

Of *Shtieblach* and *Kiddush* Clubs: Modern Orthodox, Yeshivah Orthodox and the Jewish Future

By Emanuel Feldman

Readers are invited to use this forum to express personal views and address issues of concern to fellow Jews.

A recently issued study by the American Jewish Committee suggests that American Jewry is in for a stunning and almost shocking surprise. The study notes that Orthodox Judaism in America is on the ascendancy, and that in the decades to come it is destined to exercise major influence on the quality and direction of American Jewish life.

For those of us who have been fighting the battles of Orthodoxy for many decades, this news comes as a delicious surprise. But it is a surprise that has been telegraphing its arrival. Slowly and imperceptibly, the rules of religious engagement have been changing for a number of years, and one had only to keep his eyes open to read the signs as they began to emerge during the closing years of the twentieth century.

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For the fact is that a funny thing happened on the way to the millennium. Nomenclature that was once limited to the Orthodox and was dismissed as being narrow and parochial has gradually become de rigueur among non-Orthodox groups. For some time now, one has been able to find non-Orthodox *kollelim*, day schools, *beit midrash* programs, *chavruta* study, *chevrah kadishah* groups and a new stress on “rituals” and *mitzvot*. There is even renewed interest in the long-derided concept of mikvah. And major Federations, which once opposed day schools and *yeshivot* as being separatist and antiquated, have become supportive. Clearly, the unfashionable Orthodox have become quite modish.

If Rip Van Winkle were a Jew, he would awaken today in amazement, for the face of American Orthodoxy, particularly in Jewish communities outside the major metropolitan areas, has changed radically in less than two generations. Most Jews—even the Orthodox themselves—were certain

that Orthodoxy was down for the count, and that it was only a matter of time before rigor mortis would set in. Mitzvah practice was minimal, Jews were apologetic about their Jewishness, and serious Torah learning was a rarity.

In our little synagogue in Atlanta in those days—not untypical of synagogues in smaller communities—the most pious of our families observed *kashrut* at home (but not away from home) and lit candles on Friday night. Period. This, plus attendance at a late Friday night service (conducted in English), marked one as being devout. It was an axiom that in the twentieth century it was simply not possible to observe anything else. These were fine, charitable people, but practices like Shabbat, or tefillin, or mikvah, or serious Jewish study or sending one's children to Jewish day schools and *yeshivot* were not even on the screen. And ours was the Orthodox synagogue of the community. The only question was whether the Conservative or the Reform would dominate the future. Today that

little synagogue is no longer little, and is at the center of a thriving Orthodox community. What happened to it in microcosm was what happened to Orthodox Judaism around the world.

What caused this unlikely transformation—actually a resurrection—to take place? Was it due to the vitality of the Orthodox, or to the ideological inconsistencies of the non-Orthodox movements?

Two determinants were certainly primary: A. the widespread educational network of the Orthodox and B. the consistency and focus of the Orthodox message, with its emphasis on religious standards, personal discipline and Torah learning—determinants which were sparked by the influx into America of Holocaust survivors, many of whom provided a major ingredient in the solidification of Orthodox practices on these shores. And not to be overlooked was the appearance in America, in the 1930s and 1940s, of the bearded, Yiddish-speaking European *roshei yeshivah*. They—together with a small but idealistic nucleus of American Orthodox visionaries—ignored the American facts of life and, despite the Jewish establishment's fears of old-world anachronisms and ghetto-like behavior, responded to the Holocaust with the classic vision of intensive education and religious fervor. Their steady insistence on Torah study and practice—plus their cavalier disregard of politically correct Jewish public opinion—nurtured the gradual proliferation of day schools, *yeshivot* and *kollelim*, which are now being replicated by their former denigrators. Not incidentally, the Jewish pride and moral strength of these old-world personalities shored up wavering young Orthodox rabbis (of which I was one) in the American hinterlands, and convinced us that our ship was not sinking and that Torah life could move forward even in the religiously inhospitable waters of America.

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hemorrhaging intermarriage and unprecedented Jewish illiteracy within their movements.

But to all this there is a “but.” Now that old-fashioned Orthodoxy is being vindicated, one wonders how it will utilize its growing influence. Will it—as a few Orthodox groups are already doing—reach out lovingly and without condescension to attempt to redirect Jewish communities that are in thrall of today's consumerist, everything-goes culture?

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Will it work toward a reversal of the spiritual and demographic decline that undermines world Jewry? On its ability once again to defy all odds, and to successfully impart these classic Torah themes, does the future of Jewish life now depend.

