Re-imagining Orthodoxy

View PDF



Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and Editor of its journal, Conversations. This article appears in issue 17 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Orthodox Judaism in the ideal is very different from Orthodox Judaism as it is today.

In the ideal, Orthodoxy is a beautiful way of life that inspires an abiding spirituality and an ethical lifestyle. It links us to thousands of years of Jewish texts and traditions, to time-honored mitzvoth and customs. At the same time, it allows us—and encourages us—to develop ourselves as thinking, feeling and creative human beings. At its best, Orthodoxy provides a worldview that is intellectually vibrant, compassionate, and inclusive. Torah and mitzvoth provide us with a framework for developing ourselves as full and vibrant human beings, drawing on the wide range of our talents and propensities.

When Rabbi Hayyim Angel was still a rabbinical student, he wrote a short statement responding to the question: Who are religious Jews? That statement well reflects ideal Orthodox Judaism. He wrote: “Religious Jews are those whose hearts smile when their mouths do. Religious Jews feel pain in another’s misery, joy in another’s happiness. They know that perfection is impossible, yet they strive for it. They are trees rooted in the earth with their branches extending towards the heavens. Religious Jews are cisterns who do not lose a drop; they are springs of water which steadily increase. They observe the commandments with an adult’s intelligence and a child’s enthusiasm. They act in a manner that is a credit to themselves and which earns them the respect of both Jew and non-Jew. They are prepared to sacrifice for God, their people, their laws, and their homeland. Religious Jews are a unified mass of sand, yet individual stars who shine on the world.”

Fortunately, adherents of ideal Orthodox Judaism do exist and they are models of human excellence.

However, the general tone of Orthodox Judaism today falls considerably short of the ideal Orthodoxy just described. To an increasing degree, it is identified with authoritarianism, obscurantism, conformity, coerciveness, and mechanical observance of ritual commandments. This is true not only in “Hareidi” Orthodoxy but also in “Modern” Orthodoxy.

For us to strive toward an ideal Orthodoxy, we need to clarify our thinking on basic issues of our religious worldview. This essay focuses on ideas and ideals, in the belief that without a clear and firm intellectual foundation, Orthodoxy will continue to drift in less than ideal directions. The hope is that if enough Jews take these ideas and ideals seriously, they will have strong impact in moving beyond the status quo and into a finer Orthodoxy that represents Torah teachings at their best.

How Does Orthodoxy “Brand” Itself?

A popularly used phrase for identifying an Orthodox Jew is shomer Shabbat or shomer Shabbos. Proprietors who wish to attract Orthodox customers put signs in their store windows or on their packaging labels, indicating that they are Shomer Shabbos. The phrase is code for: “We are Orthodox Jews who observe Torah and mitzvoth. If we observe Shabbat, that means we’re serious about observing mitzvoth. You can trust us, we’re one of you.” Orthodox Jews, presumably, will want to patronize such businesses of fellow observant Jews.

Some years ago, I received a letter from a Jewish cemetery in the Midwestern United States, proudly announcing “the establishment of an exclusive area for the burial of Shomrei Shabbos [sic] Jews.…It will feature wide paths to ensure that graves are not walked upon, separate burial section for men and women, as well as burial for husbands and wives side by side.” To earn the right to be buried in this exclusive Shomrei Shabbos area, those purchasing graves would need to provide two letters from two Orthodox rabbis testifying that the purchasers are in fact Shomer Shabbos [sic].”

I wrote a letter to the rabbinic group that was involved in sponsoring/supervising this exclusive area of the cemetery. Here are excerpts of that letter (dated October 18, 1994):

"It is exceedingly distasteful to foster distinctions among Jews and to encourage self-righteousness all the way into the grave.…[This] will only serve to further

isolate Orthodox Jews and to make us appear extremist, exclusionary, self-righteous, and arrogant. These are all qualities that we should find repulsive to us….Moreover, the policy itself is remarkably problematic. What if a person keeps Shabbat, but is a thief, or does not observe the laws of niddah, or is not careful in other very serious mitzvoth? Should we create cemetery spaces only for those who eat glatt kosher, or for those who keep various humrot? Why don't we leave it to the Almighty to decide where we belong in the overall scale of righteousness?"

If popular parlance identifies religiosity with being shomer Shabbat/shomer Shabbos, this is also reflected in the domain of rabbis and Batei Din. This is especially apparent in the area of conversion to Judaism. Invariably, rabbis/Batei Din require kabbalat haMitzvoth, i.e. that the candidate for conversion accept the obligations of the mitzvoth. Although there is considerable discussion as to the exact nature of kabbalat haMitzvoth—ranging from a general acceptance of commandments to an absolute commitment to observe every jot and tittle of halakha—the common requirements of a candidate are often presented as Shabbat, kashruth, and laws of family purity.[1] The requirements generally also include a commitment to give children a Jewish education, i.e. to send them to an Orthodox Day School.

