PSYCHOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON ORTHODOXY'S DILEMMA

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In this age of worldwide insecurity, we generally find people rushing for safety by moving more to the far left or right both politically and religiously. The rise of radical Islam marked by violent behavior such as bombings and beheadings, the threat of a nuclear Iran and even the chaotic state surrounding the recent election of the United States' President are but a few examples of the fear factor gripping the world today. This fear generates in many, a form of regression and denial, of not seeing the reality of one's behavior as well as the behavior of the group to which he/she belongs. In psychological terms, this means that there is a tendency to return to earlier childlike behavior that belies the age and stages of adulthood. There is a tendency to wish to be protected by a parental type authority figure or a charismatic leader. There is even a willingness to assume a childlike role by accepting dependence upon this authority figure. Compliance and conformity become the norms of group behavior to ensure approval of the paternal authority figure. Similarity of outer dress is often adopted as a sign of identification with these group norms. In this way, the illusion of safety can be secured by sacrificing one's autonomy and independence.

Dr. Sigmund Freud, a century ago, characterized this mentality in his “Essay on Group Psychology” (1921-Standard Edition). He discusses how the group ego (identity), and the powerful need of the individual for the love and acceptance of its leadership, can bypass one’s superego (conscience) and lead to blind allegiance (shades of the coming Nazi era). This is translated to mean that anything that goes wrong is blamed on the outside, the “other”. In our era, Isis blames the infidels, Iran blames Israel, and religious enclaves blame decadent secular influences, such as the Internet, TV, Movies, Newspapers, etc….. This leads to greater insularity and isolation since all that is good resides within the group and all that is bad is outside. There is no need to look inside the group to deal with internal issues or to assume any responsibility for making change in one’s own behavior.

This form of regression and denial has permeated the ethos of both the secular and religious worlds. There are sometimes boisterous civil rights demonstrations that are focused solely on blaming others (whites, police, etc.) instead of looking internally to deal with the basic causes of their rage. Unfortunately, their leadership does not raise that same strong voice to help rebuild and improve their communities, such as forming patrols to combat gangs and drugs, providing classes for single mothers on how to raise their children, etc. So much organization time and effort is expended to fight the “outside”, but they neglect to look internally to their own failings. Repair cannot be done by the outside community for them. It must come from their own leadership who know how best to help the community repair itself, and who have the responsibility to protectthem. The battle must be fought against the enemies within as well as without.

Another example of this regression where adult responsibility is avoided is the worldwide escalation of anti-Semitism. The word itself is a misnomer, because it avoids looking internally at its real causes. It is more accurately a negative derivative of sibling rivalry/envy, stemming from feelings of deprivation, helplessness, inferiority and greed. It is especially prevalent when economic conditions worsen. Jews (the eternal scapegoat) who have struggled to become financially successful are then blamed as the cause of their inadequacies. To overcome this disparity, to “even the playing field”, the easiest way is to demean and destroy the “other”. Indeed, if they can shift the blame to the other, they do not have to be reminded of their disadvantaged state. They then begin to coalesce with other like-minded individuals and groups. Strengthened by the power of “group think” and by charismatic leadership, they now feel empowered because they have a virtuous mission. In this way, the need to look at their own

failures is avoided, and they no longer have the responsibility to change. This is how regression is acted out via the age-old canard called anti-Semitism.

These developments in the secular world are not without their counterparts in Jewish religious life. Being identified with the Orthodox community, I will focus on this theme as it relates to this branch of Judaism. We are witnessing a similar form of psychological regression within the ranks of right-wing Orthodoxy, specifically among some ultra-Chasidic and Charedi groups. The “modus operandi” is basically the same as discussed above, that is to avoid dealing with internal issues (introspection) by denial and blaming others. In this case the “others” are a reference to the corroding influences emanating from the secular world such as the Internet, TV, Movies, Newspapers, etc.… To counter these influences, a number of regressive/repressive measures have been adopted. For example, discouraging the importance of secular education, women being seated in the back of public buses and being discouraged from driving cars, etc.… The aim of these and other such measures is to produce greater insularity by separation from the outer world. Unfortunately, they also serve as a screen to block action on a number of internal issues, such as the escalating divorce rate among young marrieds, increasing evidence of child sexual abuse, poverty, an educational system in need of revision, increasing unemployment, etc.

