A Modern Orthodoxy with Social Impact and Relevance

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The Modern Orthodox community today is treading water. It certainly is not dying, but it also is not excelling. Many have noted that the movement today is not only lacking great leadership but also heart and soul. It is recognized for its cognitive prioritizing of intellectual endeavors (Torah and academic study), but the movement is often out of touch emotionally and socially. However, the immense potential for the Modern Orthodox is uniquely distinct from the non-Orthodox and the Hareidi.

There have been few attempts to study Modern Orthodox Jews as a separate demographic group. For example, the National Jewish Population Survey 2000–2001 listed a U.S. Orthodox population of about 567,000, slightly more than 10 percent of the U.S. Jewish population, but it did not distinguish between the Modern Orthodox and the Hareidi populations. Despite being in such a small minority, the Orthodox community has reason to be optimistic about growth, as Orthodox Jews have a higher prevalence than other Jews in many geographic areas, and only about 5 percent of Orthodox Jews intermarry, as opposed to nearly half of all Jews in the United States. Orthodox Jews comprise

- 21 percent of all Jews who belong to a synagogue
- 34 percent of young Jews (age 18–34) who belong to a synagogue
- A 39 percent higher birth rate, compared to other Jewish denominations
- 23 percent of all Jewish children

On the other hand, there are indications that the Orthodox denomination has difficulty retaining its members. Only about 41 percent of those raised as Orthodox Jews remain Orthodox into adulthood. Thus, while it has been estimated that Modern Orthodox families average between three and five children (as opposed to five to 10 children among the Hareidi), the rate of growth is mitigated by the high rate of those who cease to identify as Orthodox.

I would propose that there are a few key adaptive changes that need to be made for the Modern Orthodox community to move from a state of mere survival to a position where it is thriving:

1. Embrace our national and global interconnectivity.
2. Make Torah values relevant for the world.
3. Demonstrate the added value that Torah observance makes to the world.

Embrace Our National and Global Interconnectivity

We must move out of the Modern Orthodox *shtetls* that have developed around the United States and expand our reach and sense of community. We should be more proactive in forming strong relationships with non-Jews and non-Orthodox Jews and recognize that we are also dependent upon others. When other good people succeed, it can be our success, and when other good people lose, it can be our loss; our identities as Jews, as Americans, and as global citizens make us highly interconnected and interrelated with those around us.

We live in a world in which we cannot escape our co-dependencies. This is reflected well in the following story:

In the kingdom of Solomon there once lived a two-headed man. Upon the death of his father, the man became embroiled in a bitter dispute with his brothers and sisters over the inheritance."Since I have two heads," he claimed, "I deserve twice as much of the money as the rest of you." "Perhaps you have two heads," his siblings responded, "but you have just one body. Therefore, you deserve only one share." The case was brought before King Solomon, the wisest of the wise. His response was characteristically enlightening.

"Pour boiling water over one of the man's two heads," said King Solomon. "If the second head screams in pain, then we will know he is one person. If not, then we have determined that the two-headed person is in fact two separate, independent individuals."

The lesson for us is that when one of us feels pain, we all feel the pain. A loss to one is, of course, a loss to all. That sense of collective responsibility has enabled our people to survive and thrive.

While many prefer the role of giver to that of taker, there comes a time in most every life when the giver must, of necessity, become the taker, most commonly in one's elder years. This situation is reflected well in a story in the Chofetz Chaim's *Ahavat Chesed*:

A young child once observed his father throw his grandfather out of the house because the grandfather was unable to keep himself or his surroundings clean. Shaken as the child was, he could not deny the cruelty he had witnessed. Later, he met his grandfather wandering on the street. The grandfather asked the child to bring him a coat, so that at least he could avoid freezing in his homeless state. The child returned to his father and asked him if he could have a coat for the grandfather.
"Go up to the attic," said the father. "There's an old coat up there that he can have."
When the child returned from the attic, he was holding half of a coat."What happened to the coat?" the father asked. "Why has it been cut?"
"I did it for you," said the child, "so that when you grow old, you can have the other half."

The Jewish tradition teaches that one who neglects others will ultimately come to be neglected, a lesson that has universal application. Martin Niemoller, the German pastor, served as a U-boat commander in World War I, and along with too many others who had supported the Kaiser and German nationalism, valued order over the chaos of Weimar Germany. Although Niemoller quickly grew apprehensive of the Nazis, it took him several years to openly denounce them. By the time he began his imprisonment at the Sachsenhausen (and later Dachau) concentration camp in 1938, millions had already been imprisoned or murdered, and those remaining in Germany were quiescent. Too late, Niemoller grasped the consequences of his inaction, and after the war he powerfully and famously taught this idea thus:

When the Nazis came for the Communists, I remained silent; I was not a Communist.