A major Orthodox Bet Din asks sponsoring rabbis to attest that the candidate "has accepted the yoke of commandments and is fully observant of Orthodox Jewish law, including the laws of Shabbat, Kashruth, and family purity." In conversations I have had with hundreds of converts over the years, the almost universal experience they have had with Orthodox Batei Din reflects the demands for careful ritual observance. These demands have gone beyond Shabbat, kashruth, and family purity—although these three are always at the top of the list. Candidates for conversion report that they are asked to recite blessings, to identify the parashat haShavua, to give an accounting about the observances of our various holy days and fast days.

Batei Din often go further in their demands upon a candidate for conversion. Here are some cases I have dealt with in recent years. A woman, whom the Bet Din agreed was fully observant and sincere, was rejected for conversion because the Bet Din did not think her intended Jewish spouse was Orthodox enough, i.e., was not careful enough in his Shabbat observance. In another case, a woman was told that she must move into an Orthodox neighborhood in order to qualify for conversion. When she told the Bet Din that she was living in an area where there is an Orthodox synagogue and that she indeed attends that synagogue regularly,

the Bet Din told her that they did not think that the members of that Orthodox synagogue were “frum” enough. A male candidate was grilled by an Orthodox rabbi on fine details of Jewish law, including knowing the parashiyot inside the tefillin. The candidate answered correctly but was unable to explain the difference of opinion between Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam on the order of the parashiyot. He was turned away, and told he needed more time for studying before conversion would be possible.

Without belaboring the point, acceptance of Orthodoxy is generally seen in terms of halakhot relating to ritual commandments.[2] When people describe someone as being “frum,” this invariably means to convey that the person is careful in the observance of Shabbat, kashruth, and laws of family purity. Surely, ritual commandments are vital components of a religious Jewish way of life; but they are components, not the full picture. Orthodoxy, in focusing so heavily on ritual observance, seems to be ignoring the totality of our human reality.

Religious Worldview

Along with its “shomer Shabbat/shomer Shabbos” self-image, Orthodoxy is popularly represented by “authorities” who identify it with narrow, obscurantist viewpoints. While this is more evident in the “Hareidi” world, it also is reflected in the “Modern” Orthodox community. There seems to be a “religiously correct” movement, which seeks to circumscribe Orthodoxy and to de-legitimize anyone who crosses the lines it sets. The result is to limit the free range of opinions, even when these opinions have proper foundations in traditional Jewish sources. As I’ve written elsewhere,

"We must face this problem squarely and candidly: the narrowing of horizons is a reality within contemporary Orthodoxy. The fear to dissent from ‘acceptable’ positions is palpable. But if individuals are not allowed to think independently, if they may not ask questions and raise alternatives—then we as a community suffer a loss of vitality and dynamism. Fear and timidity become our hallmark."[3]

There is a feeling among a significant segment of Orthodoxy that the Gedolim, great rabbinic sages, are the only ones authorized to propound the “true” views of Torah. Only they have full access to daas Torah/daat Torah. Yet, the only ones who qualify to be in the ranks of the Gedolim are those who pretty much subscribe to the dominant right-wing Orthodox worldview. Other very learned and pious men and women—who are no less erudite than the “accepted” Gedolim—are marginalized as being not “really” Orthodox, or not “Orthodox enough.”

The veneration of Gedolim was clearly expressed by Rabbi Bernard Weinberger, an avatar of Hareidi Orthodoxy:

"Gedolei Yisrael possess a special endowment or capacity to penetrate objective reality, recognize the facts as they really are and apply the pertinent halakhic principles. This endowment is a form of ru'ah haKodesh [divine inspiration], as it were, bordering, if only remotely, on the periphery of prophecy….Gedolei Yisrael inherently ought to be the final and sole arbiters of all aspects of Jewish communal policy and questions of hashkafa…[E]ven knowledgeable rabbis who may differ with the Gedolim on a particular issue must submit to the superior wisdom of the Gedolim and demonstrate emunat Hakhamim [faith in our sages]."[4]

This astounding statement is problematic in so many ways. How does Rabbi Weinberger (or anyone else) know for a fact that Gedolei Yisrael are endowed with supernatural powers akin to prophecy? If they are indeed endowed with divine wisdom, why are there so many disagreements—and outright feuds—among those who are considered to be Gedolei Yisrael? Even if sages are erudite in Torah and halakha, why should anyone accept the notion that these sages should be the "final and sole arbiters" in matters of policy and religious worldview? Does Judaism really demand belief in the infallibility, or even the quasi-infallibility, of Torah scholars? Certainly not!

The veneration of Gedolim, though, is too often presented as an essential feature of Orthodoxy. This tendency leads to authoritarianism, conformity, and passivity. It promotes narrow and obscurantist views as being the sole legitimate views of Orthodox Jews. This is a vast disservice to Orthodoxy in general, and a particular disservice to thinking Jews who seek to live a Torah life without turning off their own brains.

