Authority or Authoritarianism? Dynamics of Power in the Contemporary Orthodox Rabbinate

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"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." -Abraham Lincoln

Differentiating between legitimate and abusive uses of power and authority by rabbis and (other Jewish leaders) has been a concern for the Jewish community ever since the advent of Rabbinic Judaism following the destruction of the second temple. The great rabbinic authorities of the Mishna and Talmud were aware of the potential for abuse of power, and even while establishing their authority, they established ways of limiting this authority, for example, the traditions of debate and of the (respectful) acknowledgement and careful setting down of minority opinions. Even those whose views or behavior were considered heretical were not written out of our tradition. Despite, or perhaps because of, the need to govern the Jewish people without the usual political and military tools, discourse was privileged over dictatorship. Despite, or perhaps because the Jewish people lived as a minority among powerful others, Jewish tradition emphasized restraint in the exercise of power, and developed narrow legal rulings that were sensitive to local

and even individual conditions.

Today, however, most rabbinic institutions actually oppose presenting or examining the merits of points of view other than their own. In place of careful consideration of the merits of different opinions before offering a halakhic ruling, these points of view are ignored, ridiculed, or besmirched, and their owners are vilified as evil enemies of Torah. Instead of seeking to understand the social, religious, and economic realities of specific communities, they presume to know what is best for everyone without bothering to consult them. Our knowledge and experience as psychologists (one clinical, one organizational) leads us to assert that the growth of rabbinical authoritarianism, the abuse of rabbinic power, and other pressures for conformity-not the voices they are attempting to censor-are the biggest threats to the future of Judaism and to the nature of the Jewish State.

As psychologists and as halakhic Jews, we believe that the legitimate exercise of authority is a positive force in both individual and communal spheres. We point out that the root of the word authority comes from the Latin augere-to create, to enlarge, and to make grow. Authority shares its root with the words "augment" and "author," words that speak of growth and creativity. In a relationship of authority there is a source of creative energy, a recipient of that energy, and finally, what is created or achieved. Fundamentally, authority is generative. You can see its dynamic at work in a variety of positive human relationships-with a parent, a teacher, a doctor, a community leader-in which someone outside of ourselves helped us to achieve some good outside of ourselves. Authority is distinguished by the fact that the energy that flows from it-which specifies the rights and responsibilities in relationship to it-is not for itself. The energy that flows from authority is transformed through the process of its transmission into growth in others.

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, a second-century C.E. talmudic leader, is a Jewish example of leadership by authority. When he took over from Rabban Gamliel, he cancelled the latter's policy that restricted attendance at the Bet Midrash to only the most elite students. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah opened up the Bet Midrash, added hundreds of benches, a policy that won talmudic approval. The Talmud notes that on the day that the Bet Midrash was opened to the masses, the most difficult problems were solved.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, perhaps the quintessential Modern Orthodox rabbinic authority, was opposed to authoritarianism and its use of coercion to enforce adherence to mitzvoth. (See Thinking Aloud by Rabbi David Holzer, for specific examples.) How much more strongly would he have opposed the use of coercive

measures to produce the extra-halakhic conformity that has now become the norm for acceptance as a "truly" Orthodox Jew?

Authoritarianism is entirely different from authority: Authoritarianism is about power. Authoritarianism serves the few who want to dominate the many. In contrast to the growth-enhancing dynamic of authority, authoritarianism is aimed at reducing freedom by imposing conformity and restricting individual development. Authoritarianism is a repressive force whose tactics include coercion, force, manipulation, exclusion, and humiliation. The energy that flows from authoritarianism is designed to amass and maintain power and domination, to control people's lives.

Judaism's concern about the perils of authoritarianism goes back at least as far as the prophet Samuel who preached against the institution of monarchy (Samuel I 8:8-11). Samuel warned that unchecked centralized power would seek to accumulate and increase, that kings will take and not give. Finally, he predicted that the abuse of power would become unbearable. And Samuel was right; the Israelites were not well served by their kings, despite the existence of a counterbalancing institution, the Prophets, who were charged with speaking truth to power.

Much later in Jewish history the Hasmoneans assumed the monarchy. As priests, they combined religious and political leadership roles-to the detriment of both. Hasmoneans were authoritarian, ruthless rulers who corrupted the institution of the priesthood.

Power and influence are heady stuff. In a series of recent role-playing experiments, researchers simulated experiences of power, and found that "powerful" participants condemned the cheating of others while cheating more themselves. Moral hypocrisy comes easily to the powerful.

We see that social science studies concur with what the Torah and history both demonstrate: that is, when power becomes centralized and authoritarian, it inevitably leads to a disconnect between the leaders and their followers, between the leaders' public judgment of what is just and right and their own private behavior, between the public interest and the leader's personal and political benefit.