From a psychological perspective, this regressive/repressive environment stymies individual autonomy, creativity and freedom of action. These are replaced by conformity and dependence, which then become the norms of group behavior. Conformity is readily recognized by their uniformity of dress. Whereas this dress code is condoned in the name of “*tzniyus”* (modesty), the need of the individual for some self-expression is suppressed in this controlled environment. The reassuring Yiddish words of the paternal Rebbe “*Gott vet helfen*” (God will help) does not always overcome the reality of this regressive mindset, nor reverse the mounting numbers of those opting out of these closed enclaves. The exact numbers of these defections are difficult to come by, because they are hidden from public view. But it is well-known that the numbers have risen to the point where those who leave these communities have organized themselves into groups. One such group numbering in the hundreds is “Footsteps”. The main purpose of this organization is to help former Chasidim integrate into the secular world. These are the more intrepid ones. There are others who are afraid to break from their Chasidic roots, but rebel in a less conspicuous manner. They act out by resorting to the ancient art of rationalization. This consists of drawing a split between rituals and ethics. They are focused on observing those *mitzvot* between man and God e.g. Sabbath and holiday rituals, daily prayer, Torah study,

etc.…, but are lax when it comes to ethics in conducting their personal business affairs. The Anglo Jewish press have carried many examples of the latter.

These types of deviations and defections can be averted by changing this mindset from insularity and regression to greater introspection and constructive action on the part of their leadership. In more “open” Chasidic/Charedi/Yeshivish groups this is indeed happening. An example of how this is being done is the popular TV series in Israel featuring a Chasidic family coping with a variety of issues within their setting. It has drawn not only religious viewers, but also many secular Israelis. In so doing there is developing a greater understanding and appreciation of their way of life within Israeli society. There are also Chasidic women who are producers and directors of movies that are acceptable within the parameters of Orthodox life. The Internet, Movies and TV are not, therefore, in and of themselves corrosive influences to be avoided or condemned. On the contrary, they can play a very positive role in portraying the beauty and sanctity of Chasidic life. In these more open right-wing groups the emphasis is less upon control and more on promoting individual growth and autonomy. Control and autonomy are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Despite efforts at further segregating women discussed above, how refreshing it is to see these evidences of Chasidic women being in the forefront of conveying a positive image of their way of life to the rest of Jewry. It is to the credit of those Chasidic rebbes and Charedi leadership who do not feel threatened when women assume leadership positions within their ranks. These are cogent examples of how it is possible within right-wing Orthodoxy to look internally to find creative solutions instead of blaming others and withdrawing from society.

In the more liberal wing of Orthodoxy often referred to as “modern”, we see a less extreme regressive/denial tendency, but the mechanism of avoiding the responsibility of addressing festering internal issues still remains. The main difference between them is greater public exposure and lesser degree of rigidity rather than kind. Because this is a more open branch of Orthodoxy their issues have surfaced in the secular press, thanks largely to bloggers. They are related to the same issues as in right-wing Orthodoxy which are now being characterized as “sliding to the right”. For example, regarding the issue of the separation of sexes, there is a growing trend within modern Orthodoxy to extend this beyond its previous limits. The *“Mechitzah”* (Partition) which was used exclusively at religious services, has made its appearance on the dance floor at weddings. Today the separation of the sexes is extended to the wedding ceremony itself. Other examples of this slide to the right can be seen in a variety of non-religious functions, such as separate seating at lectures, Synagogue dinners, Shabbat

Kiddush, etc. Even in synagogue programing and scheduling of classes, there is increasing attention to gender separation. This is occurring within “centrist” Orthodoxy which has always prided itself on being the more inclusive branch of traditional Judaism.