When they locked up the social democrats, I remained silent; I was not a social democrat.

When they came for the trade unionists, I remained silent; I was not a trade unionist.

When they came for the Jews, I remained silent; I wasn't a Jew.

When they came for me, there was no one left to speak out.

Others see the positive potential of actively bringing the Torah to life in and for the entire world. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch is one example:

> Judaism is not a religion, the synagogue is not a church, and the Rabbi is not a priest. Judaism is not a mere adjunct to life: it comprises all of life. To be a Jew is not a mere part, it is the sum total of our task in life. To be a Jew in the synagogue and the kitchen, in the field and the warehouse, in the office and the pulpit, as father and mother, as servant and master, as man and as citizen, with one's thought, in word and in deed, in enjoyment and privation, with the needle and the graving-tool, with the pen and the chisel—that is what it means to be a Jew. An entire life supported by the Divine idea and lived and brought to fulfillment according to divine will. (*Judaism Eternal*, 103)

Rabbi Joseph B.Soloveitchik went further, seeing a mandate to create and remake the world (*tikkun olam*):

> The Jewish people see their own fate as bound up with the fate of existence as a whole.... Physical reality and spiritual-historical existence—both have suffered greatly on account of the dominion of the abyss, of chaos and the void, and their fates parallel one another.... The Jewish people bring a sacrifice to atone, as it were, for the Holy One, blessed be He, for not having completed the work of creation. The Creator of the world diminished the image and stature of creation in order to leave something for man, the work of His hands, to do, in order to adorn man with the crown of creator and maker. (*Halakhic Man*, 107, 113)

The Rav acknowledged the quandary of a people who often lived apart from society in the ghetto, at times a refuge from outside persecution but at times a stop on experiencing the full potential of this world and wrote of this ambivalence:

> Our approach to the relationship with the outside world has always been an ambivalent character, intrinsically antithetic, bordering at times on the paradoxical.... In a word, we belong to the human society and, at the same time, we feel as strangers and outsiders. We are rooted in the here and now of reality as inhabitants of our globe, and yet we experience a sense of homelessness and loneliness as if we belonged somewhere else. We are both realists and dreamers, prudent and practical on the one hand, and visionaries and idealists on the other. We are indeed involved in the cultural endeavor and yet we are committed to another dimension of experience. (“Confrontation,” 6)

Make Torah Values Relevant for the World

One example of the great contribution we can make is that the Dalai Lama asked to meet with a group of rabbis in 1989 to learn how the Tibetans can survive in the Diaspora as well as the Jews have. The contributions we can make to the rest of the world are not limited to our history of persecution, however; the intellectual life and moral sustenance of the Torah, and Judaism broadly, are gifts we can and ought to share.

The prophets taught us that our people had to move from being transmitters of a parochial, sacrificial religion to practitioners of a universalistic, giving religion (Hoshea 6:6: "For I desire kindness, not a sacrifice."). Much later, the rabbis taught that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananyah and Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai were walking past the ruined Temple Mount when Rabbi Yehoshua said, "Woe unto us! The Temple, the source of all forgiveness for our sins, has been destroyed." Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai replied, "My son, don't despair. We have another source of atonement, and it is acts of kindness" (*Midrash Yelamdeinu*).

To truly re-imagine how the Jewish people can best leverage our gifts to share with the world, we must revisit our educational assumptions. One widely held false assumption is that "the halakha works," that it will transform us if we follow it. But halakha doesn't "just work," and this is why so many leave observance. Rather, it needs to be done with certain intentionality to make it work. The mystics embraced certain *kavannot* (intentions) to try to make halakha a transformational tool, but this approach is not attractive or effective for most of us. We must expand the role of the spiritual imagination, of *middah* (character) development, and of moral introspection through the performance of mitzvoth. We must help other Jews make halakhic observance relevant and transformative. Bur first, we need to make sure it's working for us. The Rambam, at the end of the Book of Purity, taught that the goal of Jewish observance is to create a pure heart and moral personality. This is the radical approach that Jewish education must now place front and center. In most yeshivot today, the goal is to cram in as much "practical" material as you can without mastering its spirit or meaning. It's about literacy and competency, not relevancy. For halakha to be relevant and transformative, we can't just learn it and live it; we need to play the music of the tradition and then transcend the chords through it.