The Authoritarian Worldview

According to scholars who have studied the phenomenon, an authoritarian worldview is characterized by the following ideas (each is illustrated with a

position popular in at least some quarters of the Orthodox community.)

The world is made up of "Us" and "Them."

The fractionalization of Orthodox groups creates smaller and more particularistic in-groups that place all other Jews in the out-group category. Freud referred to this type of phenomenon as "the narcissism of small differences."

Although the existence of multiple groups may superficially appear to represent diversity, in fact each group is authoritarian, requiring more and more conformity in order to fit in and carry its particular label. For example, Frumster, a dating website, asks its members to self-describe by choosing one of seven categories for Orthodox, four for the Orthodox-Conservative continuum, and one for everyone else.

"We" are good, and "They" are bad.

Many Orthodox people argue that we are a holy people-but non-Jews and their culture are at the root of most of the evil in the world; the rest is attributed to the rebellion of Conservative and Reform Jews.

We need to get them before they get us!

This is a defensive posture that perceives threats everywhere and leads to intolerance, hatred, and even violence. Furthermore, this stance leads to the interpretation of any action that we don't like as anti-Semitism.

The ends justify the means.

Since "our" values are right and true, we are justified in doing whatever we need to maintain our power and position. Financial fraud is accepted among some Ultra-Orthodox Rabbis, if they believe it is to the advantage of a worthy cause of theirs.

It is fine to have punitive attitudes toward the weak.

Authoritarians disdain those who are weak or of lesser status. Choosing conversion as an arena in which to exert power reflects this attitude-prospective converts are very low status; they are weak and vulnerable. Sexual exploitation of prospective converts and of children are crimes that demonstrate this attitude-they are two of the most vulnerable and powerless groups. Additionally, failure to resolve the institutional oppression of agunot reflects institutional indifference to these most powerless women.

Subservience toward authority is vital.

Authoritarians disdain those they view as below themselves and are very submissive toward those they see as being strong and above themselves. Rabbis in the Hareidi or Hassidic hierarchy defer to those with more (perceived) power-even if it means backtracking from a position that they had taken-even a public one-and they often claim that they had been "deceived" into taking the original position.

The Rabbinical Council of America's capitulation to the Israeli Rabbanut regarding conversion procedure and personnel credentialing is another sorry example. Despite widespread acknowledgment of the Rabbanut's deficiencies of integrity, competence, and reliability, the perceived power of the Rabbanut was sufficient reason for the RCA to overturn centuries of the Diaspora tradition of local rabbinical autonomy and leadership.

Groupthink

Authoritarianism and the abuse of power by rabbinic leaders are not the only sources of behavior and thought control in the Orthodox community. Groupthink exerts an additional set of pressures to conform to an increasingly narrow, exclusionist view of what it means to be a Torah committed Jew, and is perhaps even more nefarious since it arises from within the community membership. For those who are unfamiliar with the term, groupthink is a type of thinking that occurs in cohesive groups, where the desire to remain a member of the group and to maintain consensus, overrides critical thinking and leads to faulty group decisions. Irving Janis, who researched historical fiascos created by groupthink, defined it as "A mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action." While group cohesion provides the foundation needed for groupthink to develop, Janis has suggested that insular, homogeneous groups that have directive leaders and that experience stress from external threats are particularly vulnerable to groupthink. We suggest that these are attributes of current Orthodox Judaism, and that our community displays all of the symptoms of groupthink described by Janis and his colleagues. The symptoms are listed below, followed by real-life examples from within the Orthodox community.

Symptoms of groupthink

1. Illusions of invulnerability create excessive optimism and encourage risk-taking.

Example:
There is a widespread belief that social problems such as substance abuse, spousal or child abuse, and addictive gambling are less prevalent in the Orthodox community than elsewhere, even when there are no reliable statistics, or that the statistics indicate otherwise. When a scientific study by Rachel Yehuda, Ph.D., Michelle Friedman, M.D., Talli Y. Rosenbaum, P.T., Ellen Labinsky, Ph.D., and James Schmeidler, Ph.D., published in the American Journal of Psychiatry, found that the Orthodox women in their sample were sexually abused at about the same rates as other women, Avi Shafran, representative of Agudath Israel, sprang into action, claiming not only that the survey was biased, but also that "the Torah-observant population is greatly underrepresented in the realms of societal ills like rape, AIDS, prostitution and marital infidelity that affect their less repressed neighbors," while simultaneously admitting that he has no statistics to back up his claim. He just knows.

Other leaders within the Orthodox community dismissed the results of the survey by saying that "approximately 40 percent of the respondents were ba'alei teshuva, and therefore, their experiences are irrelevant to those raised in Orthodox homes."

