The Grasshopper Effect and Other Defects in Modern Orthodox Leadership

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Since the days of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the Orthodox world has been blessed with many great leaders and thinkers who have scrupulously observed halakha (Jewish law) but who have, at the same time, adjusted to the modern world, including its science and technology. In more recent times, we have been fortunate to have Yeshiva University as guided by Rabbi Norman Lamm and more recently by Richard Joel. We have had a series of outstanding chief rabbis of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, most recently, Jonathan Sacks. There was the incomparable Joseph B. Soloveitchik, of course, whose inspirational teachings have generated numerous leaders across the globe.

I continue to be impressed with Jewish thinkers such as Menachem Kellner, David Hartman, Adam Ferziger, Marc Shapiro, José Faur, Joseph Telushkin, and many others. At the same time, we have inspiring congregational leaders who have assumed wider roles, such as Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, Rabbi Benjamin Lau, Rabbi Marc Angel, and Rabbi Avi Weiss. In Israel we have the example of Yeshivat Har Etzion, so ably led by Rabbis Aharon Lichtenstein and Yehuda Amital. One cannot help but be impressed with the textual skill of Rabbi Menachem Leibtag.

Notwithstanding our recent history of esteemed leaders and thinkers, the weaknesses in our Orthodox world cannot be ignored if they are to be mended. A

variety of factors have resulted in a collapse of any meaningful application of the word "leadership" to Modern Orthodoxy. This collapse is mostly self-induced.

A few years ago I was walking on Ben Yehuda Street in Jerusalem. In the Jewish world there are not six degrees of separation but rather, only one or two for the most part. I was searching the passing faces for people I knew. There was something oddly familiar about a gentleman approaching me, but I assumed it could not be anybody that I knew because the man was decked out in a long black coat and big-brimmed black hat of the type rarely seen in my hometown of Seattle except for on the occasional meshulah (charity collector). As my brain adjusted, though, I could see that it was a rabbi I had known for many years. I knew him as a moderate, educated, Modern Orthodox congregational leader. My confusion was multiplied when I remembered that this rabbi was Sephardic, yet he was dressed as if he were someone from Eastern Europe in the high fashion of Polish gentry 200 years ago. We greeted each other and I asked him why he was dressed in Hareidi garb. He straightforwardly answered that, in order to fit in and be taken seriously as a rabbi, he felt he had to dress in that manner and conform to "the look."

This encounter was symbolic as it relates to the topic at hand, which is the leadership crisis. This brings us to one of the most distinct factors in the decline of leadership: a massive inferiority complex. When the Jews left Egypt, they left with the direct intervention of God, with all God's visible power and with the promise of continuing intervention in the conquest of the Promised Land. Moses assembled the leadership of the time and sent them to reconnoiter the land. Despite having all of the power of God behind them, the majority had a crisis of confidence. Ten of the twelve spies projected their own insecurities onto the situation with the Canaanites, and in a famous bout of self-criticism said: "We were like grasshoppers in our eyes, and so were we in their eyes" (Numbers 13:31-33).

In the context of this discussion, many in our Modern Orthodox world, including congregational rabbis and organizations, seem to frequently operate with one eye on the Hareidi world as if it consisted of giants. As a consequence, they seem to view themselves as inferior. It is time to stop this grasshopper effect.

We must ask ourselves: Who are these "giants," and what do they stand for? The Hareidi world is characterized not only by observance of strictures (humrot), but also by the baggage that generally (although not always) comes with the long black coat and wide-rimmed black hat. More often than not, that baggage includes a rejection of reality. For example, most Hareidim insist that the universe is strictly 5,768 years old, despite overwhelming proof from geology, physics,

astronomy, and biology that the universe is approximately 14 billion years old, the age of the earth is approximately 4.5 billion years, and life on this planet dates from about 3.5 billion years ago. They reject any notion of evolution, making themselves look foolish in the eyes not only of scientists but also in the eyes all people whose worldview is grounded in factual reality.

In addition, most Hareidim hold that a literal interpretation of Midrashim is often the most accurate. Here, I quote extensively from Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishna. Rambam's wisdom, written 825 years ago, still resonates. Since this passage inspires me, I quote it in full:

It is important for you to know that there are three classes [of thinkers] who differ in their interpretation of the words of the Sages, of blessed memory. The first class comprises the majority among those that I have come across and whose compositions I have read and of whom I have heard. They understand the words of the Sages literally and do not interpret them at all. To them all impossibilities are necessary occurrences. They only do this because of their ignorance of sciences and their being distant from [various] fields of knowledge. They do not possess any of the perfection that would stimulate them [to understanding] of their own accord, nor have they found someone else to arouse them. Therefore, they think that the intent of the Sages in all their precise and carefully stated remarks is only what they can comprehend and that these [remarks] are to be understood literally. This is despite the fact that in their literal sense some of the words of the Sages would seem to be so slanderous and absurd that if they were related to the uneducated masses in their literal sense, and all the more so to the wise, they would look upon them with amazement and exclaim: 'How is it possible that there exists in the world anyone who would think in this manner or believe that such statements are correct, much less approve of them!' This class is poor [in understanding] and one should pity their folly. In their own minds, they think they are honoring and exalting the Sages, but they are actually degrading them to the lowest depths. And they do not perceive that, as God lives, it is this class of thinkers that destroys the splendor of the Torah of God into saying the opposite of what it intends to convey. For God said in His perfect Torah: This is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes and say: Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. [Deuteronomy 4:6] But this category [of thinkers] expounds the words of the Sages in their literal sense so that when the nations hear them, they will say: "Surely this small nation is a foolish and degenerate people." (Introduction to his commentary on Perek Helek)

Throughout rabbinic literature, our Sages note that God's highest gift to humankind is our intelligence and our ability to think. But in the Hareidi world, people feel that their highest duty is to turn off that brain and allow their "Rav" or a "Gadol" to do their thinking for them about even the simplest and most personal things, including occupation, residence, spouses, and politics. Despite the acknowledged disappearance of prophecy within Judaism, at least until messianic times, Hareidim all but import it back into our faith through the concept of "Daas Torah." Loosely defined, "Daas Torah" is knowledge of all things because of immersion in Torah unadulterated by any other knowledge. (See Lawrence Kaplan, "Daas Torah: A Modern Conception of Rabbinic Authority," in the Orthodox Forum, Rabbinic Authority and Personal Authority.) We see the spectacle of well-known Hareidi rabbis speaking with self-confidence as to why God did specific things as if they have spoken to God directly. God's supposed reasons for the Holocaust proliferate, for example. In more recent times, God's so-called reasons for the devastation of New Orleans by Katrina, or reasons for the debacle of the last war in Lebanon against Hizbullah have been expounded by these "sages." The more isolated a Hareidi leader is from science, current events, indeed any secular knowledge, the more that world considers that leader as holy. These are the "giants" before whom many in the Modern Orthodox world feel small.

I have to question whether we really need to "look up" to the Hareidi world which overwhelmingly rejects the legitimacy of the State of Israel. Should we really be in awe of those in Israel who avoid national service-yet accept state welfare in huge numbers? For that matter, if we all took on their lifestyle, who would pay for it? In Israel we would all live in abject poverty. In the United States, we would take state welfare. In both countries we would live in ever-increasing ignorance. How is this a long-term solution to world change?

Jewish self-confidence eschews any need to seek validation in the views, real or imagined, of others. The Torah was given by God and, accordingly, we must view God's system as perfect. Jews have always been an infinitesimal percent of the world's population but this minority status has never been a concern of ours. Historically, Christianity and Islam have sought through force and active proselytizing to convert as many people as possible to their respective religions. Islam continues to support, for the most part, these goals through violence, while Christianity continues to pursue these goals by softer methods. Mormons have honed the proselytizing skills to such a degree that there are now almost as many

Latter Day Saints in the world as there are Jews-even though Joseph Smith incorporated the religion only in 1830. Each of these religions partially justifies itself by pointing to what each of them perceives to be proof of the inherent validity of their religion. They argue that their religions are true because they have attracted so many millions of adherents, as if truth is a matter of popular vote, or is self-validated by large numbers of members. Many of our Modern Orthodox leaders turn, in similar fashion, to the Hareidi world for validation. The fact that so many Orthodox leaders act (or refuse to act) with one eye over their shoulder to how they think the so-called gedolim of B'nei Brak or Monsey will perceive them is an acute demonstration of an endemic shortage of self-confidence. People who are self-confident are not afraid of the marketplace of ideas, nor do they need to be ideologues believing in the most ridiculous of things despite evidence and proof to the contrary.

Another manifestation of the weakness of leadership is in the proliferation of outreach kollels of all stripes around the country, including Kollel MiZions. (See the article by Adam Ferziger of Bar Ilan University: "The Emergence of the Community Kollel.") There are a number of reasons why Modern Orthodox rabbis welcome these kollels into their midst and, so often, actively promote them. One of the reasons is that Orthodox leadership has become lazy and has outsourced to the kollels one of its primary functions. Leadership would imply feelings of responsibility for all Jews. Leadership would also require the desire to promote greater levels of observance in all congregants. Leadership would include outreach to nonmembers. Yet instead of taking on the responsibility, our Modern Orthodox leaders all too often simply abdicate. They sit back and watch the kollel families do their work for them, not realizing that their own authority and effectiveness are undermined.