As examples of the problems I am describing, I reprint below several of my "Angel for Shabbat" columns that have appeared on our Institute's website, jewishideas.org.

The Age of the Universe: Thoughts on Parashat Bereishith, October 25, 2008

The Torah begins with a majestic description of God's creation of the universe. The powerful language is remarkable for its poetic beauty, evocative imagery, and profound spirituality. When we read these paragraphs thoughtfully, we feel that we are in the presence of God at the very moment of creation.

The language of the creation story is religious/poetic, not scientific. The Torah, in its infinite wisdom, wants us to sense the wonder and grandeur of God's creation. It does not present a cold scientific treatise, but a lofty, emotionally compelling account.

Regrettably, the notion has arisen in some religious circles that the creation story in Genesis is to be taken literally—that God created the world in six 24-hour days. Proponents of this view have then made calculations based on biblical narratives and have concluded that the universe is 5,770 years old plus six days. They have declared this to be a non-negotiable religious "truth." One right-wing Orthodox Jewish group requires that would-be converts answer a question on "the Torah view on the age of the universe."

One elderly "sage" in Israel was quoted as invalidating religious rites performed by Orthodox rabbis who believe the universe is older than 5,770 years. A number of rabbis and teachers insist that dinosaurs never existed, since scientists claim that dinosaurs lived millions of years ago—an evident impossibility if the universe is only 5,770 years old.

The fundamentalist view is not only scientifically incorrect, but is intellectually flawed on its own terms. Since the sun was not created until the fourth day, how could there have been sunset and sunrise on the first three days? What could the Torah have meant by the words "evening" and "morning" in a universe that had no sun, moon, or stars? Moreover, why do fundamentalists feel compelled to defend a position that is clearly at odds with the unequivocal findings of scientific research? Maimonides taught, quite correctly, that the Torah and Nature (governed by scientifically verifiable laws) were created by the same Author—and cannot be in basic conflict with each other. Scientists have dated the universe at approximately 15 billion years. They have discovered and dated dinosaur fossils going back many millions of years. If these are indeed established facts (and they are), then why would fundamentalists demand that religionists deny clear scientific evidence—especially when there is no theological reason to do so? Why should religious people be asked to become unthinking, unscientific, unreasonable beings?

The "days" in the creation story surely do not refer to 24-hour periods. Rather, they might better be understood as periods of time of undetermined length. They might each have been billions of years long. The universe was created in stages, with each stage involving an evening (erev, a period of mixture) and a morning (boker, a period of clarity, when the mixed state of matter solidified into identifiable things). The Torah does not indicate how long these "days" were, and

it makes no attempt to frame the story in scientific terms.

Since these first six "days" might have been billions of years long, there was ample time for dinosaurs to live and become extinct before the creation of Adam in the "afternoon" of the sixth "day."

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan cited classic rabbinic texts asserting that the world is far older than the 5,770 years implied by our current dating system. The Sefer haTemunah, attributed to the Tanna Rabbi Nuhunya ben haKanah, suggested that there were other worlds before Adam was created. The Talmud (Hagigah 13b) records the view that there were 974 generations before Adam. Most interesting is the view of Rabbi Yitzhak of Akko, a student and colleague of Ramban, and one of the foremost kabbalists of his time (thirteenth century). Rabbi Kaplan made calculations based on Rabbi Yitzhak's writings, indicating that Rabbi Yitzhak thought the universe was 15.3 billion years old! This is incredibly close to the "big bang" theory posited by modern-day scientists. (For more information on this and related topics, please see my article, "Reflections on Torah Education and Mis-Education," available online at the Institute's website, www.jewishideas.org.)

Rabbi Yitzhak of Akko and the other sages who posited a universe far older than 5,770 years had no theological problem suggesting these views. These opinions were not seen as heretical in any way. It was not felt by these sages, nor by the many others who read their views without raising objections, that it was a vital principle of Judaism to believe the universe is only a few thousand years old.

The creation story that opens the Torah should inspire us to come closer to God, to appreciate His grandeur and unfathomable wisdom. It should excite our minds to want to learn more about God's ways as manifested in the laws of nature. It should help foster a spirit of scientific inquiry, intellectual curiosity, and a profound love and reverence for God. The opening chapter of Bereishith should open our minds with wonder, not close them in a fundamentalist, anti-scientific—and ultimately anti-religious—mindset.

Torah and Evolution: Thoughts for Parashat Bereishith, October 22, 2011

I recently received an email communication from an Orthodox Jewish organization stating in unequivocal terms that "Orthodox Judaism rejects the theory of evolution." In certain Orthodox circles, it is posited as a matter of faith that "true" Judaism does not and cannot accept evolution. God created the universe; God created Adam and Eve. This is clear from the first chapter of Bereishith, and there is nothing more to say on the subject. Any other position is heresy.

