The Millennial Generation: From the Chosen Nation to the Nation that Chooses

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Rabbi Ben Greenberg is a planning executive at UJA-Federation of New York and Founding Director of OpenSinai.com. Prior to that, Rabbi Greenberg served as a congregational rabbi in Colorado and as the Orthodox rabbi of Harvard Hillel and Director of the OU-JLIC program at Harvard. He is the author of two books and writes regularly for MyJewishLearning.com, Patheos, and The Huffington Post. He lives in New York City with his wife and children. This article appears in issue 24 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

It was only a short while ago in America that there were those predicting the death of Orthodox Judaism in this country. A large segment of Orthodoxy included the generation of survivors ravaged by the trauma of a Holocaust they had barely survived. They were learning to adapt to a new society, a new language, and a new culture. The children of those survivors, Baby Boomers of today, were opting out of Orthodox Judaism in droves to join the fast-growing Conservative and Reform movements. The more liberal movements offered much to attract first-generation native-born Jews: services in regal and refined English, a rabbi whose only accent inflecting his sermons was a
Northeastern one, pews that allowed families to sit together, lively social programming with regular dances and parties, and much more. It is no wonder then that some of the greatest Orthodox authorities of the first half of the twentieth century spent much time and a lot of spilled ink in defining borders between Orthodoxy and the rest of the denominational world.

Chief among those busy with the task of separating Orthodoxy from the other movements was the great halakhic decisor, haRav Moshe Feinstein. Rav Moshe was one of the most creative, insightful, and brilliant rabbinic minds of his generation. His genius and erudition were widely acknowledged. He also lived,

taught, and offered rulings in the heart of the American immigrant Jewish experience: the Lower East Side neighborhood of Manhattan. When Rav Moshe offered his halakhic rulings, he did so not from a safe and comfortable distance inside a Bet Midrash removed from the ordinary person; he was very much a part of his community and understood intimately the challenges of the day.

Rav Moshe worked tirelessly to free agunot from abusive relationships (E”H 1:43; 1:48; 1:79, et cetera). He grasped the new socio-political reality that American Jews found themselves in and urged people to vote and take part in the civic process (in a letter from 1984), and recognized the government of the United States as a trustworthy and reliable source for oversight so that he permitted halav stam (Y”D 1:47). He perceived the value of the labor movement that was advancing the rights of working Americans and he permitted strikes and negotiations (H”M 1:59). He also forbade any official recognition, interaction with, or participation together with the Reform and Conservative movements (Y”D 1:160; E”H 1:76: E”H 4:13; O”H 2:50; O”H 3:21; O”H 4:91, et cetera).

Furthermore, not only did he draw a clear line in the sand when it came to the non-Orthodox religious Jewish community, he also utilized their practices and customs as a proof and source for what Orthodoxy ought not to do. If the Conservative movement sanctioned a practice then it must be forbidden, even if it was permitted on purely halakhic grounds. A striking example of this is his ruling on the impermissibility of conducting a Bat Mitzvah ceremony inside a synagogue. In his ruling he states: “The ceremony of the Bat Mitzvah is definitely only an optional matter (divrei reshut) and only vanity (hevel), and there is no way to permit such a thing in the synagogue; and all the more so since its root is in the Reform and Conservative movements” (O”H 1:104).
One need only to contrast Rav Moshe’s ruling on Bat Mitzvah to that of haRav Ovadiah Yosef to see the difference between a posek who is occupied with waging a battle against the denominations and one who is not. Rav Ovadiah rules (Yabia Omer, O”H 6:29) that the Bat Mitzvah festivities are a seudat mitzvah, a meal infused with religious significance. Furthermore, he offers the opinion that a parent may recite the traditional blessing recited by Ashkenazim of Barukh shePetarani, albeit without shem malkhut, upon a young woman reaching the age of Bat Mitzvah. Nowhere does Rav Ovadiah reference the Reform or Conservative movements in this ruling. He only states briefly that he was aware of Rav Moshe’s strident opinion against Bat Mitzvah but did not find it compelling.

The denominational war for the heart and soul of American Judaism is over. The struggle of the early generation of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to instill a

love of traditional Judaism to their American-born children enchanted with the more American milieu of the other denominations is over. This is not our central struggle, and this is not our battlefield.

We live in a different zeitgeist than Rav Moshe Feinstein. Our struggle is not with the other streams of religious Jewish expression in America. While the predictions in the first half of the twentieth century foresaw an America without Orthodox Jews, this proved dramatically false. The youngest movement in Judaism is Orthodoxy. The only movement in Judaism not experiencing massive rates of assimilation and intermarriage is Orthodoxy. (This is not to say that an intermarried family ceases to connect with the Jewish community, but by definition it will be an attenuated connection with competing religious interests.)