There are many Jewish concepts that could be made relevant for the broader world. For example,

- *Teshuvah*—models of self-growth and healing
- *Shabbat*—the value of rest for all people, workers, animals, and the land
- *Pikuah Nefesh*—the value of saving life (and end-of life issues, such as organ donation)
- *Ketubah*—the value of marriage (and system of commitments and obligations)
- *Havruta*—collaborative education models
- *Onesh*—compassionate and effective models of criminal justice (*eved ivri, ir haMiklat*)
- *Aveilut*—the value of mourning and spiritual practices for communal comforting

Demonstrate the Added Value that Torah Observance Makes to the World

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin brilliantly explained how a religious person must engage with others in the world in a humane spirit:

Besides the fact that they were tzaddikim (righteous) and hassidim (pious) and showed great love towards God, they were also "yesharim," i.e., they [the patriarchs] behaved respectfully toward the most distasteful idolaters; they related to them in a loving way and were concerned about their welfare since this is the foundation of all civilization... This is clearly to be deduced from the degree to which Avraham struggled and pleaded with God to spare the people of Sodom who were thoroughly wicked... and how Yitzchak went out of his way to appease the shepherds of Avimelech who made him great and awful difficulties.... The same is true about Yaakov who showed infinite tolerance towards his father-in-law, Lavan. (*Ha'amek Davar*, introduction to *Bereishith*)

We should not live in a self-imposed ghetto, but we must demonstrate righteousness wherever we may go. The Torah teaches that there was ambivalence among the heavenly host about bringing such

morally flawed creatures into the world. But our role is to teach the potential of *teshuvah*, that we can all change and grow and develop to new heights even though we are inevitably hopelessly flawed.

Rabbi Shimon said: "In the hour that God was about to create Adam, the angels of service were divided. Some said: 'Let him not be created.' Others said, 'Let him be created.' Love said, 'Let him be created, for he will do loving deeds.' But, Truth said, 'Let him not be created, for he will be all falsity.' Righteousness said, 'Let him be created, for he will do righteous deeds.' Peace said, 'Let him not be created, because he will be full of strife.' What, then, did the Holy One Blessed be He do? He seized hold of the truth and cast it to the earth [where it broke into pieces], as it says, 'You cast truth to the ground.' (Daniel 8:12)" (*Bereishith Rabbah* 18.5)

Although we are all flawed, each person also has tremendous gifts to share with the world and was created in order to share them.

Every person is created for his telos and that is his "service." likewise, Israel was created to be an illumination unto the nations and to cause them to achieve knowledge of the Lord of the universe. (*Ha'amek Davar*, Ex. 12:51)

Various organizations have emerged in the Modern Orthodox community to help further a more relevant and impactful religious Judaism in America.

The innovative and vibrant rabbinical seminary, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, has led the way in training Orthodox rabbis for the twenty-first century who are deeply religious and profoundly open minded. The IRF (International Rabbinic Fellowship) has become a major force in Jewish life.

Another important development is the rich pursuit of social justice work being undertaken by passionate Modern Orthodox Jews. Uri L'Tzedek, the Orthodox Social Justice movement, has created a revolution engaging tens of thousands of young Modern Orthodox Jews in education, leadership development, and activism in just six years so far.

One positive development within the Modern Orthodox movement today is the increasing involvement of women. This year, Yeshivat Maharat, will be ordaining its first three women as Orthodox authorities of Jewish law and as spiritual guides. The Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) held its First International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy in 1997, and in December 2013 it will hold its 8th Conference. In addition, JOFA sponsors Campus Fellowships at more than a dozen colleges, for women who wish to take leadership positions within their school's Orthodox community.

The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals is furthering a high level of intellectual discourse in the community. The TAG Institute for Social Development "promotes interdisciplinary research integrating insights from Jewish texts and practices with the methods and concepts of the social sciences to create interventions that promote the wellbeing of individuals, families, communities, and society."

The Modern Orthodox community can play a vital role as a bridge between the non-Orthodox community and the Hareidi community. More importantly, it can be the representative for the relevancy of Jewish values for an evolving complex world. Jewish law has sustainability and rootedness while it also has a mechanism for evolution making it a tremendous tool for guiding social change. This is the way Modern Orthodox Jews should see themselves, and this vision should be the guide to retention, growth, and vibrancy in the years and decades ahead.