Actually, there is much more to say on the subject. I believe that it is religiously incorrect to state that “Orthodox Judaism rejects the theory of evolution.” This is not only an invalid statement from an intellectual point of view, it is also invalid from an Orthodox religious point of view. The statement reflects obscurantism, not faith.

The first chapter of Bereishith presents a lofty, beautiful, and poetic account of creation. It does not present a scientific account of creation. It does not describe how God created things, only that He did indeed create the world.

It has been pointed out that the six “days” of creation are not 24-hour days as we know them today; the sun wasn’t created until day four! Rather, the Torah poetically speaks of six periods of time—each of which could have been billions of years long—in which the universe came into being. Current scientific calculations place the “big bang” at a bit over 13 billion years ago. These calculations are not based on idle speculation but on carefully studied cosmic phenomena. Religious Jews, along with all thinking people, should feel comfortable embracing the findings of science. There is no contradiction at all between Torah and the “big bang” calculations.

The theory of evolution, which has a strong body of scientific support, posits that life emerged gradually, over the course of many millions of years. Simple life forms gradually evolved into more complex life forms. Human beings ultimately emerged from a long process of evolution. The Torah neither affirms nor denies the theory of evolution. It makes clear, though, that God created the world; things did not develop randomly. God could have created things in an instant; or He could have created things by a process of evolution spanning millions of years. When the Torah states that God created Adam from the dust of the earth, this could mean that God created Adam via a process of evolution spanning a vast period of time—beginning with the simplest cells found in the dust and ultimately developing into thinking human beings. The Torah simply does not provide us with scientific details about the formation of human beings.

Since the weight of scientific information indicates a gradual development of life, we can embrace this information without religious qualms or conflicts. The Torah tells us that God created the world; scientists have been trying to figure out the process of the creation. Thus, the theory of evolution poses no threat whatever to our religious tradition. Rather, it fills in scientific information that was not discussed in the Torah.

Our conflict is not with the theory of evolution per se. Our conflict is with those who claim that evolution happened entirely on its own, without any divine impetus. Religious Jews may properly accept the findings of science, but must always make clear that it was God who fashioned the universe, who set things in motion, and who indeed created the scientific phenomena upon which the scientists are drawing their conclusions.

During the Middle Ages, a conflict raged between science and religion on the question of the nature of matter. Science, as represented by Aristotle, argued for the eternity of matter. Religious tradition, based on the first chapter of Bereishith, argued for a created universe. Maimonides, in his Guide of the Perplexed 2:25, maintained the traditional religious view of God as creator. He argued that it is philosophically impossible to prove the eternity of matter. On the other hand, since it is philosophically plausible to posit God as creator of matter, we can safely rely on religious tradition to teach us that which science/philosophy cannot teach.

At the same time, Maimonides points out that if indeed it could be demonstrated that matter is eternal, then we would necessarily accept scientific truth. Since God is the Author of both Torah and Science, it is impossible for the two to be in conflict. If science could prove the eternity of matter, then the Torah would need to be re-interpreted accordingly:

"Know that our shunning the affirmation of the eternity of the world is not due to a text figuring in the Torah according to which the world has been produced in time. For the texts indicating that the world has been produced in time are not more numerous than those indicating that the deity is a body. Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation shut in our faces or impossible of access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world in time. For we could interpret them as figurative, as we have done when denying His corporeality."

Maimonides’ methodology is of profound significance. Religious texts do not and cannot conflict with demonstrated scientific truths. If the texts seem to conflict with scientific truth, then the texts need to be re-interpreted.

People are welcome to accept or reject the theory of evolution as they think best after they have actually studied the scientific data carefully. But regardless of their personal opinion, they are not entitled to say that “Orthodox Judaism rejects the theory of evolution.” If the theory of evolution is scientifically valid, then religious Jews—along with all thinking people—should necessarily accept it—with the proviso that the process of evolution itself was God’s means for creating life.

Thoughts about Thinking: Thoughts on Parashat Nitzavim, September 15, 2012

The Torah calls on us to think, to evaluate, and to act righteously. It challenges us to serve the Almighty with our intelligence and personal responsibility; not from blind obedience.

In this week's Torah portion, we read: "For this command that I command you today is not a wonder to you, and it is not distant.…For the thing is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, to do it." The Torah is not an esoteric document that can be deciphered only by an elite group of prophets or sages; rather, it is the heritage of the entire people. Each of us has access to the truths of the Torah by means of our own intellectual and emotional efforts.