Contrast this development with the remarkable rise of women’s Torah scholarship as well as their professionalism in secular fields and you have what amounts to a “happy problem” growing within modern Orthodoxy. It centers around providing leadership opportunities within Orthodox religious life commensurate with women’s education and talent. Due in part to a failure of leadership of the organized Orthodox rabbinate, as well as to the vacuum created by the passing of Harav Joseph B. Soloveichik Z”l whose stature and strong voice are sorely missed, the voices of this potential leadership pool are now beginning to be heard. Women appear to be less afraid to speak out and are subtly beginning to fill this vacuum. They are also less embroiled in establishment political infighting which often retards needed action and decision making. In Israel, they have banded together and assumed positions of leadership unparalleled in Jewish history. Unlike in America it has become commonplace to see Orthodox women in the highest echelons of religious life serving as *“Dayanot”* and “*Toanot*” (judges and advocates) especially in legal matters affecting women, such as marriage and divorce, *“Taharat Mishpachah”* (ritual purity) etc.… In a landmark decision, the prominent Religious Zionist Ramban Synagogue in Jerusalem appointed a woman, Karmit Feintuch, to serve as Rabbanit alongside its respected Rabbi Benny Lau. While this may be the first female communal leader to be so named, the way was paved years ago, thanks to the outspoken voice and leadership of Rabbi Shlomo Riskin as well as others who had the courage to look inward to develop creative means to serve the religious leadership aspirations of talented knowledgeable women instead of the usual blaming of the Israeli religious establishment for its regressive stance. In America with the notable exception of Rabbi Avi Weiss, there has been relative silence from the organized modern Orthodox rabbinate on women’s issues. The women themselves have united to determine its course of action led first by the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) then by Edah, and others that have since sprung up. There are continuing signs that positive action can be taken such as *Semichah* (Ordination) of women in addition to more rabbinic positions opening up for Orthodox women.

Meeting the religious leadership needs of modern Orthodox women is however only one of several other internal issues. For example, it is well-known that the number of divorces has escalated among young modern Orthodox married couples (as was pointed out above among the right-wing Orthodox). To address

this particular issue, it is first necessary to obtain figures on the extent of this problem. In turning to the local or national rabbinic bodies for statistics on this important issue, one is “stonewalled” with excuses, such as “we do not have the funds for this type of research”, etc. In the secular world involving huge samples of the American population, annual reports on the divorce rate are readily available. Why is it so difficult in a comparatively small sample of American Jewry to obtain such basic information as the divorce rate? Other internal issues that need to be addressed are increased drug use among teenagers, child sexual abuse, concern for those opting out of the movement, as well as meeting the needs of many “*Baalei Teshuvah*” (penitents) entering the fold etc. In general, this whole issue of modern Orthodoxy’s “slide to the right” needs to be seriously confronted by our leadership. The “*Chumros*” (stringencies) being instituted by the right-wing are creating a kind of mindset that is pulling the more liberal-minded Orthodox in their direction. This needs to be resisted and requires a more vigorous response.

This critique in no way diminishes the positive action undertaken by the modern Orthodox rabbinate on certain issues that deserve commendation. For example, the recent action taken by the RCA (Rabbinical Council of America) to publicly endorse reporting directly to police, suspicion of child sexual abuse instead of to the local “*Beth Din*” (Rabbinic court). They also encourage the community not to be afraid of violating the Halachic ban on “*Lashon Hara*” (evil talk) often used to cover up the disclosure of embarrassing issues within its ranks. Nevertheless, resistance to publicly airing of internal issues remains. This is most likely due to an attitude of complacency derived from the remarkable growth of its “Yeshivas” which has lulled our leadership into a “status quo” mode. This is however a mode of regression and denial of dealing with those issues that need to be addressed. It also creates a false sense of safety which inhibits introspection and much needed action.

In the related field of psychology, this stalemate stance is reminiscent of the patient in therapy who begins to explore the origins of his/her presenting difficulties. The initial exploration leads to the early impact of parental failures. Some patients hang on to the mistaken notion that “they” (the parents)” made me this way”. This type of patient will be arrested (stuck) at an early stage of development. If the patient with the help of the therapist can reach a point of recognizing that he/she has the inner resources and strength to move on to further develop themselves instead of continuing to blame the parents, then growth can proceed. The patient can then actualize his/herself as an independent individual capable of choosing one's own lifestyle. This is the road to maturity.

Introspection has been the force for growth and change.

This therapeutic model is the antithesis of what we see today. People escape responsibility by giving up a sense of self by letting others determine their fate even on important moral and ethical matters. They are willing to find safety in groups that are arrested and do not sponsor personal growth. A benign leader helps develop the individual as well as the group, unlike the power-seeking charismatic leader who may not consider the best interests of the individual in order to provide an illusion of safety that people long for. The tell-tale conclusion is that one can determine by the amount of autonomy or lack thereof, whether the leader is acting in the best interests of the group or is using it as a method of keeping the group controlled.

This is the challenge in modern Orthodoxy today. We are seeing dramatic positive changes relating to women’s leadership that augur well for the future. These positive developments run counter to the regressive trend (slide to the right) we are seeing in Orthodoxy today. It remains to be seen whether further introspection will develop the type of leadership not only to deal with internal issues, but with its place in the broader troubling world we live in today.