2. The group rationalizes warnings that might challenge the group's assumptions.

Example:
Consider the following explanation of the outrage over Rav Eliezer Melamed's endorsement of soldiers' refusal to obey orders to attack Jews: "Secular zionists, who by and large built Israel are accused of trying to dismantle Israel, because their motives for creating the State was not based in Torah. Only Torah Jews imbued with a nationalist impulse stand in their way. Those who built it-right and left-have been trying to dismantle it for well over a decade and a half-and only Torah Jews imbued with a nationalist impulse stand in their way."

Another example: Yitzhak Kakun, editor-in-chief of the Shas weekly Yom Le'Yom claimed that the arrests of members of the Syrian Jewish community of New Jersey and Brooklyn, on suspicion of money laundering was an anti-Semitic plot cooked up by the FBI.

3. There is unquestioned belief in the morality of the group, causing members to ignore the consequences of their actions.

Example:
In offering an explanation of why leading Hareidi religious figures (and others) allowed Leib Tropper and EJF to control conversions, Rabbi Steven Pruzansky wrote that "Gedolei Torah-and most rabbis-are incapable of recognizing true evil and hypocrisy. Call it the ‘Yitzchak Avinu and Esav Syndrome.' I have been in the presence of Gedolim, and they live on a plane of purity and saintliness where such incidents-while theoretically possible; after all, the Tanakh is filled with stories of the foibles of great people-are not considered practical possibilities. Most never encounter salaciousness, degradation, and the dark side of man." (Pruzansky blog, Dec 23, 2009)

Another example of this willfully amoral mindlessness is the increasingly frequent reference to "Daas Torah is hefekh daas Baalei Batim," (Lay understanding is the opposite of Torah wisdom), a phrase that insulates rabbis ("Gedolim") from criticism and replaces serious, respectful dialogue with contempt for anyone else's perspective. (For a sensitive treatment of this issue, see Rabbi Yossi Ginzberg's December 29, 2009 post on the blog, "Emes Ve-Emunah.")

4. The group promotes stereotyping of those who are opposed to the group as weak, evil, biased, spiteful, disfigured, impotent, or stupid.

Examples:
Consider the following quotations:
"The Conservatives begin the process with a desired result in mind (abolishing the mehitza, permitting cohanim to marry divorcees, counting women in the minyan, etc.) They are quite adept at manipulating the halakha to achieve that result, twisting and turning the words of our sages until they are "saying" what the Conservatives want them to say." (Pruzansky blog, Dec 4, 2009)

"The feminist movement ravaged the American family." (Pruzansky blog, Nov 29, 2009)

As another example, When Nofrat Frankel and the "women of the wall" attempted to read from a Sefer Torah in the women's section at the Western Wall, they were accused of doing it solely for political purposes, and of "inverting every relevant fact in order to make [their] argument" (Yaakov Menken, "The right to disrupt your prayers" Cross currents, November 30, 2009). Commented one of the readers of this column: "Getting arrested for wearing a tallit makes this woman a martyr for egalitarian rights and for civil rights. This gives the small group of non-Orthodox Jews in Israel a way to be noticed. Otherwise, they are totally ignored."

A common theme is to accuse others of nefarious motives, even when they have stated benign or benevolent ones. How exactly is it that the in-group members know the motives of others so much better than the others know their own motives? Or are they accusing them of deception and trickery?

5. Direct pressure (aka peer pressure) is used to conform placed on any member who questions the group, couched in terms of "disloyalty."

Example:
Rabbi Norman Eisenstein announced that no judge on a conversion court would be accepted if he believed the universe was more than 5,770 years old.

6. The group self-censors ideas that deviate from the apparent group consensus.

Example:
For a clear and compelling example of this, think of the number of people who you know who have altered their publicly expressed opinions or behavior (or asked family members to change theirs) in order to not threaten the matchmaking options of their children. In cases we know personally, a young man was denied permission to go to college because of the danger it posed to his sisters' marriage opportunities, while middle-aged couples have stopped going to the movies (although they will watch the same films at home, in private) for the sake of their children's potential "shiddukhim."

7. Illusions of unanimity among group members is promoted; silence is viewed as agreement.

Example:
Everyone might disagree, but everyone thinks that everyone else agrees:
You conform to a certain dress code in order to fit into the group-"I don't think there is anything wrong with wearing pants...but..."

8. The group has self-appointed mind guards, who shield the group from dissenting information. These can be group leaders who guide the flock and weed out dissenters, and who cultivate a negative attitude about talking to outsiders. These are often Hareidi journalists and columnists.