In his book, The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture (Cambridge University Press, 2012), Dr. Yoram Hazony makes an impassioned case that the Bible is essentially a reasonable and philosophically sound literary corpus. While so many have mistakenly characterized the Hebrew Bible as a simplistic work that demands nothing but blind obedience to the word of God, Dr. Hazony demonstrates that the Bible is actually a very sophisticated intellectual enterprise. If one is able to study the Bible on its own terms, understanding its own literary and philosophical methods, then one will find it to be not only a magnificent collection of literature and laws, but also a profound exploration of ideas and ethics.

The Hebrew Bible includes a wide range of texts, with varying—and sometimes contradictory—viewpoints. Rather than presenting us with dogmatic "truths" in the form of a catechism, it offers historical narratives, laws, prophetic orations, wisdom literature. Dr. Hazony notes that "the purpose of the biblical editors, in gathering together such diverse and often sharply conflicting texts, was not to construct a unitary work with an unequivocal message. It was rather to assemble a work capable of capturing and reflecting a given tradition of inquiry so readers could strive to understand the various perspectives embraced by this tradition, and in so doing build up an understanding of their own.…The reader who takes up the Hebrew Bible is thus invited and challenged to take up a place within this tradition of inquiry, and to continue its elaboration out of his or her own resources" (p. 65).

Judaism calls on us to engage in this "tradition of inquiry," to be seekers of truth. Certainly, the Torah offers laws that we are commanded to obey. But it offers vastly more than this; it offers a spiritual context for life, a respect for our personal religious and philosophic strivings, a realistic and humble awareness of our strengths and limitations as human beings.

Judaism is at its best when its adherents are intellectually and emotionally engaged with its teachings. It is far below its best when its adherents sink into the abyss of blind obedience.

Some months ago, Forbes Magazine published a list of the 10 richest rabbis in Israel. The rabbis' net worths ranged from 9 million dollars to 335 million dollars! It appears that all (or nearly all) of these rabbis have reputations as wonder workers, Sephardic kabbalists, or Hassidic rebbes of huge dynasties. These rabbis have amassed huge fortunes because the public is willing to pay them for their blessings, amulets, holy water, and so forth. It seems that a considerable segment of the public does not believe in its own ability to pray to God, but wants the intercession of holy men who supposedly have an inside track with God. Many people aren't interested in a "spirit of inquiry"—they want "truth" as promised to them by wonder working rabbis.

If these wonder working rabbis indeed have such magical powers and can control God, then why don't they use these powers to disarm Israel's enemies; to uproot anti-Semitism; to punish the wicked; to provide for all the sick, poor, and hungry of the world?

A tendency has arisen in segments of the Jewish world that grants magical, even infallible, powers to certain "sages." This tendency leads to a vast perversion of Judaism, and veers in the direction of superstition and cultic behavior. It fosters authoritarianism, obscurantism, and dogmatism. It undermines freedom of thought, religious inquiry, independence of spirit. The fact that cultic rabbinic figures can amass so many millions of dollars is an indication of how deeply this negative tendency has taken root.

It is essential that we reclaim Judaism as an intellectually vibrant, creative, and dynamic religious way of life. This entails personal commitment, a sense of responsibility, and a commitment to the "spirit of inquiry" that characterizes a healthy Judaism. We need to have the self-respect and religious dignity to think...and to keep thinking.

Religion and Superstition: Thoughts for Parashat Vayikra, March 12, 2011

During the past week, I received an email from an organization in Israel seeking donations for which donors would merit success, happy marriage, and good health. The organization offered to have a Torah scholar pray at the Kotel from the Fast of Esther through the seventh day of Passover. They assured donors that this is a "very powerful time for hidden blessings to be revealed."

Not long after getting this spam, I received in the mail a glitzy brochure from another organization seeking donations so that the "gedolei haDor" will pray on our behalf at the Kotel. The brochure features photos of sages with long white beards, who assure us that by supporting this charity we will gain wonderful rewards.

These are recent examples of the ongoing process of cheapening Jewish prayer, and of undermining the spiritual foundations of the Jewish people. The above charities, and many others as well, prey on the gullibility and fears of the public. They claim to have direct access to God—through their "Torah scholars" and "gedolei haDor"— that the rest of us lack. They claim that these prayers at the Kotel will be effective, whereas our own prayers anywhere else will not be as effective. Charlatans abound who promise miracles, if only we will give them ample donations. They will write us amulets, bless red strings, send us holy water or food, pray for us at the Kotel.

There is, of course, a long history of charlatanism and shamanism in religion—including Judaism. There have always been those who claim to have the keys to God's inner chambers, and that—for a price—they would intercede on behalf of those who turned to them.

Superstitious practices and beliefs, even if dressed in holy garb, are inimical to the purity of religion. They blur the line between religion and superstition, degrading and disgracing true religion.

As we approach the Purim holiday, we recall that Esther requested that the Jews fast during their hour of distress. Rabbinic tradition has understood this as a call to prayer and repentance. Esther did not ask Jews to send donations to holy people at the Kotel; or to pay for prayers by supposed saints and scholars. No, she called on each Jew to reach out to God from the depths of his/her heart. And the Jews were redeemed.

