Modern Orthodoxy and Discriminating Judgment

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All groups need discerning judgment. Even Orthodox Jews who restrict their broader exposure and encounter mostly rabbinic influences must differentiate between more and less reasonable voices. After all, rabbis are quite capable of uttering foolish statements. Nonetheless, the challenge of developing the ability to evaluate ideas and positions expands for Modern Orthodox Jews who expose themselves to so many elements of both higher and lower Western culture. Where have we succeeded in availing ourselves of the best that culture has to offer—and where have we failed by taking in the worst?

How does the college education Modern Orthodox Jews so value aid them in this endeavor? On a daily basis, I rely upon the wisdom and inspiration of great Gentile and secular Jewish thinkers, and that wisdom animates my teaching. Wordsworth's *Nuns Fret Not* beautifully captures why structure does not necessarily crush individuality or creativity but can even enhance them, a significant point for halakhically observant Jews. Denise Levertov's *On Tolerance* powerfully conveys how the positive concept in the poem's title can turn destructive. The practical skills learned in college enable a much more robust and varied *tikkun olam*. Those who stay in yeshiva until age 30 are unlikely to attend medical school and engage in cancer research. The gap between more open and closed approaches expands to massive proportions in Israel where the lack of secular education in the Hareidi sector makes entering most professions extremely difficult.

Openness enables a richer, more accurate, and less simplistic understanding of other groups. One who reads the essays of George Orwell or Atul Gawande will have a much harder time asserting that Torah provides all the required wisdom and that we should eschew non-Jewish authors. No work of contemporary Torah literature addresses the current question of care for the elderly with the insight and compassion of Gawande's *Being Mortal*. Analogously, it is easier to refer to secular Zionists as an "empty wagon" when one does not witness up close their dedication to protecting and serving their

nation in the IDF and when one remains ignorant of the gastronomic sacrifices made by all the vegans and vegetarians of Tel Aviv. A person who actually speaks with soldiers and reads literature about them would more likely realize the offensiveness of saying that studying Torah is more difficult and demanding than fighting on the frontlines (a statement recently said by Yitzchak Goldknopf, current head of the Agudat Yisrael party).

The wisdom of Gentiles has proven pivotal in helping our community understand the scourge of sexual abuse. A person who only knows Shas (the entire Talmud) might not comprehend why victims could take two decades to speak up or how those who have been violated could put themselves in the identical position a second time, granting the abuser another opportunity. That person might also think that victims' mental disorders automatically discredits their testimony instead of considering the possibilities that the abuse caused the disorder or that abusers prefer to prey upon the unhealthy and vulnerable. The knowledge generated by (Gentile) psychological research enables us to address such issues.

A number of ideologies and institutions that admittedly include threatening elements have nonetheless proven a boon to our community. If feminism means downplaying the importance of family or seeing every spousal discussion about who should wash the dishes as part of a war to overcome the patriarchy, we correctly reject it. On the other hand, feminism and the need for an Orthodox response to the feminist challenge have led to greater educational and professional opportunities for women. We treasure the opportunity contemporary women have to encounter the profundity of our tradition first-hand and function as more learned Jews. Women can more easily make major contributions to society as doctors, lawyers, and mental health professionals. Paradoxically, the entire kollel enterprise, a world that tends to portray feminism as pernicious, only survives due to "kollel wives" in the workforce supporting their families.

LGBTQ+ ideology often clashes with traditional Judaism but it too has had some positive impact. In 1976, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein wrote that no person naturally desires homosexual relations and those that want it are simply rebelling against God (*Iggerot Moshe* OH 4:115). Very few Orthodox rabbis would suggest this today, and we should honestly admit that the broader world has helped us realize how some individuals do indeed have intrinsic homosexual desires. We dare not add to their difficulties by accusing them of acting out of spite. Furthermore, justified theological commitments motivated some rabbis to too quickly support the reparative therapy of Project Jonah, which turned out to be a dangerous fraud. Here too, non-Jewish wisdom from the outside world had something to teach us.

Finally, we have all benefited greatly from the institution of democracy. While we can marshal support for democratic themes in our tradition by citing Abarbanel (commentary on Deuteronomy 17), other rabbinic authorities such as Rambam (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 1:1) favored a monarchy and the idea that Judaism may not promote a specific position on the nature of national government. As Gerald Blidstein argued (*Tradition* Fall 1997), we can strongly endorse democracy and see it as an effective vessel for promoting Jewish values without thinking that our halakhic system necessarily calls for it. Democracy has allowed Judaism to flourish in the United States and has proven even more valuable in Israel, where it has enabled Jewish political parties who passionately disagree to function together and produce a thriving Jewish State despite immense military, economic, political, and cultural obstacles.

In the foregoing examples, the entire Orthodox world has benefitted from these ideas, but Modern Orthodoxy is more forthright in admitting our debt to broader intellectual society and in explicitly promoting the values of democracy and feminism. However, we cannot ignore the less savory influences of Western society. Many Modern Orthodox students head off to college eager to experience the life of heavy drinking, frat parties, and sexual license. Some actively participate in secular party environments, while others bring that cultural universe to the Hillel and enter Shabbat after a pregame of alcohol in the Hillel parking lot. This represents mindless adoption of some of the worst values the larger world offers.