Or is all this a pipe dream? Will Orthodoxy fall victim to its own success and spin apart amidst turf battles and strife between its several discrete parts? The internecine conflicts that have rocked Satmar and Lubavitch and Bobov among the *Chassidim*, Yeshivat Ponevezh among the non-*Chassidim* and some unpleasant struggles within the Modern Orthodox community, do not augur well for a benign religious influence. They hardly establish a model of uplifting and inspiring religious behavior that non-Orthodox Jews might want to emulate. On the contrary, such behavior comes close to denigrating the good name of Torah—all, of course, in the name of Torah.

Even more debilitating is the split between yeshivah-world Orthodoxy

(YO) and the Modern Orthodox (MO), with each group viewing the other as unsuited for future leadership. We have come a long way from the time when, a generation ago, Lakewood's Rabbi Aharon Kotler, the preeminent sage of yeshivah Orthodoxy, saw fit to invite Yeshiva University's Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, the preeminent sage of a more modern Orthodoxy, to be the guest speaker at a Chinuch Atzmai dinner, despite the subtle *hashkafic* differences that existed between them. In times of crisis for the Jewish people, these Torah giants realized that what united them was more significant than what divided them.

If the MO and the YO, which—though they have *hashkafic* differences—all share basic Orthodox beliefs in God, the Sinaitic Revelation and the primacy of Torah and *halachah*, are estranged from one another, how will they be able to persuade those whose core beliefs vary totally from theirs? Ultimately, if fellow Jews are shunned not because they are unbelievers (which in our day is no reason to shun them) but because of the color of their clothing, the inflection of their Hebrew or because of the *rebbe* they do or do not follow, one can hardly be sanguine about the future.

Granted, there are differences in outlook and perspective between the MO and the YO, and these should not be minimized or disregarded. MO, for example, is not fearful that engagement with the outside world will somehow dilute its Jewishness; but YO is convinced that such engagement, beyond what is unavoidable, will inevitably result in such dilution, and is thus very cautious about crossing certain boundary lines. These differences manifest themselves in surface ways like clothing and appearance, and also in more significant ways, such as attitudes toward fuller participation in American life and in questions like the role of secular education; the significance of a secular Jewish state and relationships to the Jewish, but non-Orthodox, community. Because the YO answer these questions

in one way, they tend to be more insular. They devoutly wish to remain the outsider, and willingly adopt religious stringencies that tend to safeguard their separateness. The MO, on the other hand, answer such questions in a different way, and as a result are more accommodationist, and more participatory in general American culture.

Only the naïve would expect that these and other differences can be air-brushed away. Nevertheless, it would be a serious dereliction of our duties as Jews if either group, busily tending its unique garden, diverted its eyes from the parlous facts of contemporary Jewish life. Basic Judaic values are threatened by the very society in which we enjoy freedom; both MO and YO youngsters are dropping out of our vaunted educational system because they are unable to resist the lure of being like everyone else; horrendous figures of intermarriage, assimilation and illiteracy afflict American and world Jewry. The Orthodox might be winning the battle, but we are in danger of losing the war. And all the while, MO and YO Jews, who theoretically care about the future, are busy with their own institutional agendas.

A Jewish fantasy: An emergency joint task force of the leadership of the Orthodox Union and other MO institutions, and of Agudath Israel and other YO institutions, is established. It has a single, circumscribed purpose: It will focus on ways to fight the onslaught of Jewish ignorance and intermarriage. Neither group necessarily accepts the other's worldview; perspectives on Torah and Jewish life remain unchanged. But in this critical *eit la'asot* situation—and in fulfillment of the words of the *Talmud Yerushalmi in Sotah* (7:4), and of Ramban (Devarim 27:26), that those who are able to influence others to be loyal to Torah and do not care to do so, do not find favor in the eyes of our Creator—stereotypes and intolerance are put aside, and resources and energies are combined for this single objective.

Imagine the electric impact on the

Jewish world even of such a limited cooperation.

(One makes such a tentative proposal in trepidation, in fearful anticipation of the slings and arrows of outraged partisans on both side of the divide—which trepidation is in itself the most eloquent testimony to the kind of times in which we live.)

Sometimes, in moments of despair, one wonders: Is there something within the spiritual genes of an Orthodox Jew, MO or YO, that prevents joining hands with other Orthodox Jews of a slightly different perspective?