The outreach function of the kollels has one other drastic effect on the quality of Modern Orthodox leadership. Except for the Kollel MiZion movement, the rabbis chosen for these kollels are, more often than not, trained in Hareidi yeshivas. Therefore, directly and indirectly, these kollels promote the views of the Hareidi yeshivas to the people with whom they interact, many of whom do not have backgrounds sufficiently solid to aid them in sorting out the wheat from the chaff.

Are these kollels encouraging their adherents to ask questions of and seek guidance from their local Orthodox rabbis? Occasionally this does happen, but more often they themselves give the answers, or they seek the answers from

their own teachers and relay them to their adherents. The kollels are a Trojan horse to Modern Orthodox leadership but, by the time they realize it, it is often too late. (See my article on the Seattle experience at the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals website, www.jewishideas.org [3] [1] [1], entitled "The Seattle Kollel: A Study of Unintended Consequences.")

Often, when sufficient numbers of supporters are achieved, the kollels then promote their own schools (as was done in Seattle) and promote their own synagogues-and pressure the communities directly and indirectly to adopt Hareidi standards. An example of a Hareidi takeover is the transformation of the Breuer's Community in Washington Heights, New York City. That community supposedly followed in the footsteps of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. The legacy was "Torah im derekh erets," Torah with the ways of the world. Rabbi Hirsch promoted the idea that truth is unitary, and that Judaism should strictly adhere to halakha, while responsibly and selectively incorporating well-tested facts and truths that come to us by way of secular culture. That community's transformation into just another Hareidi community was documented by George D. Frankel in his five-part 2002 essay entitled "Dan Shall Judge His People."

Within the North American Modern Orthodox community, the very concept of what a congregational rabbi is supposed to be has changed, leaving many in the dust of practical irrelevance. It used to be sufficient for the rabbi to be a halakhic expert and a good Talmud teacher. Today he must be so much more. Many of our Modern Orthodox rabbis lack any training, or even much interest, in the kinds of skills necessary for successful congregational leadership. Earning semikha (ordination) from most yeshivas does not require (nor do they even offer) training in psychology, sociology, communications, educational theory, or many other prerequisites for effective leadership within the context of the modern world. Until the various yeshivot teach and promote real leadership skills there will continue to be a decline in the effectiveness and power of congregational rabbis.

Another factor that promotes a decline in leadership is the way we allow Modern Orthodox leaders to be maligned. Those vibrant rabbis within the Modern Orthodox world who do spend time and energy trying to find the tools to attract and mold greater levels of observance are often ostracized and heavily criticized for their efforts. This negativity is not only from the Hareidi world but also from the Modern Orthodox community, another sign of insecurity and the need to seek validation from the right wing. While the conga lines during Adon Olam in Riverdale might not be my cup of tea, one cannot argue that spirited services and displays of warmth and friendship have brought thousands of Jews closer to God

and have inspired ever-increasing levels of personal and communal observance and involvement. The pillorying of those rabbis who are making valiant efforts to truly lead can only discourage others from even trying. Here the aforementioned generalized insecurity manifests itself. Why? Because even within the Modern Orthodox world many rabbis are quick to jump on the Hareidi bandwagon of criticism of their fellows. Each tries to outdo the next in tearing down a colleague to "prove" how much more "religious" he is.

Torah Judaism provides a structure for a moral life. We as a people have been inhibited from maximizing our specific function and job on earth by millennia of persecution. Nevertheless, without a mission, without a purpose, no organization can stay healthy. Jewish leadership entails responsibility to perfect our fellow Jews and to teach the world by word and by example the ways of God, in order to bring the world to ethical monotheism. However, there is a strange fact within observant Judaism, including Modern Orthodoxy. Generally speaking, the further to the right one goes, the less one is concerned about fellow Jews outside one's own particular group and, certainly, the less one is concerned about the non-Jewish world. It is interesting to note that the further left toward Reform Judaism one goes, the more of an emphasis can be found on tikkun olam (repairing the world)-but the less emphasis one can find on the rest of the phrase, b'malkhut Shaddai (under the kingship of God). For this reason the causes embraced by the left are sometimes contrary to Jewish law. The further to the right one goes, one finds that the emphasis is on the yoke of heaven, and recognition of a responsibility to fix the world fades to nothingness. True leadership would promote the sight of kippot in rallies against the genocide in Darfur and the other ongoing mass murders. We should see participation in the promotion of human rights across the globe, not only for refuseniks, but also for the downtrodden in Zimbabwe. Our synagogues should be visible pillars of support for local food banks and neighborhood watch committees.

"Leadership" makes itself irrelevant when it fails to vigorously and unequivocally condemn immoral or illegal behavior just because the perpetrator is part of the Orthodox community. We should not be silent about sexual predators within our midst and within some of our schools. We should not turn a blind eye to the abuse of children or the denigration of women. Leadership should insist that tax evasion is not just a game and that dishonesty in business is not to be tolerated. There should not be an automatic defense of a kosher meat processor who systematically violates the law and treats workers as disposable commodities. There seems to be a fear that the rabbi who speaks out on these issues will himself be criticized by those further to the right.

