Can We Build Bridges Both to the Left and to the Right—Simultaneously?

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“Excuse me for a moment; I need to take this call,” I said to the rabbis I was meeting with at an important convention for Hareidi professionals dealing with practical halakhic issues and public policy. I had just stopped by the convention to meet some of the rabbis who had taught me and mentored me over the years. I was sitting with my main mentor—a Yeshivishe, Litvishe Rav—and his friend, a close associate of some of the Hareidi rabbinic authorities.

What made this moment ironic is that while my mentor and his friend were discouraging me from taking the position of President of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the call I received was from the Chairman of the Board of YCT offering me the job! In fact, just that evening, before coming to the convention, I had met with the Board of Directors of the Yeshiva for my final interview. So as I stepped aside, still surrounded by dozens of Hareidi rabbanim at the hotel, I accepted the offer from YCT, fully aware that in some ways I was agreeing to take myself into a different world than where I was standing. In an ocean of black hats, I was committing myself to a modern and open life-boat. But even at that moment of contrast, I still saw myself, and Modern Orthodoxy in general, as paddling in the same direction as the large ship of Hareidi, Yeshivish Orthodoxy. Moreover, I remained hopeful that along the way, there would be bridges from the life-boat to the large ship that would enable passengers in both vessels of Torah to intermingle and inspire each other.

The belief that Modern Orthodoxy, inclusive, open, and connected with the non-Orthodox world, could also connect with Hareidi, Yeshivishe, Hassidishe Orthodoxy animated my decision to take on the presidency of YCT, a relatively new yeshiva founded by Rav Avi Weiss. I had been the rabbi of a rapidly growing (from 90 to 400 members) Modern Orthodox shul in Chicago, and every time I went in to meet the lay leaders and faculty of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, I made sure to combine the trip with visiting Rashei Yeshiva of my alma mater, Yeshiva University. Some were more encouraging of my interest in YCT, some less encouraging, but all my encounters leading up to taking the job at YCT continued to reinforce within me the belief that as committed as YCT was to a Modern and open Orthodoxy, I could still connect the Yeshiva and its talmidim to the broad world of Orthodoxy, across the spectrum.

In fact, as it was announced that I would be becoming the President of YCT, some well-known rabbis, well-respected in the Hareidi world, said that they were interested in coming to YCT, as long as it was done quietly. These rabbis were interested in discussing kiruv and other pertinent matters with the students because basically, we shared the same goals.

I was quoted in the press as having the sincere desire to reach out and connect with both the “Right and the Left” and to welcome students from the spectrum of Orthodoxy. My experience in Chicago, where both my shul and I had close professional and personal relationships with many Centrist Orthodox and Hareidi rabbis and communal professionals—let alone lay leaders—convinced me that we were all together in this mission of spreading Torah throughout the Jewish world. Certainly there were arguments that justifiably could make me cynical, but I had a lot of evidence that bridges existed, and could be widened, to connect all of Orthodoxy.

Then came the installation. Rav Avi Weiss has been excited and supportive throughout the process of passing on the presidency to me, and with his encouragement and my own excitement for taking on this new role, the Yeshiva planned a gala installation to introduce me to the community. In my own thinking, consistent with the mission of the Yeshiva to train Orthodox rabbis to serve the entirety of the Jewish community, not just the Orthodox community, an installation should include the spectrum of the Jewish community. Yeshivat Chovevei Torah is one of the leading rabbinical schools in America, producing more Hillel rabbis—in various positions—than any other single institution, let alone the dozens of pulpit rabbis and educators in important positions throughout the Jewish community (85 so far).