Let us each turn to the Almighty in sincere and pure prayer. This is the special privilege and responsibility that Judaism offers us: to stand before the Master of the Universe directly. The Torah of God is pure; we must not allow it to be defiled by misguided superstitious beliefs and practices.

To Be a Human Being

In speaking to Orthodox audiences over the years, I often have made the following statement: “We are not just Jews, we are also human beings.” Some in the audience chuckle, some seem startled, some light up with a flash of happy

insight: yes, we are human beings! The thought, even though so obvious, is liberating for many Orthodox Jews. It reminds them that their lives can have broader horizons, and that everything human belongs to them as much as to anyone else in the world. While religious observance keeps us within the four cubits of halakha, it does not limit our minds and spirits, it does not require us to forfeit our intellectual, emotional, cultural and aesthetic selves.

“Hareidi” Orthodoxy looks askance at the study of general subjects such as philosophy, literature, history, the arts, theoretical science. “Modern” Orthodoxy anguishes as it tries to justify the study of such subjects. It feels the deep need to defend Torah im Derekh Eretz and Torah uMadda as legitimate expressions of Orthodox Judaism.

Ideally, though, Orthodoxy should embrace general knowledge as a normal and natural part of the human adventure. Since we are human beings, we should obviously be interested in the entire expanse of human experience. “General studies” belong to us as much as to any other human beings. It does not require any apologetics or intellectual acrobatics to “prove” that it’s kosher to study literature, the arts, science, and philosophy. This is something to be taken for granted as our natural right.

Certainly, our experience of the “secular” world needs to be shaped by Torah values and halakhot. An ideally Orthodox Jew will seek to experience his or her humanity within the framework of his or her religious commitments. The Torah and halakha help us achieve our human potential within a religiously meaningful framework.

Professor Shalom Rosenberg has offered an important insight by distinguishing between humanism and humaneness. “The Torah instructs us in humaneness, not humanism. This trait is one of the defining characteristics of every truly religious person….The humanist believes in man as the ultimate lawmaker, the final arbiter of ethical behavior. The believer refuses to accept that premise. While often agreeing with the humanist regarding the content of his values, he disagrees about their origin. The source of humane behavior is not human; it is divine.” [5]

The goal of Torah is to create humane personalities—kind, compassionate, thoughtful. Humaneness originates in our relationship with God, the Creator and Giver of the Torah. It is our spiritual/intellectual connection with God that imbues mitzvoth with their power.

Jewish folk wisdom has understood the centrality of our being good, upstanding people. In designating the “ideal” type of person, Yiddish-speakers use the word mentsch, literally, a human being! Ladino-speakers use the word benatham (i.e. ben adam), also meaning: a human being! Folk wisdom has recognized that we achieve our ideal personhood when we are fully moral, fully compassionate, fully decent human beings.

Insights from Rabbi Benzion Uziel

One of the great luminaries of the modern period was Rabbi Benzion Uziel (1880–1953), who served as Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1939 to 1953.[6] Rabbi Uziel offered keen insights in Jewish law, philosophy, ethics, and worldview.

Rabbi Uziel taught that the Torah tradition calls on us to be engaged in the overall development of society—yishuvo shel olam. We are to be involved in study and deed that advance human civilization. In order to fulfill our specific mission as Jews, it is essential that we play our role on the stage of humanity.[7] Since we are part of human civilization, we necessarily have a symbiotic relationship with other nations—we learn from them, we teach them, we share with them the responsibility for creating an ethical society.

Rabbi Uziel wrote:

"Each country and each nation which respects itself, does not and cannot be satisfied with its narrow boundaries and limited domains. Rather, they desire to bring in all that is good and beautiful, that is helpful and glorious to the national [cultural] treasure. And they wish to give the maximum flow of their own blessings to the [cultural] treasury of humanity as a whole. [Each self-respecting nation desires] to establish a link of love and friendship among all nations, for the enrichment of the human storehouse of intellectual and ethical ideas and for the uncovering of the secrets of nature.…Woe unto that country and nation that encloses itself in its own four cubits and limits itself to its own narrow boundaries, lacking anything of its own to contribute [to humanity] and lacking the tools to receive [cultural contributions] from others.” [8]

The distinctive quality of Judaism is its understanding that our goal in life is to serve God, to “walk in His ways.” This spiritual worldview imbues our entire lives. “Our holiness will not be complete if we separate ourselves from human life, from human phenomena, pleasures and charms, but [only if we are] nourished by all the new developments in the world, by all the wondrous discoveries, by all the philosophical and scientific ideas which flourish and multiply in our world. We are

enriched and nourished by sharing in the knowledge of the world. At the same time, though, this knowledge does not change our essence, which is composed of holiness and appreciation of God’s exaltedness.” [9]

Rabbi Uziel insisted that we are not just Jews, but are also human beings. As Jews, we must be devoted to a spiritual, righteous life following the teachings of Torah; as human beings, we must play our role in human society, learning what we can from others and teaching what we can to them. We are not to be an enclave separated from humanity, but a nation that is an integral part of humanity.