Example:
Forbidding Hareidim to use the internet, Rav Yisrael Hager, the son of the Vishnitzer Rebbe, called on the community to refrain from buying tefilin and mezuzoth from anyone connected to Hareidi websites. The Rav's comments came at the start of the Shovavim period (the period that begins with the reading of

Parashat Shemot and ends with Parashat Mishpatim), a time that the Kabbalists teach is auspicious for repentance. The Rav added that children from families with internet connections should not be accepted to schools, and that rabbis and teachers who do not conform to this policy should not be employed as teachers.

Overall, groupthink encourages overestimation of the group's power and morality, closed-mindedness, and pressures toward uniformity, and leads to defective decision-making. Although some of these examples are from the Hareidi rather than the Centrist/Modern Orthodox community, not all are. The symptoms of groupthink are increasingly observable in C/MO groups as well. If we don't want critical decisions facing the Jewish community to be defective, we need to be more vigilant about preventing, or disrupting groupthink.

Preventing Groupthink

The best way to prevent or disrupt groupthink is to eliminate or avoid the conditions under which it occurs. Although it is not likely that we can remove the external threats to the continued existence of the Jewish people, we can address the three others:

1. Directive leadership
2. Isolation of the group from outside sources of information and analysis
3. Homogeneity of members ideology and social background

1. Directive leadership is a "command-and-tell," military-style leadership, which is helpful in critical situations of imminent threat, but has been identified as a chief cause of defective group process and poor outcome for decision-making in groups. A good leader is capable of a variety of leadership styles, adjusting the style to suit the situation.

2. & 3. That openness to outside sources of information and analysis helps counteract the groupthink tendency is self-evident, but the advantages of diverse groups may need some explanation. The advantages of diversity are not just our ideological bent-there is a good deal of research on the advantages (and disadvantages, to be honest) of diverse groups in terms of organizational functioning:

Diverse groups tend to be more creative and are better at problem-solving than are homogenous groups. When groups include people with different types of education and experience, they have a richer deliberation about the best course of action. Diversity helps an organization become more adaptable and flexible in responding to a rapidly changing world, while attracting and retaining its best

members. Diversity, though, does increase turnover within the group, making it less socially integrated than groups of people who are all alike. Nevertheless, suspicion and hostility toward diverse opinion and demographics cause long-term harm to the group.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Recently, a number of young, educated, sincerely religious Israeli couples decided to reject the Rabbanut system entirely and make independent wedding plans. They arranged their own halakhically correct marriages and were willing to be officially considered common-law husband and wife rather than participate with that disreputable institution. Will this become a trend? Let us hope there is still time for it to serve as an illustrative warning. This is what happens when leadership fails: the best and most capable will not stand for it.

Religious authority in Judaism is meant to be a force for affirmative growth, to help us on our way toward becoming a "nation of priests" and a "light unto the nations." Authoritarianism won't get us there.
Just as we accept that we are subject to invisible physical influences, such as gravity or bacteria, we need to understand at a deep level-both individual and communal, lay and clergy-the workings of psychological forces on our reasoning and judgment, opinions and behavior. We need to foster the humility to recognize our vulnerability to the easy temptations of authoritarianism and the pitfalls of groupthink. Since these forces operate outside our awareness, we recommend the following changes in organizational structure and process to help keep them at bay:

1. Intentional organizational self-reflection. Self-reflection, or heshbon hanefesh, is a religious obligation for individuals and is a recommendation whenever national calamity strikes. The Orthodox, religious Zionist community undertook such self-reflection following the assassination of Yitzchak Rabin and, at least for a while, the community made changes. Today, the parade of scandals in the religious community is a calamity that calls for self-reflection, particularly for religious and lay leadership. As a first step, independent professional consultation should be engaged on a regular basis to meet with leadership for the express purpose of examining their thinking process and power relationships.

2. Transparency and lay oversight. Since any individual or group with power, left unchecked, will tend to tip, however unintentionally, toward policies of self-interest, it is essential to be able to examine rabbinical decisions against standards of logic, fairness, and consequences for community concerns. This in

no way threatens their halakhic expertise and authority. Rather, it refines and extends it.

3. Make a conscious, declared decision to incorporate diversity as a hedge against the inroads of fundamentalism. For too long now, the Modern Orthodox/Centrist rabbinical leadership has been busy looking over its right shoulder, defensive about its authenticity in the face of attacks from the religious right. Nevertheless, we continue to affirm the value of secular study, while acknowledging that at times it may present a religious challenge; we accept the risk, based on our beliefs. Similarly, while it is true that diversity in organizations entails some risk, it is a better choice than paranoia, black-and-white thinking, and hypocrisy, which are characteristic of authoritarian organizations.

For Further Reading:

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