So it was natural that we invited all the rabbinical schools—from Yeshiva University to Hebrew Union College—to participate in the installation. I had no expectation that every Hareidi or even centrist institution would participate or even attend. I may be passionate about building bridges, but that doesn't mean every institution or community leader is—that much I recognize. Yet, it was gratifying that Orthodox and non-Orthodox leaders came from all over, together with another 500 people, to celebrate this transition at a Yeshiva, transforming our Yeshiva from a start-up to an established center of Torah. What was interesting—though not surprising—was that much of the Hareidi organized world attacked the bridge-building on the left as a sign that Chovevei Torah was not sufficiently Orthodox. The paradigm that the Hareidi institutional world was presenting, and accepted passively by elements of the organized Centrist world, was that if an Orthodoxy builds bridges with the Left, in an open, respectful way, it will not be able to build bridges to the Right. It is either or: If you want to be part of our type of Orthodoxy, or be in partnership with us, you will have to burn your bridges with the non-Orthodox organized world. No Presidents or Chancellors of non-Orthodox institutions should be on a pre-installation panel discussing the future of rabbinical education; if they are, we do not want to be any part of such an installation. It is either embracing your Orthodox friends and rejecting any respect or honor for the non-Orthodox, or we have no desire to connect with you.

Upon reflection, the strong reaction to placing non-Orthodox rabbis on a stage to be given respect and honor at an Orthodox ceremony could have been expected. Genuine and justifiable fear has built up in the Orthodox world for more than two centuries toward heterodox movements. There is fear that they are out to destroy Torah, mitzvoth, and Judaism as we know it. Indeed, this might have very well been the case in the past: Reform leaders spoke out against the "cult" of ritual in Judaism; Conservative leaders erected synagogues that had mixed seating and called for serious changes to halakha in a process unfamiliar to the Orthodox world. Reconstructionist Judaism represents the teaching of Mordechai Kaplan who rejected the Orthodoxy he grew up in. Perhaps if many of the open and inclusive Modern Orthodox leaders who are pluralistic would have been rabbis 100 or even 50 years ago, they would not have been able to build the bridges to the non-Orthodox world that we can build today.

The fear of the non-Orthodox world is understandable, but it is anachronistic and the wrong approach. Not only do the non-Orthodox movements espouse Torah and mitzvoth—albeit in their own unique ways—they are gateways for thousands of Jews to find more commitment to Torah and mitzvoth. These Jews who find Judaism and Jewish life through the non-Orthodox movements and non-Orthodox

leaders, frequently are then drawn to Orthodoxy as well. The competition with non-Orthodox movements will only help Orthodoxy grow stronger, rather than pose a threat. More importantly, the opportunities that non-Orthodox movements provide for Orthodoxy, as far as outreach and connection to diverse Jewish populations should make us Orthodox Jews grateful for the other movements. In fact, placing Orthodox and non-Orthodox leaders on a stage, anywhere, is a way for Orthodoxy to learn more and to shine, rather than be damaged and beaten up.

Nevertheless, we in the Modern Orthodox world who have moved away from a position of fear to one of respect and excitement to build bridges to the non-Orthodox movements and organizations need to be sensitive to this fear. Perhaps in my joy of having such incredible leaders on stage with me, in equal, loving dialogue, I was not sufficiently sensitive to this fear that still exists in the Hareidi, Yeshivish, and Centrist organized world. One way of confronting this real fear is to further develop the idea of “emunat hakhamim”—the belief that rabbis, and the general halakhic rabbinic environment, need to be trusted to work things out. Normally, emunat hakhamim is a construction used to justify rabbis maintaining the status quo, despite how illogical and unethical it may seem, or to justify onerous humrot (restrictions) that make practical living difficult. Don’t question, but trust and believe in the great minds of our time. Emunat hakhamim differs from Da’as Torah: Da’as Torah is accepting the advice of the rabbis on non-halakhic, public policy issues; emunat hakhamim is trusting that the halakhic process works, that as strange as the rabbinic Orthodox halakhic consensus seems, it deserves to be trusted and adhered to.

