The Middle of the Road Approach

View PDF



Rabbi Dr. Benjamin (Benny) Lau is the director of the Center for Judaism and Society as well as the Institute for Social Justice at Bet Morasha of Jerusalem. Rabbi of the Ramban Synagogue in the Katamon neighborhood of Jerusalem, he is a well-known author and lecturer. This article appears in issue 3 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

There is a type of "middle of the road" approach in religious observance that is passed down from one generation to the next, an approach that does not always coincide with what is practiced in the world of the yeshiva. It is quite common for a son to return from yeshiva and begin to find fault with the practices of the household: he doesn't approve of the size of the Kiddush cup; he wants to wear tsitsith so that they hang outside his shirt; he objects to preparing tea on Shabbat (by means of a "third vessel"), but insists on using tea concentrate, and so on.

I remember when I was a youngster entering the high-school-level yeshiva, and we began with the study of the Mishneh Berurah. Already on the first page I came across the obligation to wash one's hands in the morning upon awakening, right near the bed, without walking the distance of four cubits. This was something alien to what was customary at our home, and I was very embarrassed at the revelation that our household was not conducting itself according to halakha. I immediately adopted the new practice, to the chagrin of my parents. Only at a later stage in my life did I learn the kabbalistic basis for our household practice, its validity, and the many opinions that differed from the ruling of the Mishneh Berurah.

There are countless practices common in the households of observant Jews that do not coincide with recent books of halakhic rulings such as Mishneh Berurah, Shemirat Shabbat keHilkhata, Darkhei Tahara, and so forth. The yeshiva student's conflict between the written words of halakhic rulings and the experiential

practices of the household find resolution in various ways, depending on the power of the competing sides. A household that governs itself according to halakha and a serious relationship with tradition will succeed in conveying to one who grows up within it the confidence that the "minhag (custom) of Israel is Torah" and one should not deviate from the practice of the household. But a household that is not confident in matters of tradition may lead one who is caught up in this conflict to choose to veer from the household practices. This has led to a phenomenon within the religious community of those who "turn in repentance" from the household practices and adopt a more stringent approach with practices that had not been the norms of the household. Thus, yeshiva students are identified by hanging their tsitsith outside their shirts, as called for by the Mishneh Berurah, in spite of the fact that their religiously observant fathers did not do so. We find Torah students of Sephardic backgrounds who are careful to don the tefillin of Rabbeinu Tam, even though their very traditional fathers did not do so. Many other examples could be adduced.

In all such examples, it is possible to see that the practices suggested by more recent posekim (halakhic decisors) are not universally accepted by other posekim, and it is possible to maintain the household traditions without halakhic difficulty. Clearly, in the yeshiva world there is pressure directed at elevating and purifying religious life, manifested in a meticulous concern for halakhic details. Educating the public toward the validity of the "middle of the road" approach requires the educator to be strong and comfortable with the perpetuation of tradition based on the practices of generations of religiously observant Jews. The argument that this approach fails to challenge and energize the religious soul, in the way that traditional yeshiva education does, is a serious one and should not be dismissed. It is critical to confront this challenge, but never at the expense of the tranquility of a measured and balanced Torah life.
In contradistinction to the ideal "middle of the road" approach that reflects many of the ideals of Torah im derekh erets, certain religious communities have created norms that barely meet minimal halakhic standards, for example, activities of a mixed society such as mixed swimming or dancing. The spiritual leadership of a community must take a stand with respect to these norms, either by speaking out or by remaining silent. As we know, failure to respond is in itself a response.

Because of these manifestations, many great rabbis have shunned the yoke of formal rabbinic leadership. Great sages such as the Gaon of Vilna and the Hafetz Hayyim recognized their own inability to compromise or close their eyes to the "middle of the road" approach of fulfilling the halakha. Many heads of yeshivot who came from Lithuania (Brisk and its offshoots) followed their example. They

preferred to be enclosed in the four cubits of halakha and Torah, and to leave the responsibility to other rabbis to create a bridge that connects the Torah and the people. These other rabbis may have been on a lower level of Torah knowledge, but they bore on their shoulders the burden of communal leadership. Synagogue rabbis and teachers, from time immemorial, were called upon to confront communal norms that were not in line with halakha. The commandment to chastise sinners often stood in conflict with the biblical concern (in Proverbs) not to chastise someone who might then come to hate you. Is it better to choose the path of silence, or is a rabbi obligated to chastise, regardless of how people will respond? In fact, we know that many of our Sages tried hard to close their eyes to sinners, when they knew their chastisement would not have a clear positive result. However, one cannot shut one's eyes to the fact that there is also a danger in this approach.

A "middle of the road" approach to halakha that is characterized by religious compromise has caused a serious depreciation in the effective status of the "ideal middle of the road." The yeshiva world has identified the Modern Orthodox community as a community that is dissatisfied with religious principles.

It is our responsibility to restore the glory of the ideal "middle of the road" approach, and to distinguish between it and religious compromise. I am not certain that the ideal "middle of the road" approach will succeed in firing the hearts, but it is certain to maintain the warmth of Torah and derekh erets and to transmit it with care and confidence to future generations.

I will close with a comment on extra religious meticulousness during the Ten Days of Penitence. The Shulhan Arukh states that one should avoid eating "gentile bread" during this period. Rabbi Efraim Zalman Margaliot, author of Mateh Efraim, commented on this passage and noted the custom of pious people in Talmudic times to be stringent in the matter of eating food only while in a state of ritual purity. Rabbi Margaliot indicated that this stringency would be quite difficult and strange in our times. He wrote:

There are some pious individuals who are stringent with themselves and eat their food in purity during these days. One who does this, needs to seek grain upon which no water has fallen that would have made it receptive to ritual impurity; the flour needs to be mixed with fruit juice (rather than water). When he wishes to drink, he needs to bend low and drink from the river or well, so that he does not touch them and make them ritually impure.

This sort of behavior can be described as being quite strange. These are acts of piety that distance a person from normative life and cast into doubt the strong religious foundations of the general community. Rabbi Margaliot warns us about

this stringency:
One should not follow this practice, unless all his deeds are in holiness and purity and he conducts himself with utmost separateness. Otherwise, this [excessive stringency] is foolishness and bad-spiritedness and presumptuousness. Each person is obligated only to do what he can do [and not to adopt unnecessary stringencies].

Would that people would fulfill that which they are obligated to do.