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Consider: How many Conservative rabbinic groups are there in the United States? One. How many Reform rabbinic groups? One. How many Orthodox rabbinic groups? The fingers of one hand are barely sufficient to count them.

How many Conservative synagogue bodies are there in the US? One. How many Reform synagogue bodies? One. How many Orthodox synagogue bodies? The fingers of the other hand would barely suffice—not to mention the untold numbers of unaffiliated *shtieblach* that dot every metropolitan area and whose adherents rarely evince any concern about Jews outside their immediate enclaves.

Even if one takes into account that the proliferation of Orthodox groups might be a reflection of Orthodox intensity as opposed to the casual approach to Judaism of some of the non-Orthodox groups, one question nevertheless begs to be asked: Is there a

component within the Orthodox personality that creates this *machen-Shabbos-far-zich* (“make Shabbos for one's self”) attitude? Does this attitude come with the territory? Must the very personality that is able to swim against the tide of society inevitably contain the stubborn element that does not permit him to associate with others who are not precisely in his own image? Does an Orthodox Jew need the proverbial two shuls—one that he attends, and one that he would not set foot into? When he hears about the sorry state of general Jewish life today, is he concerned, or does he just yawn and continue cavorting within the four ells of his *shtiebel* or his *kiddush* club? One cannot be blamed for asking if there is built into MO and YO Jews an innate lack of concern for the future of the Jewish community, an unconcern that increases in lockstep with one's level of piety: the more pious, the more unconcern with the community at large; the less pious, the less unconcern?

This is not to denigrate the fact that certain elements within both MO and YO have, through their dedicated outreach programs, touched the lives of many thousands of Jews who have been brought back into the religious fold by idealistic, skilled and heroic outreach workers. But despite our best efforts, perhaps 1 percent of American Jewry has been reached. The masses of American Jews remain on the brink of extinction, while the masses of the MO and YO communities are distracted by less crucial concerns.

That the broad picture is not on our screen was driven home to me here in Jerusalem. We live in the Bayit Vegan section, which, though it is quite open and tolerant, is known as a *Chareidi*—or YO—area. Occasionally, I attend a nearby shul that is non-*Chareidi*, rather MO in American terms. A well-meaning neighbor lifted his eyebrows when he learned that I go there once in a great while. “You *daven* there?” he exclaimed in disbelief. “But they are *lo dati* [not religious]!” I was stunned. *Lo dati?* Its members are all observant; the

shul has a well-attended Daf Yomi, a very kosher balcony *mechitzah*; they have several minyanim a day; its *davening* is joyous and sincere. But in the eyes of some, they are not religious enough. Why? Because they wear knitted yarmulkes. Because they do not look askance at general education. Because their youngsters serve in the Israeli army.

This, when one thinks about it, is irrational. But few are thinking.

By the same token, there are MO Jews who would never enter a YO synagogue, and who seem more comfortable with their non-Orthodox, totally non-observant brethren than with their YO brethren, who share the same beliefs and who observe all the *mitzvot* of the Torah.

This too, when one thinks about it, is irrational. But again, few are thinking.

The Orthodox are moving to the front of the line. Whether we will rise to the challenge of genuine communal leadership is an open question. On the face of it, the prospects are grim. The hard-fought Orthodox ascendancy that we are beginning to enjoy could become as ephemeral as was the Conservative-Reform ascendancy of a generation ago. History could well view the contemporary Orthodox prestige and influence as nothing more than a chimera that evaporated in the heat of parochial turf battles, *frummer*-than-thou rivalries and myopic vision.

With the majority of world Jewry slowly sinking beneath the surface, we can no longer afford the callous luxury of watching them all go under while we sit in our comfortable lounge chairs on the upper decks. This is probably our last chance to defy all odds and to mount a united, massive rescue effort dedicated to bring aboard the masses of innocent American Jews and offer them a deeper appreciation of a life of Torah.

The Orthodox have come a long way. But we have a long way to go. We are on the ascendancy, but the climb is a perilous one and can easily turn into a slippery downward slide. Will the MO and the YO ultimately break out of their comfortable cocoons, look at each other through tolerant and un-stereotyped glasses and jointly accept the great challenge of our times? Or will they—we—continue our *frum* habit of focusing on why the other fellow is wearing a head covering different from ours, and on how long the *davening* is taking, and on how soon we can get to our waiting cholent—while the community outside goes down for the third time?

Unless we begin thinking out of the MO/YO box, a very un-funny thing might happen on the way to the next century. **JA**

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