Let's Stop Preaching Only to the Choir

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Over the last 50 years American Orthodoxy has managed to create a national community that is successful in the realm of imparting knowledge, Jewish commitment and continuity. Over the past years Orthodox rabbis convinced entire communities to change their eating habits by refraining from “eating out” and to raise a generation of Jewishly literate and deeply committed youth by sending their children, at great personal expense, to Jewish day schools. It is precisely these rabbis, on the heels of these successes, who can galvanize the Orthodox community to broaden its focus in a way that can contribute so much to the American Jewish community, and the world at large. Because of the strength and vitality of our community, in many ways the envy of other denominations, an engaged and relevant Orthodoxy could reshape the way Orthodoxy is perceived by broadening the Orthodox conversation.

Orthodoxy represents a very small part of American Jewry. Small numbers notwithstanding, Orthodoxy, specifically Modern Orthodoxy, must start believing that it has a contribution to make to the larger Jewish world. While not all Jews will become Orthodox, Modern Orthodoxy must begin to speak to all Jews. Modern Orthodoxy must make a claim of relevance. A number of strategies need to be employed if Modern Orthodoxy wishes to be heard beyond the boundaries of her adherents.

First, Modern Orthodoxy must see itself as a full participant in the activities of the wider Jewish community. This would include participation and support of Federation activities, Jewish Family Services, Local Boards of Jewish Education, communal endeavors of Jewish learning as well as National Organizations like American Jewish World Service. In order for our opinions to matter, we must be seen and heard in the places where the broader Jewish community meets and studies.

Related to this is the need for Modern Orthodoxy to become a movement that speaks to all Jews by relating to the full gamut of human conditions. This includes Jews whose lifestyle deviates from Halakhic norms. Modern Orthodox communities have managed to integrate those who do not observe Shabbat and Kashrut in the traditional sense without creating the perception of condoning that behavior; we can and must do the same for all Jews.

Second, Modern Orthodoxy needs to speak out on the major cultural and ethical issues of the day. Darfur, materialism, poverty, global warming and immigration are just some of the issues facing the American and world public. The imperative to imitate God, understood by Maimonides as stemming from the verse “God is good to all and his kindness extends to all His creations,” establishes a moral responsibility on our part to speak out and to act on issues facing humanity.

While Orthodoxy must maintain concern for the details of the laws of the Torah, Modern Orthodoxy must expand the discussion to include the ethical, moral and social issues that are part and parcel of the broader message of the Torah. We have a unique potential to make the wisdom of an ancient tradition compelling to a modern diverse audience. The broader American Jewish community, indeed, all of our fellow citizens, both Jewish and gentile, could benefit from the Torah’s perspective on contemporary issues translated into modern language.

Third, Modern Orthodoxy must promote those traditional, though often neglected interpretations of Halakha which are faithful to Jewish law, while at the same time compassionate and open. Jewish law must be applied in ways that make halakhic living attainable to as many Jews as possible. Kashrut, conversion and family purity are all areas where stringent rulings can give way to halakhically recognized approaches that would help people realize that living according to Halakha is a realistic goal. Orthodoxy is fast becoming a world of humrot—stringencies, while

the koah d'hetera, the priority often given to leniency, is quickly disappear ing. The point of is to bring more people to observance of Halakha; as more people recognize that they can live according to Halakha in specific areas, more will be willing to try it in other areas.

In a similar vein, while community rabbis should consult with academics and rabbinic scholars, it is the rabbis who are in the synagogues who must ultimately set the agenda message and tone of the Modern Orthodox community. It is the community rabbis who are "in the trenches" and therefore understand the social, religious and economic realities of the Jewish community. It is the community rabbis who feel a personal responsibility towards members of the community and will therefore do all that is possible to find viable answers to those problems.

Finally, Modern Orthodoxy must begin to tackle issues of the spirit, meaning and relevance of Judaism. When people find meaning in the Orthodox system they will feel spiritually connected to it.

Questions like: What do the myriad steps that need to be taken before meat is rendered kosher teach us about the Jewish view of eating meat? What do the laws of the Sabbatical year teach us about labor relations and property ownership? How can a full understanding of the laws of Shabbat impact social and family life? Should the Biblical laws prohibiting waste and destruction impact on our choice of the cars that we drive, as well as the food we waste at our lavish weddings and bar/bat mitzvahs?

An Orthodoxy that is able to present a system of Judaism that taps into these and other foundational issues of life will be viewed as spiritually fulfilling and meaningful.

In order to achieve all of the above, Modern Orthodoxy must develop self-confidence and stop looking over its right and left shoulders hoping for approval and acceptance from others. Doing so is self defeating and is largely responsible for the reason Orthodox Judaism remains irrelevant to so many.

Modern Orthodoxy, as a movement grounded in Jewish text and tradition, while at the same time appreciating the fluid nature of modern reality, is the Jewish movement in America best suited to speak to the issues of the day with conviction and confidence. We have a unique message that can benefit the entire American Jewish community. We have to stop preaching

only to the choir.