Thoughts from Rabbi Kook

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), an older colleague of Rabbi Uziel, was a gifted thinker, writer ,and teacher. In 1919, he became the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Israel.

He taught that in order to fulfill ourselves as Jews, we need to develop our intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic potentials.

Commenting on the works of modern literature, Rabbi Kook noted that even though many of them tend toward mundane matters, they “are nothing else than preparatory levels for the supernal purity of the exalted glory that will appear in the world.” [10] Aesthetic and creative endeavors by talented human beings lead to the overall spiritual development of humanity—including Jews. Dr. Pinchas Polonsky, in his commentary on this passage by Rabbi Kook, notes that

"a person who does not grow spiritually, who does not read secular literature, cannot develop a sense of the awe or of love, so as to apprehend God’s glory at the necessary level….[T]he literature and philosophy of one’s generation and the desire to comprehend the beauty and richness of the world are necessary components of spiritual development….In some sense, secular literature and Torah are part of the same spiritual realm."[11]

Rabbi Kook believed that a full religious experience demands a full human experience—a human experience rooted in broad and deep knowledge and a heightened imagination. To attain understanding of God’s greatness “a person must truly study all the sciences of the world, all ideologies of life, all the ways of the various cultures and the content of the morality and religion of every nation and language. [Then] with a greatness of spirit, he will know how to purify them all.” [12] The study of the ideas and cultures of other peoples is a basic component in developing a strong Jewish religious life. Surely, it is not realistic for each Jew to be a world-class scholar in all fields of civilization; yet each Jew can

learn what he or she is able to learn, and can at least maintain intellectual curiosity about the many things one is not able to learn. Rabbi Kook thought that our intellects should range as far as possible, with the goal of “purifying” whatever general knowledge we come upon. We can learn profound truths from the arts and sciences, from human civilizations, from history and culture. All these truths can then be incorporated into a grand religious worldview, faithful to Torah, faithful to God.

Narrow Horizons, Narrow Thoughts

It often seems to me that spokespeople for Torah Judaism view Orthodoxy as a sect rather than as a world religion. The “outside” world is viewed with suspicion if not outright denigration. The goal seems to be to stay within our own fortress of faith and leave the rest of humanity to their own devices.

This narrow approach to Torah Judaism is popularly espoused in the Hareidi world, where people live in close-knit neighborhoods, and where “foreign” ideas and teachings are kept out to the extent possible. But it also is prevalent within Modern Orthodoxy, where the “move to the right” has certainly had an impact.[13]

The desire to insulate ourselves from outside influences stems from fear. If we don’t insulate ourselves, then we and our children may become tainted, may lose faith, may stop observing mitzvoth as good Orthodox Jews. Yet, a heavy price is paid for this approach to Judaism. Over the years I (and I’m sure many readers as well) have dealt with Jews who were raised Orthodox, but who eventually rebelled. Orthodoxy seemed claustrophobic; it limited free thought; it limited creativity; it demanded oppressive conformity in thought, action, and dress. It simply didn’t let us be ourselves, but forced us to fit in to a rigid way of life without reference to our own inclinations, talents, and abilities.

Others have rebelled because the “Yeshiva system” did not properly inoculate them to deal with intellectual problems they faced when they attended college. They were shocked when their physics teachers told them that the world was billions of years old; they were stunned when the professor of biblical literature treated the Bible as a literary text composed by various authors at various times; they were baffled when they learned about evolution; they were thrown off balance when they studied history, philosophy, art, and literature—and realized that Jews and their Torah represent an infinitesimal segment of humanity rather than being at the center of human civilization. In trying to “insulate” students from the prevailing intellectual trends, the system actually makes students more

vulnerable to “infection” when they ultimately are exposed to these trends. The students would have been much better served if they learned a broad range of topics—including the most problematic and controversial topics—but had learned them from a religious teacher who fully grasped the intellectual currents and scientific knowledge of the day. Then, when they later came into confrontation with these ideas, they would already have had exposure to them and would better be able to grapple with them.

One of the problems of our educational system is that Judaic studies teachers are not always blessed with a solid general education. They themselves don’t know about biblical criticism, or evolution, or philosophy, or art. Since they often have received a narrow Orthodox education, it is not likely that they will have the competence or the interest to enlighten their students on topics beyond their ken.

Moreover, schools—including Modern Orthodox schools—are reluctant to offer an open, engaging general education. They fear that the general studies teachers may not be sensitive enough to religious concerns, and may inadvertently plant seeds of doubt in the minds of the students. They instruct general studies teachers to avoid topics, such as evolution or biblical criticism, that may be deemed “controversial” in some Orthodox circles.