One need only attend the convention of any major Jewish communal organization to witness the sea change. Whereas it was only a decade or so ago that if you kept kosher at most of these large gatherings you were served your food in a plastic box triple wrapped; now almost all of these gatherings are completely kosher with dedicated room for each tefillah. A professional at an organization whose major annual convention I recently attended remarked to me how her organization has had to make major changes to adjust to the influx of Orthodox attendees and lay leaders. The unfortunate reality is that this does not mean a net growth in attendance; rather, this is occurring at the same time the rate of participation and lay leadership of the non-Orthodox continues to decline.

What then is the great challenge of our era? Where should our attention, our communal energy, our rabbinic leaders, our thinkers and activists be focused? I believe it comes down to one distinct issue: We are no longer merely the chosen nation, but rather the nation that chooses. This has been true for some time, but has not been felt as intensely than in the millennial generation (and perhaps will be felt even more so in the generations to come).

As Modern Orthodox Jews, we invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in the formal Jewish education of our children. A year of kindergarten can cost upwards of $20,000 alone in a Jewish day school in a major metropolitan area. With the rise of the Orthodox Day Schools in America combined with the nearly universal year or more in Israel studying in yeshivot or seminaries prior to college we are experiencing one of the most well-educated and well-versed Jewish populations in Jewish history. Countless Modern Orthodox young men and women in their 20s and 30s can turn to a daf of Gemara and translate it and work through the accompanying commentaries of Rashi and the Tosafot. How many of them experience a passion in their daily tefillah? How many of them relate to the

teachings of Hazal and can distill the wisdom within? Orthodox Judaism today is not struggling against the allure of a more Protestant Americanized ethos. It is struggling with the great challenge of relativism and postmodernism.

Postmodern influence on the religious worldview of today's Modern Orthodox millennial generation is profound. Whether it is deconstructing previously held core theological tenets such as a belief in God, the theophany at Sinai, or the election of Israel as a chosen people; or being unconvinced that there are any truth claims, the postmodernist critique of society, culture, and literature has shaken up the Modern Orthodox community in ways we are only beginning to recognize.

How can one become passionate about something that is no more or less true than any other competing value and belief system? How can one find inspiration in the narrative of one's people if it has been deconstructed through literary criticism and voids in the archeological record? What relevance does Jewish peoplehood have in an era of universalism and global solidarity?

These are the most monumental challenges facing our community now and in the years to come. In a similar vein to the breathtaking life work of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik to bridge the world of Torah with the world of twentieth century modernism, we need today intellectual religious leaders who can stake out intellectual and theological positions that resonate with the millennial Orthodox generation. Just as Lonely Man of Faith inspired a generation of Orthodox Jews, a new Lonely Person of Critical Doubt could have the potential to bring about a similar process in today's generation.

From my time as an Orthodox rabbi on a college campus, I saw firsthand the impact of the postmodernist approach on Modern Orthodox young people. The intellectually curious young person finds little guidance to help resolve the tensions arising from a deconstructionist method, or to confront more nuanced definitions of truth in a world of competing truth claims. More often than not, they are told that their questions are without merit or their struggles are a test of their faith in God. It does not take long for that young person to opt out of active engagement and to maintain, at most, only an external fidelity to the rituals and lifestyle of Orthodoxy.

Where do we start in addressing this challenge? The first step is to acknowledge that young people today choose their lifestyle, their religious commitments, and their beliefs. People today feel less of a need to maintain what previous generations believed or felt than perhaps in any generation prior. The

tremendous growth of the “nones” in the American religious landscape is testament to this fact. If we internalize the reality that people today choose to affiliate, to identify and to practice their faith, then we have an obligation to respond with integrity and thoughtfulness to the critiques people in their 20s and 30s are bringing to the communal table.

Additionally, we have to rethink the way we do business. Michael Perman, the Dean of Global Innovation at Gap, Inc., said it clearly in an interview for Forbes in 2013 when he was Senior Director of Global Marketing at Levi’s: “With Millennials, we have to let go a lot. As a brand, I think we were a company, among others, who felt that tight control of the brand and saying what our voice is was crucial up until probably a couple of years ago. We’re essentially a brand now that is based on co-creation….” Any serious attempt to address the intellectual and theological challenges millennials are grappling with must be done in collaboration and coordination with millennials themselves. There is an expression in special needs inclusion that boldly says “nothing for us without us” and the same is equally true with the millennial population. People in their 20s and 30s have a strong desire to be a part of the conversation and anything that is produced without that joint conversation will not have the same impact and resonance.

If our rabbinic and intellectual luminaries can rise to the time and begin to address the monumental theological and religious challenges posed by this generation, we face the prospect of reinvigorating and infusing a new era of meaning and depth into Jewish discourse and Jewish life. This will take bravery and courage to go where no rabbi has gone before in wrestling with the profound implications of a critical approach to belief in God, in the origins of Torah, in the place of religious obligation in a world of choice and a host of other areas. This conversation must be done with those most directly grappling with these topics. It cannot seek to rebrand and impose twentieth-century solutions on twenty-first-century problems. However, as Calev defiantly declared in the face of overwhelming challenges, “aloh na’aleh,” we can surely accomplish this too if we truly commit ourselves to the task.