Thoughts on Modern Orthodox Jewish Life

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Rabbi Marc D. Angel made these comments as part of a symposium published by Tradition Magazine, summer 1998.

Comments of Rabbi Marc D. Angel
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The Status of Women in Orthodoxy

The past sixty years have witnessed a remarkable transformation in the status of women in general society, and this has obviously had an impact on Orthodoxy. While some segments of the community do their best to deny or ignore the changed reality, others attempt to find ways of expanding women's role in Orthodox life within the parameters of halakha. While in some Orthodox communities it is forbidden for women to study Talmud, in others it is allowed and encouraged. While some Orthodox communities have made no efforts to expand ritual opportunities for women in synagogues, others have instituted women's prayer groups, Megilla readings, hakafot. Women serve on the boards of a number of Orthodox synagogues, and also are involved in education and hesed work.

We are living in a transitional period vis-à-vis the role of women in religious life. Different approaches are being tried; but it will probably be several generations before we reach a real consensus as to what will be deemed "normative."

The wisest approach is to keep our options open. We need to explore halakhically acceptable ways of meaningfully involving women in as many aspects of religious life as possible. No one today should state with certainty what the "truth" is on this topic because no one really can know for sure how things will develop. One

hundred years ago, it would have been deemed sinful to teach Talmud to women; today, some of our best and brightest Orthodox women study Talmud. Again, let me emphasize: the role of women—as of men—must always be within halakhic boundaries.

The Need for Diversity within Orthodoxy

Anything that moves Jews away from traditional faith and observance is a threat to Orthodoxy. This includes the non-Orthodox movements as well as secularism.

One general response has been to strengthen ourselves so that we and our families are not swept away from Torah and mitzvoth; we have built synagogues, day schools and yeshivot, communal institutions; we have published books and magazines; we have utilized modern technology to spread Torah study through tapes, videos, the Internet.
We have also sought to reach the non-Orthodox in various ways. Some have chosen the road of dialogue and friendship; others have emphasized outreach programs; some have separated themselves from direct contact with the non-Orthodox.

Our strategies have had some success, yet all of them have failed. The evidence of this failure is that the vast majority of Jews do not share our commitment to Torah and mitzvoth. In spite of all the heroic and inspired work of generations of Orthodox Jews, the overwhelming number of Jews are not Orthodox—and many are anti-Orthodox. The assimilation rates among the non-Orthodox are frightening.

Creative, dynamic Orthodoxy should be providing non-Orthodox Jews with vibrant, alternative models. We need to foster a healthy diversity within Orthodoxy, giving as many options as possible for non-Orthodox Jews to find a suitable entry point for a life of Torah and mitzvoth. Whether right wing or left wing or centrist, whether Sephardi or Ashkenazi, whether rationalistic or kabbalistic—the more diversity within Orthodoxy, the more the possibility of reaching those who are not presently within our camp.

Yet, precisely now, when we vitally need legitimate diversity, we are witnessing a shrinking of options within Orthodoxy. The growing narrowness in Orthodoxy is reflected by the growing narrowness in clothing styles deemed appropriate for Torah-true Jews.

Worse, the range of legitimate intellectual and halakhic options is contracting. The forces for conformity are powerful; and one who dares not to conform will be

intimidated or isolated. We have Moroccan and Yemenite rabbis in Israel who dress like Eastern European rabbis because they feel they will not be accepted as rabbis if they do not conform. We have people afraid to make controversial statements in public because they fear communal reprisals. One rabbi has referred to the contemporary situation as the “Artscrolling of Judaism,” i.e., only a certain range of interpretation is allowed, and only certain sages are given recognition.

If Orthodoxy is to meet the critical challenge of this generation, then it must reject the tendency toward narrowness and unthinking authoritarianism. It must be open, fresh, imaginative; it must give sway to the human mind and soul; it must foster diversity of thought and diversity of style—all within the boundaries of Torah and halakha.

The Orthodox community must be governed by the principle of derakheha darkehei no’am. We must represent Torah as a sweet, pleasant and meaningful way of life. To do otherwise is to discredit Torah and to generate hatred toward Orthodoxy.

Right Wing, Left Wing, Centrist

Tendencies in religious life vary from period to period. Sometimes the mood is more to the right, sometimes more to the left; but most of the time it hovers near the center. People, by and large, are not extremists and will not live indefinitely with extreme positions. They, or their children or grandchildren, will seek a more balanced outlook.

Musar

A religious Jew must be heroic; must have a deep sense of inner calm and confidence; must not be afraid to be different. It is valuable to draw on the ethical and moral guidance of our great Musar writers. I personally have found much strength in the Pele Yoets of Rabbi Eliezer Papo.