What Characterizes the Ideal Modern Orthodox Rabbi?

View PDF



Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Let me begin by saying how the "ideal Modern Orthodox rabbi" [IMOR] is similar to all other Orthodox rabbis. He shares the belief in the divine nature of Torah, and the binding authority of halakha. He dedicates his life to studying and teaching Torah, and to bringing people to as high a level of religious knowledge and observance as possible.

Yet the IMOR differs in outlook and approach from other types of Orthodox rabbis. He is characterized by the following qualities:

INTELLECTUAL VIBRANCY: While being steeped in traditional rabbinic learning, the IMOR is aware of contributions from modern scholarship. He is interested in the intellectual currents of the time. He reads widely and seeks to learn in a spirit of intellectual curiosity. He brings the wisdom of Torah to the challenges of our time, and the insights of modernity to the study of Torah.

COMPASSION: The IMOR lives and teaches Judaism in the spirit of compassion and kindness. He is sympathetic and tries to be non-judgmental. His goal is to try to understand others, to work with them lovingly and respectfully, and help each person achieve his/her highest level of religiosity. He sees himself as a helper and a guide, not as an authoritarian autocrat. He follows the example of Aaron the High Priest, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving his fellow human beings and drawing them closer to Torah. His method will be characterized by kindness and thoughtfulness. He does not demand or seek honor; he does not demand or seek authority. Rather, he wins the hearts of others through his genuine piety and his deep concern for their welfare.

INCLUSIVENESS: The IMOR loves all Jews and wants his community to reflect the spirit of inclusiveness. All Jews are welcome, regardless of their level of religious knowledge and observance. All Jews have a spiritual home in the Modern Orthodox synagogue. The IMOR seeks to work together in harmony with all members of the community, and to bring people to respect each other and see each other as partners in the Jewish community. The IMOR strives to solve interpersonal conflicts in his community, and seeks to have his community function with shared ideals and shared commitment.

RESPECT: The IMOR must be characterized by genuine respect for those with whom he works. He must be attuned to their spiritual needs, their personal problems, their material concerns. He must show respect to his community--men and women, young and old, rich and poor, religiously observant and not so religiously observant. He wins respect not by demanding it, but by earning it through his genuine respect of others.

COMMITMENT TO ISRAEL: The IMOR sees the State of Israel not only as a political state, but as a reflection of God's providence over the Jewish People. Whereas some Orthodox groups grant no or little religious value to the State of Israel, the IMOR places great value on the religious significance of the Jewish State. He encourages his community to support Israel in every way, to visit, to have their children study there, and even to make aliyah.

PARTICIPATION IN THE GENERAL COMMUNITY: The IMOR participates actively and enthusiastically in the work of the general Jewish community, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, in the belief that we are all part of one people and share a common destiny. All Jews need to work together in a spirit of shared destiny, even if we differ with each other on religious matters. Likewise, the IMOR sees value in working together with non-Jewish individuals and groups on projects for the betterment of society.

The Ideal Modern Orthodox Rabbi believes that the Jewish people exists by virtue of our Torah and our religious traditions, and that Jews are happiest and most fulfilled when they conduct their lives according to our Torah. His duty is to bring the word of Torah to the Jewish public in such a manner that more and more Jews will want to study and observe Torah. "Rabbinic scholars increase peace in the world". That is the goal and the challenge of the IMOR.