Deri mocked the knitted kippot of the Modern Orthodox. Jewish law says nothing about requiring either multi-colored knitted kippot or the black, wide brimmed Borsalino hats preferred by Haredi men and recently adopted by Haredi Sefardi men, even though this mode of attire is foreign to the classical Sefardic tradition, custom, and sensibility. The classical Sefardic Tradition did not deride these kinds of Jewish difference.

If Deri has a problem with Modern Orthodox ideology and practice, there are venues, rules of discourse, and approaches of Jewish law that must be considered. Mocking dissent is unbecoming for an Orthodox Jew, be he or she Ashkenazi, Sefardi, Yemenite, Haredi or Modern Orthodox.

As long as one does not violate Talmudic law, a rabbinic opinion is valid. While Haredi Orthodoxy disavows Israeli military service, Modern Orthodoxy affirms this civil obligation. The Oral Torah requires the conscription of “the groom from his room and his bride from his side.” Deri’s Orthodoxy observes this explicit religious obligation in the breach. Unlike historical Sefardic precedents, Deri’s “orthodoxy” forbids the acquisition of the requisite secular learning required to making a decent living. Making an honest living and defending one’s homeland are also Orthodox mandates.
For Deri’s Judaism, it better to be impoverished and under strict rabbinic control than to possess the income and education to be a thinking, religious adult. Deri’s Orthodoxy regards the Torah as unreadable. Only the great rabbis are able to read and understand Torah, and tell Jewry what to do, think, and become.

Conversely, Modern Orthodoxy believes that the Torah is readable and understandable. It is, after all, not any longer in Heaven. And Modern Orthodoxy’s “sin” is that it permits what Jewish law does not forbid. Forbidding the permitted is not a religious virtue.

Most troubling is Deri’s advancing his own position by putting down the other. One does not raise oneself by diminishing the other [Maimonides, De’ot 6:3]. Authentic Orthodoxy strives to make people better, and not obsess about other people’s imagined inadequacies.

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