
Orthodoxy and Mission

Modern Orthodox and Haredi Judaisms have traditionally been distinguished on the basis of attitudes in three areas: secular knowledge and education, Israel and Zionism, and the role of women. We can safely add a fourth theme that has gained prominence over the last two or three decades: Daas Torah--is the authority of great Rabbis limited to their expertise in Jewish law, or does it extend to other realms, such as science and politics?

It now appears that a fifth theme is emerging, and a critical one: the place of Jews in the world, or our very mission here on earth.

What difference or division could there be in this regard? Is it not the case that Haredi and Modern Orthodox Jews agree that our obligation, our purpose is to obey God and observe the 613 mitzvot, to do what is required and abstain from that which is prohibited?

Yet perhaps right here is where we might locate the beginnings of a division. That is, is there a purpose, any mission beyond the observance of the mitzvot? Do we not have a mission over and above this, to change or repair or perfect the world? Perhaps to spread ethical monotheism? Perhaps to bring about the coming of Mashiach? Serve as a light unto the nations?

Or maybe it is not our job to figure out or define the purpose of our mission, but rather only the means? We observe the mitzvot, and let God take care of the rest. Another variation of this approach would claim that our performance of mitzvot, our study of Torah, themselves change the world for the better--that, for example, Israel is protected primarily by the study of Torah and not by its military power, that Torah scholars do more than soldiers to defend the nation.

Such an approach, I would suggest is, more or less, the Haredi orientation towards Jewish mission.

And what follows from such an orientation? First, Jewish mission does not require much or any engagement with non-Jews or the world outside of the Jewish or observant Jewish community. We can accomplish our mission, perfect the world, and never communicate with anyone but Jews. Second, and a logical consequence, some 99.7% of the world population remains inconsequential to the purpose of God's creation, serving, at best, as extras on the Jewish stage, unimportant players in God's play for the Jews. And therefore, from this perspective, perhaps Jews are created "more" in the image of God than non-Jews.

To many, this arrangement might appear odd. Why create a world of several billion self-aware people, and designate only a few million of them as consequential to the story of life? Why then not create only Jews?

And so there is another approach to these matters, one exemplified by such groups as Uri L'Zedek, such between-semester programs as those sponsored and organized by Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future, and overall more characteristic of a Modern Orthodox outlook. It is a world where both Jews and non-Jews are important players in God's plan, and are created equally in the image of God. Where Jews have roles and responsibilities in ending hunger and protecting the environment, where Jews act as paragons of ethics in business dealings and not defend themselves as acting to the strict letter of the law to excuse apparent or even clear moral lapses.

Of course, we remain obligated by the mitzvot and do not replace Judaism with a distorted notion of Tikkun Olam. But neither do we absent ourselves from the great ethical and political issues of our times. Rather, we become leaders and examples and demonstrate that Orthodox Judaism and

Orthodox Jews remains relevant to the larger world. We find here a core notion that we are partners with God in the perfection of the world, and not the only essential performers on God's stage, and certainly not puppets in a divine production (according to an even more extreme formulation, where nothing happens in the world, not a single movement of a single ant, without God orchestrating it).

In such differences, we can see the emergence of a prominent fault line separating Haredi and Modern Orthodox orientations to the world, a distinction as significant as those over secular knowledge, the religious meaning of the state of Israel, the role of women, and the authority of the Rabbis.

We Jews, including Orthodox Jews, do not much use the word mission, having largely ceded the term to adherents of other religions, and we certainly are not missionaries in the sense of seeking converts as a means of perfecting the world (though we welcome those who wish to join us). Yet a sense of mission is critical to giving our lives shape and meaning, and perhaps we ought to use the term more frequently and consider more thoughtfully the mission of our existence.

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