Traditional Modernity: Thoughts for Parashat Behukotai, May 17, 2014

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In his book, The Perspective of Civilization, Fernand Braudel utilizes a concept that he calls “world-time.” Braudel notes that at any given point in history, all societies are not at the same level of advancement. The leading countries exist in world-time; that is, their level of advancement is correlated to the actual date in history.

However, there also are countries and civilizations which are far behind world-time, whose way of life may be centuries or even millennia behind the advanced societies. While the advanced technological countries exist in world-time, underdeveloped countries lag generations behind; some societies are still living as their ancestors did centuries ago. In short, everyone in the world may be living at the same chronological date, but different societies may be far from each other in terms of world-time.

Braudel's analysis also can be extended to the way people think. Even though people may be alive at the same time, their patterns of thinking may be separated by generations or even centuries. The characteristic of Modern Orthodoxy is that it is modern, that it is correlated to the contemporary world-time. Being part of contemporary world-time, it draws on the teachings of modern scholarship, it is open to modern philosophy and literature, and it relates Jewish law to contemporary world realities.

On the other hand, “non-modern” Orthodoxy does not operate in the present world-time. Its way of thinking and dealing with contemporary reality are pre-modern, generations behind contemporary world-time.

The differences between so-called right-wing Orthodoxy and Modern Orthodoxy are not differences in sincerity or in authentic commitment. Rather, the differences stem from different world views, from living in different world-times.

A Modern Orthodox Jew does not wish to think like a medieval rabbi, even though he wishes to fully understand what the medieval rabbi wrote and believed. The

Modern Orthodox Jew wishes to draw on the wisdom of the past, not to be part of the past. The philosophy of Modern Orthodoxy is not at all new. Rather, it is a basic feature of Jewish thought throughout the centuries. In matters of halakha, for example, it is axiomatic that contemporary authorities are obligated to evaluate halakhic questions from their own immediate perspective, rather than to rely exclusively on the opinions of rabbis of previous generations. The well-known phrase that “Yiftah in his generation is like Shemuel in his generation” (Rosh haShanah 25b) expresses the need to rely on contemporary authorities, even if they are not of the stature of the authorities of previous generations. We are obligated to be “Modern Orthodox,” to recognize present reality and to participate in contemporary world-time.

One of the weaknesses of contemporary Orthodoxy is that it is not “modern” in the sense just discussed. There is a prevailing attitude that teaches us to revere the opinions of the sages of previous generations, and to defer to those contemporary sages who occupy a world-time contemporary with those sages. Who are the sages of the present world-time, who absorb the contemporary reality, the contemporary ways of thinking and analyzing? To be Modern Orthodox Jews means to accept our limitations, but it also means that we must accept our responsibility to judge according to what our own eyes see, according to our own understanding. It means to have the self-respect to accept that responsibility.

Modern Orthodoxy and pre-Modern Orthodoxy do not engage in meaningful dialogue because they operate in separate world-times. The sages of each generation are influenced by the social and political realities of their time. If many of our sages in the past believed in demons and witches, if they thought that the sun revolved around the earth, or if they assigned inferior status to women and slaves—we can understand that they were part of a world that accepted these notions. We do not show disrespect for them by understanding the context in which they lived and thought. On the contrary, we are able to understand their words better, and thus we may determine how they may or may not be applied to our own contemporary situation. It is not disrespectful to our sages if we disagree with their understanding of physics, psychology, sociology, or politics. On the contrary, it would be foolish not to draw on the advances in these fields that have been made throughout the generations, including those of our own time.

There is no sense in forcing ourselves into an earlier world-time in order to mold our ways of thinking into harmony with modes of thought of sages who lived several hundred or even several thousand years ago. This week’s Torah portion begins: “If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments and do them…” The Torah uses three verbs to urge us to follow the mitzvoth: walk, keep, do. The

emphasis is on action. It has been pointed out that the word for Jewish law is halakha, which means the path on which we should walk. Walking entails movement, not stagnating. Rabbi Haim David Halevy, among others, has noted that Judaism could not have survived all these many centuries unless the halakha was a living, moving organism that kept in tune with the times. As new developments and challenges arose, the halakha faced them directly. To live in modern world-time is a prerequisite to being faithful to Jewish tradition.

Angel for Shabbat