When is the last time that many of us asked a halakhic question of our local Orthodox rabbi? And when we do ask questions, do we get well thought-out, reasoned opinions? When our lay and local leadership attend yeshiva in the United States or in Israel and turn to their roshei yeshivot for halakhic guidance they thereby undermine Orthodox leadership by failing to take seriously the local community rabbis. This is especially true today because of the proliferation of cheap communications by telephone and email. Our roshei yeshivot should stop this practice and encourage decisions at the local level.

When we do ask questions, we see the grasshopper effect again, because often an opinion is given orally with the refusal to put it in writing. In Seattle there are, for example, extensive written guidelines by the local Va'ad for Passover procedures and products. Oral advice is sometimes at odds with the written advice because local Orthodox rabbis simply don't want to put in writing a view that they think is correct but that will draw criticism from those further to the right. We have become people of the look, rather than people of the book. (See the Jerusalem Post article by Michael Freund, 1/29/08, entitled "People of the Look.")

Another problem with maintaining moderation within the Orthodox world is structural. Often, as in Seattle, the local Orthodox rabbis organize, ostensibly for more strength. They join together in a Va'ad for the purposes of uniform community standards. Since these Va'ads operate by consensus, there is a shift in these community standards to the most extreme views of the furthest right member. The nature of consensus is often, in practice, that the most extreme views have to be honored or there will be no consensus.

The recent controversy over conversions is a good example of the partial abdication of Modern Orthodox leadership in the United States, and is a further example of the "grasshopper effect." Many Orthodox rabbis throughout the United States know how ineffective they are at inspiring observance. They therefore have gravitated toward political requirements for conversion, requirements that have only tangential relationship to talmudic requirements for conversion. Every generation adds strictures, partly to show how "serious" they are about their Judaism. They frontload the conversion process with demands and commitments far beyond any requirement for native-born Jews. (See the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) geirus [sic] standards on their website.) One reason they do this is they hope it will mean they will not have to spend energy inspiring converts to greater observance after conversion. The RCA's effort to conform to the will of the now Hareidi-controlled Chief Rabbinate is another

example of the grasshopper effect. The RCA's effort to appease the Chief Rabbinate was almost immediately mocked by the ruling in Israel invalidating (supposedly and only in their view) potentially thousands of conversions previously done under the Chief Rabbinate's own Conversion Authority.

I recommend the book The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements by Eric Hoffer (1902-1983). Hoffer was a longshoreman who wrote philosophy. In 1983 he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for this book. In it, he analyzes the nature of ideology. One of the chief components of his argument is that beliefs are held onto so strongly by the ideologue that reality and any evidence appearing to contradict the belief system is simply ignored. Jewish leadership will fail to the extent that it holds onto beliefs such as the literal interpretation of Midrash, and a less than 6,000 year history to the universe.

In the short term, those true believers who find it necessary to not only be trembling (hareidim) before God but to also be trembling before science and the unfolding nature of reality, will continue to gain strength. There is a certain power that the true believer has, as witnessed by the political movements of the last century and continuing to the present time.

The world is moving too fast. Technology today is creating a new haskalah (enlightenment). Fundamentalism and rejection of reality are an understandable reaction found, not only within Judaism, but even more so within Islam, Christianity, and even within Hinduism. The Hareidim are in good company with Christian fundamentalists in the United States. For example, according to a Gallup Survey in 2004 almost half (45 percent) of Americans believe that the world is under 10,000 years old and that humans were created in our present form within that period. However, although understandable, the effort to shut off the stream of information is not a solid long-term approach to the challenge that faces us.

What Modern Orthodox leadership can offer in place of such a short-sighted approach is a path to the future that accepts reality, examines it through the lens of Jewish values, and helps us to strengthen our observance in the face of change. That is why we need to encourage an independent leadership at the international, national, and local levels. We need rabbis and lay leaders who are not so insecure in their Judaism that they must look to the Hareidi world for validation.

The Modern Orthodox have the numbers. According to a detailed study by Samuel C. Heilman, cited in his book Sliding to the Right, the Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy, approximately 11 percent of identifiable North

American Jews are Orthodox. Of them, only 27-32 percent could be classified as Hareidi, with half of that number being Hasidim. In other words, about 70 percent of observant Jews in North America fall into the category of Modern Orthodox.

In addition to the numbers, the Modern Orthodox also have the economic power, the educational and organizational background, and the knowledge to continue to lead the Jewish people throughout this century and into the future. We need leaders who can strengthen us for the future by understanding the present. We need leaders who recognize the potential of Modern Orthodoxy. We need leaders who embrace our strengths, and who reject the grasshopper mentality.