Orthodoxy and the Liberal Denominations

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Connections in a Modern World

On the eve of Rosh HaShana 1948 (5706), the first Reform rabbi to be officially appointed in Germany since 1936 arrived in Berlin to cater to the needs of the local community. Rabbi Steven Schwarzschild, a young HUC-ordained rabbi who fled to the United States with his parents at the beginning of WWII, returned to Germany despite huge opposition by the Orthodox establishment both within Germany and within the relief organizations that were heavily influenced by the American and British Orthodox circles.

This opposition was not based only on theological divisions or the question of denominational differences. The demographic conditions within the Jewish community in Berlin at the time were such that a large part of the community survived the war only due to the fact they were in interfaith marriages. At that time, almost all liberal rabbis before and after the Holocaust did not acknowledge interfaith couples. When members of the Jewish community received food parcels from relief organization in post-war-shattered Berlin, conversion was a central issue. Both the Orthodox circles and the relief organizations feared that the arrival of a Reform rabbi would create an influx of “New Jews” who survived the war as Aryan Germans. The political faction of the Zionists and Orthodox Jews within the Berlin Geminde (community) board

repeatedly warned that the Jewish community would become divided and might even disappear as "a Reform approach to conversion will alter our Jewish identity."

However, none of this actually took place. Upon arrival, Rabbi Schwarzschild did not know how to solve the flood of conversion requests. After consulting with several rabbis, he decided to adopt in full the conversion criteria issued by Rabbi Munk, the Berlin Orthodox Rabbi who preceded Schwarzschild. Those criteria were written with the support of the Belsen (Hareidi) rabbinical board, Chief Rabbi Herzog, and the Reform Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver. He was then criticized by the Liberal faction of the Geminde but was appointed an honorary president of *Mizrachi*-Germany (the Zionist-Orthodox party).

Such events where liberal rabbis sided with Orthodox factions were not rare or isolated in post-war Germany. In 1925 in India, Jerusha Jhirad, a young female member of the Bene-Yisrael Jewish community, founded a Liberal synagogue in the city of Bombay together with her sister. Due to the special character of the Indian Jewish community, this synagogue did not resemble the European model or American Liberal movements. Still, this was a non-halakhic synagogue with a different liturgy than the traditional one and with many deviations from both traditional Judaism and the old Jewish-Indian *minhagim*. However, the Orthodox community never attacked the creation of the new synagogue and in return, the rabbis and leaders of the synagogue agreed not to officiate at any weddings nor to perform *gittin*, halakhic divorces.

Looking for Solutions?

When we try to conceptualize an idea of a cross-denominational conversation we usually think about the “end-goal.” Will the Reform rabbi function according to halakhic norms? Will the leadership of the Conservative community push for more traditional halakha? Would the Orthodox rabbi become more egalitarian? It seems that many Orthodox conversations with Liberal denominations secretly underline a hope that eventually the liberal community will agree to “behave” like the Bombay community mentioned above. Many wish that the Reform rabbis could make a decision similar to that

of Rabbi Schwarzschild or will accept the halakha, at least when it comes to conversions and other public matters.

Today this seems, however, to be a somewhat naive approach. The gap between the Liberal denominations and Orthodoxy is not only theologically and halakhically huge, but it is also based on different philosophical, religious, and social foundations. It is very hard to imagine a situation such as the one that took place in Berlin or the one in Bombay taking place today. How could Orthodox institutions and rabbis work with Liberal denominations in a reality where the possibility of finding a common ground on the difficult questions (for example, *kiddushin* and *gittin*, LGTBQ matters, patrilineal decent, egalitarian synagogues, etc.) does not seem to exist? In this reality, cooperation limits itself to political matters (Israel, federation issues, anti-Semitism) and acting "civil" within the large community.

The Paradigm Is Different

A few months ago Rabbi Tzfania Drori was interviewed about Minister Naftali Benet's visit to a Solomon Shechter school. The visit created a stir within Israeli politics as it was perceived as a de-facto recognition of the validity of Conservative Judaism. Within that context Rabbi Drori, said

> The first thing I did when I came to NYC in the 1960s was to go to a Reform synagogue and see what it's about… .Later in Los Angeles I went to see their schools…. I can't say I wasn't interested. I've seen the positive as well as the negative within them….We must not excommunicate or boycott anybody.

This statement, which in the past might have caused another round of statements about Liberal denominations, went almost unnoticed. This was not because nobody heard about it; it reached the front page of leading news websites. It also was not because Rabbi Drori is an unimportant figure. On the contrary, at 79, Drori, Rosh Yeshivat Kiryat Shmona and a student of Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, is one of the leaders of National-Orthodoxy in Israel. The message was quietly

received because his statement didn't call for a change in politics nor for a change in halakha. He simply reiterated the need to know what “they” are about and to get to know “them.”

The frame of the conversation about Liberal denominations is changing. The postmodern reality we live in negates the need to always find solutions. In the past we would aspire to find a solution because the very existence of Liberal denominations jeopardized one of the foundations of Orthodoxy – securing the truth with regard to God's revelation. Today the reality allows us to live within our own individual narrative.