But instead of serving to protect our children’s religiosity, these policies can and do have the opposite result. When the children grow up and come into contact with “threatening” ideas, they have little ability to cope with them. They may conclude that their science, philosophy, and literature professors know a lot more than their rebbes did; and as they lose confidence in what their rebbes did and (and did not) teach them, they are far more likely to fall under the sway of secularist and anti-religious professors.

The Legitimacy and Necessity of Diversity

Orthodoxy does itself a vast disservice if it posits only one correct answer to every question in halakha and hashkafa. In fact, there are many valid opinions and approaches within the realms of halakha and hashkafa. The Torah world has included authoritative teachers in many lands, spanning many centuries, speaking many languages, offering many different insights. We are blessed with an incredible array of teachings representing various ways of interpreting texts and experiencing God—rationalists and mystics, women and men, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, Hassidim and Mitnagdim…and so much more.

Instead of presenting Orthodoxy as a monochromatic way of life, we would be more truthful and more effective if we were to highlight the roominess of Orthodoxy. It is not a straightjacket, but a repository of spirituality and wisdom in which every yearning soul can find a place. We should encourage ourselves and others to learn about and be open to the variety of religious experience within Torah Judaism.
Let us review some of the qualities that are necessary if we are to foster an ideal Orthodoxy:

1. To see Torah and halakha as wellsprings of spiritual wisdom and strength;
2. To avoid defining Orthodoxy exclusively or mainly in terms of observance of ritual mitzvoth;
3. To maintain an intellectually vibrant framework that includes proper study of Torah and halakha, as well as science, literature, philosophy, the arts, and so forth.
4. To avoid turning off our brains by blindly following “authorities” who, in fact, have very limited knowledge beyond their narrow Torah studies.
5. To see Torah and mitzvoth as means of helping us to develop our humanity, our individual talents and predilections, while helping us to live our lives in the context of serving God.
6. To promote an Orthodox vision for the welfare of all the Jewish people, and all society. As Jews, we are responsible for all other Jews. As human beings, we are responsible for yishuvo shel olam—participating in the advancement of all humanity.
7. To teach Torah and general knowledge with confidence, not fear; to help our younger generations understand the best in Torah and the best in the wisdom of the world.
8. To respect, value and learn from the vast diversity of legitimate opinions in halakha and hashkafa; to take pride in the Jewish communities throughout the ages and throughout the world who have contributed to the spiritual treasury of the Jewish people.

If enough of us share these ideals; if enough of us are willing to work to promote these ideals; if we can impact on synagogues, schools, and yeshivot—then perhaps these ideals will actually be realized in our community.

Right now this is a dream in the minds of ideal Orthodox Jews scattered around the world. In due time, though, we believe and trust that this dream will be realized in a Jewish people that is committed to a life of Torah, intellectual vibrancy, compassion, righteousness, and inclusiveness. Bimheira beyameinu.

[1] See my book, Choosing to Be Jewish: The Orthodox Road to Conversion, Ktav Publishing House, Jersey City, 2005; and my article, “Conversion to Judaism: Halakha, Hashkafa, and Historic Challenge, Hakirah, vol. 7, winter 2009, pp. 25–49.
[2] Batei Din often require the candidate for conversion to know Rambam’s 13 principles of faith, but rarely actually enter a serious discussion of these topics. As long as the candidate can recite the main principles by rote, that is generally deemed to be sufficient. See Marc Shapiro, The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised, Oxford, 2004.
[3] See my article, “Orthodoxy and Diversity,” Conversations, no. 12, winter 2012, p. 52.
[4] Cited by Lawrence Kaplan, “Daas Torah: A Modern Conception of Rabbinic Authority,” in Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy, ed. Moshe Sokol, Northvale, Jason Aronson, 1992, p. 17.
[5] Shalom Rosenberg, In the Footsteps of the Kuzari: An Introduction to Jewish Philosophy, vol. 1, Ed. Joel Linsider, Trans. Gila Weinberg, Yashar Books, New York, 2007, pp. 92–93.
[6] For more on Rabbi Uziel’s life and teachings, see my book, Loving Truth and Peace: The Grand Religious Worldview of Rabbi Benzion Uziel, Jason Aronson, Northvale, 1999.
[7] See his Hegyonei Uziel, vol. 2, Jerusalem, 5714, p. 98.
[8] Ibid., p. 127.
[9] See Ibid., pp. 121–125.
[10] Selected Paragraphs from Arfilei Tohar, with commentaries by Pinchas Polonsky, Machanaim, Newton, 2012, p. 70.
[11] Ibid., p. 71.
[12] Ibid. p. 76.
[13] Samuel Heilman, Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy, Berkely, University of California Press, 2006.