I suggest that the concept of emunat hakhamim must be emphasized in alleviating some of the fear that people feel when bridges are built to the non-Orthodox world: Trust Orthodoxy! Trust Torah! Trust the halakhic system that as long as rabbis and scholars are learning Torah, are arguing Torah, are making Torah the basis of their decisions, we are safe! We do not need to fear that a Reform rabbi who learns in the Beit Midrash or who speaks to students will corrupt them and their Torah—or, will, God forbid, corrupt the thinking of great Torah scholars, Modern Orthodox or otherwise. No, we need to trust the system of Torah that started on Mt. Sinai and has been handed down to us in an unbroken chain to this very day. If we trust Torah and the halakhic system, we should not fear a slippery slope or the teachings of non-Orthodox rabbis. Our system built up over the millennia, and advanced over the past 200 years by the great Yeshivot that have re-enforced Torah learning, enable us to deal with any challenge, any question, any unexpected understanding of Torah, in a coherent way that will

ultimately bring about Torah True Judaism. If we really have emunat hakhamim, we have nothing to fear of bridges to other Jews, even if they have a different perspective on Torah.

Yet perhaps even more important than dealing, sensitively, with the fear of bridges, we need to challenge the core idea of zero-sumism: that if we disagree or have competing approaches, only one of us can win. This is the Israeli concept of "frier-ism"—if I let someone get ahead of me, or freely benefit, then I must be losing and I must be a big loser at that. Thank God, we are in a world of a positive-sum game: We can each have our own approach, we can even compete, and yet, more times than not, we can both benefit from the interaction and relationship. That is essentially at the core of pilpul, or "kinat sofrim"—the competition the Talmud encourages to acquire more wisdom for everyone involved. When I encounter someone who disagrees with me, even on fundamental Jewish ideas, it is an opportunity to learn more, and sharpen my belief, rather than a moment of weakness and failure. Politically, that makes me a proponent of free-trade, immigration reform, even ethical capitalism. When it comes to the realm of Orthodox bridge-building to the non-Orthodox world, we in the Modern Orthodox camp need to demonstrate to the rest of the Orthodox world that our bridges are making us better Jews, not weaker Jews.

Yeshivat Chovevei Torah has an opportunity to demonstrate the value of openness and building bridges to Torah by producing top-quality Torah that comes out of a Modern Orthodox, inclusive-oriented yeshiva, and by pushing our students to continue to model passionate commitment to Torah and mitzvoth, in both the spiritual and ethical realms. It is a challenge. Many in the pluralistic Modern Orthodox world do not show the same passion for ritual laws as those on the less tolerant, more Hareidi side of Orthodoxy. The more we can show that this is a positive-sum world for building bridges, the more we can show that our bridges to the Left make us more passionate toward Torah, rather than more tepid, the easier it will be to demonstrate the value of building those bridges to Jewish life in America.

Bridges to non-Orthodox Jews and bridges to different types of Orthodox Jews are important for the same reason. We have to learn from each other; we have to share the Torah and destiny that God has chosen for all of us. We do not need to build bridges to demonstrate our legitimacy. For that we just need to live, learn, and love as good Jews following God's ways. We do not require anyone on the Left or the Right to tell us we are legitimate or to make us feel loved; God and God's Torah are the yardstick for legitimacy. Nevertheless, the bridges that have to go

up on both sides help us be better Jews, and they strengthen the Jewish people. It is a challenge to convince many in the Orthodox camp of the value of such bridges to the non-Orthodox—but that challenge should neither stop us from building those bridges to the non-Orthodox, nor should it make us despair from believing that we can build bridges to the Hareidi, Yeshivish, or even Centrist Orthodox world.

After a year as President of YCT, I understand better that it will take a lot of effort, patience, and sensitivity to erect the critical bridges to other elements of the Orthodox world. Yet, my belief in emunat hakhamim and my belief that ultimately this is positive-sum world gives me hope that we will successfully build those bridges to the Right, while holding onto, even strengthening, our bridges to the Left. It has taken centuries for the world to understand the benefits of free trade and commerce, even when products compete with our own products. Judaism is just beginning to build the trust and respect necessary for free-trade bridges between denominations and leaders of the different movements and non-movements. But as president of a Modern Orthodox yeshiva that is committed to training Orthodox rabbis to connect with and learn from all Jews, there is no other way. Bridges to other Jews are the way we become better Jews. And no one will stop us from striving to become better Jews, to learn from everyone and every Jew, and to work together with all Jews to make us “goy ehad ba’aretz”—one, unified nation in the land.