Clearly, many do not view university as an opportunity to study great ideas or acquire skills for bettering humanity. These missed opportunities are certainly not unique to young adults from the Jewish community, but that is precisely the point. Too often, we emulate secular society when we should distinguish ourselves by acting differently. Many see a university education as primarily a means to achieve a plum job and a large salary. Those who pursue investment banking jobs that will keep them in the office until eleven at night apparently prize money over family. I appreciate how paying multiple annual yeshiva tuitions and camping fees plus the high cost of a house in Orthodox suburbia generate the need for a large income. At the same time, the amount of money spent on Pesah programs should give us pause. For families that can afford it, purchasing takeout food for the holiday, still saving any family member from major Passover domestic chores while paying a fraction of the hotel costs might be a better demonstration of our values. The nature of most of these programs raises questions of hedonism in addition to materialism. Does anyone truly need a barbecue between lunch and dinner, and does the tearoom always need to be open?

Furthermore, certain intellectual attitudes work against the inspiration of education. If we fixate on Shakespeare as a dead White male who discriminated against Jews, Moors, and women, we will never appreciate the power and wisdom of his writings. The desire to debunk does not allow for any genuine enthusiasm and reverence. In response to the debunkers, I note that people are complex, and the same George Washington who owned slaves had several remarkable personal accomplishments, including not just leading the successful American Revolution and serving as America's first president but also delivering an influential address about religious tolerance at the Touro Synagogue and giving a very powerful Farewell Address emphasizing education and morality. We can remain in awe of Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner's brilliance even if we recognize that he was not the easiest of personalities. Additionally, many humanities programs have replaced long novels such as *Middlemarch* or *Les Miserables* with courses on film, television, and comic books. In my opinion, this entails sacrificing depth on the altar of entertainment. Too many Modern Orthodox Jews quickly endorse whatever educational trends currently pass as gospel at Harvard and Yale.

Moderns tend to emphasize choice and consent as values that supersede all others. This year, a very thoughtful student of mine has struggled to understand why "open marriage" is problematic if each spouse agrees to the arrangement. The convictions that certain things should not be done even to someone who consents or that some obligations do not stem from agreement seem foreign to her. People bear debts of gratitude to their parents despite the lack of choice involved. To some degree, the same applies to peoplehood and offers a reason why born Jews should feel a connection to their fellow Jews. Furthermore, a person can say that entering marriage requires consent but still believe the institution demands a single-minded loyalty and commitment to one's spouse for it to flourish. I decide to get married but do not determine what a thriving marriage relationship consists of.

As mentioned, feminism brought about many positive changes. However, some feminist assertions on behalf of women actually hurt women. When I suggest that college women should not attend the kind of parties where date rape represents a lurking danger, I am criticized for blaming the victim. Would anyone suggest that purchasing a good lock in a neighborhood known for robberies is blaming the victim? Clearly, the male perpetrators are the evildoers in this story—but we can still encourage potential victims to avoid giving criminals an opportunity.

I am very sympathetic to women upset that so much Orthodox discourse revolves around *tzeniut* and dress codes. Modesty applies to men as well; it is about attitude and not just dress, and it should not dominate any seminary curriculum. On the other hand, the larger Western world's attitude to women's dress does women no favors. Do women walking around with extremely revealing attire empower them and encourage engaging with them as serious and thoughtful individuals? I have watched a number of Academy Awards YouTube videos and I am always struck by the juxtaposition of justified complaints that women over 45 cannot get major Hollywood roles expressed at an event where many of the women are half undressed but none of the men are. Female hosts criticize women being judged by their looks while wearing clothing that encourages that very message.

Complaining about social media has become a cliché, but only because the complaints are valid. TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter are for the most part time-wasters, shallow instruments, training in the need for instantaneous gratification, and a replacement for genuine discourse with friends. The institution of Shabbat helps observant Jews reduce these addictions, but some restrictions of usage need to carry over into the week as well. Though it is an uphill battle, schools and parents need to jointly fight against constant smart phone usage.

For me, no live options exist beyond Modern Orthodoxy. Denominations on the left lack firm commitment to our tradition regarding both knowledge and practice, while groups to our right have too many ethical and intellectual shortcomings. As Dr. Daniel Gordis once questioned, why is there a need for rabbinical schools from other denominations to offer courses in basic Hebrew when one needs much more knowledge than that to begin studying for the rabbinate? Conservative Jews on campus who care about Shabbat and kashruth are often sociologically forced into the Orthodox community. Secondly, regarding which issues have our co-religionists to the left sided with our tradition over current Western mores? Conversely, focusing on the Israeli scene, an entire community exempting itself from army service ends any thought of entering Hareidi society for me. On an intellectual level, the Hareidi world's monolithic portrayal of Jewish thought, its whitewashing of the sins of biblical heroes and its insistence that Hazal (the Sages of the Talmud) knew contemporary science are not tenable positions.

The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 39b) faults Am Yisrael for following the corrupt among the non-Jews rather than the noble among them. For Modern Orthodoxy to succeed, we need to diametrically reverse that equation. Reviewing the list enumerated in this essay indicates that we have work to do.