Rav Shagar *z"l* writes

> Meeting different types of believers and non-believers will not weaken my faith but strengthen it. As Hasidic Jews tend to do, I will be able to recognize the divine in everything. The theological question of "which faith is better?" becomes meaningless in a postmodern world, but this does not harm my attachment to my tradition.
>
> (*Broken Vessels*, 2003)

The postmodern reality, as Rav Shagar illustrated in his writings, changes the foundation of the way we act religiously. In today's world we can create a different landscape when interacting on a denominational level with Liberal Jews. Meetings are not about a need to seek solutions to halakhic questions and matters of politics. People can simply enjoy a conversation or just appreciate meeting other Jews and try to bridge over decades of mutual suspicion.

Orthodoxy itself is a modern being. While maintaining the traditional approach to halakha and *minhag*, Orthodoxy functions in a way that was constructed in a modern setting and dealt with a Jewish community that believed and thought in modern terms. Although Orthodoxy will probably continue to thrive, as recent surveys show both in Israel and in North America, the way Orthodoxy is dealing with new and old phenomena is changing. New approaches that allow observing a traditional way of life in a postmodern reality are popping up

across the spectrum. When dealing with Liberal denominations, here too, new ways are arriving and we must listen to the voices that are fighting to preserve a traditional halakha while living in a narrative-based reality.

> Unlike Rav Kook, due to multiculturalism that is a characteristic of the postmodern reality, I am no longer in need to justify myself in front of the other or to identify him within myself—not the Jewish "other" nor the non-Jewish "other"…
>
> (Rav Shager, *To Illuminate the Openings*, 2013)

Orthodox Jews no longer live in a reality where the existence of "other" Jewish denominations is a threat. This does not mean that Orthodoxy became pluralistic and believe all denominations are a reflection of truth. In a world where Truth is no longer a goal, we all know we live within different narratives. Orthodoxy is not threatened by the existence of other narratives. In fact, one can argue that the postmodern reality allows more room for a "simple" traditional way of life that does not attempt to bridge between the reality and tradition (by modernizing Jewish values and converting modern values). As Rav Shagar writes, no one needs to justify anything anymore nor does he need to convince anyone. Communities can simply live side by side and try to meet without solving the gaps between them but rather accept the gaps.

Working in a Different Reality

In the past two years I have been fortunate to lead the *Mechadshey Kedem* initiative, which seeks to create conversations between Israeli Zionist-Orthodoxy and North American Liberal denominations. This initiative is founded on the spiritual and existential value that all Jews have a shared destiny and that we are all part of the Jewish people. Those thoughts, while obvious to many, are not always reflected in the way Orthodox and non-Orthodox denominations relate to each other.

As part of this initiative we go to *yeshivot* and *midrashot* (in Israel) and ask them to open the door to Liberal rabbinic students from HUC, JTS, or other

rabbinic schools. Last year alone we had more than 100 participants in this new initiative. In almost every place we visit, from *Haredi-Leumi yeshivot* to the *Kibbutz HaDati midrashot*, there is never an apparent expectation that the Liberal Jews who are guests will “see the light” or “repent in *Teshuva”* as a result of the meetings. Instead, it seems most rabbis and students are interested in knowing more about other Jews who think and observe differently. The fact that we don't know each other is becoming a real threat to the very nature of the Jewish people.

The willingness to sit and share *Talmud Torah* with a rabbinical student who is representing, more or less, the opposite of the *yeshiva* concept of its graduate, is not merely a *kiruv* moment or a political gesture. In a postmodern reality, one can be a zealot for halakha and at the same time learn with a fellow Jew who thinks differently. One does not need to accept the core value of pluralism and to view the Other as a legitimate reflection of truth. One can hold firmly to the halakhic world view, while agreeing to be in touch with Jews who think, believe, and operate differently. We must not see this as pragmatism or as a new-age style of *Ahavat Yisrael*. There is something much more profound that is possible in the relationship of Orthodoxy and Liberal denominations.

Some Final Thoughts

The postmodern reality allows us to bring back the notion of a joint-family to the discussion table of the Jewish people. Family members argue with each other all the time. However, even when they strongly disagree, they will still sit around the same Shabbat table and share the same worries and laughs.

I can vouch that in all sessions we held, I have never seen anyone try to raise a solution to the big questions thinking he will convince a member of the other side. Instead, people were sharing life experiences, insights on verses, on *Gemara* and prayer. People were getting to know each other. They felt connected, they argued for hours, sometimes shouting over this question or the other, but they didn't try to convince. They tried to interact.

In the past few decades, Orthodox Jews preferred not to interact at the peer-to-peer level with other denominations. The discussion was left to the rabbinic elite and the connection between denominations was limited to non-religious issues and social gatherings. I do not believe the *Kahal* should take the place

of the rabbis, leaders, and *posekim*. However, the postmodern reality allows us to interact without trying to solve everything. It allows the *Kahal* to redeem the relationship within the Jewish people and it also allows the rabbis and leaders to be in touch without constantly seeking solutions but rather connect amongst each other.

We all have experienced a Seder, a holiday meal, or Shabbat with family members with whom we do not agree. We argued… but then shared the last piece of cake. I truly believe that if we will learn how to establish a real relationship, the cake will follow—and by then we might even know how to share it.