

President's Message

The Call of the Hour

By Mandell I. Ganchrow, M.D.



One hundred years ago, on June 17, 1898, 26 Sivan 5658, a prominent Yiddish weekly called the *Jewish Gazette* described the inaugural meeting of the Orthodox Union as “the first conference of ‘Jewish Jews.’” The story reported the following: “The First Orthodox Congregational Conference has been held. It was a splendid success, the meeting of true Jews gathered for the purpose of giving light to the age-old faith and to rebuke and repudiate the reformers who have been foisting some strange devices upon us and calling that ‘Judaism.’”

At that time, Orthodoxy was waging the war for Jewish souls against the newer, “more American” streams of Reform and Conservative. Many believe today that battle is over. The “demise of Orthodoxy” is no longer fodder for screaming headlines; the diversity in Orthodoxy has taken its place. For the most part, Orthodox Jews with any yeshivah or day school background are not being swayed by Reform or Conservative theology. In addition, the growing *baal teshuvah*

movement consists largely of people with Conservative and Reform backgrounds who were searching for a more authentic and satisfying Jewish life, and found Orthodoxy. (In fact, there is a special section in this *Jewish Action*, titled “Coming Home,” with representative stories by *baalei teshuvah* that demonstrate this phenomenon. They are well worth reading.)

No longer besieged by threats to the survival of Orthodoxy, there is a new challenge facing us: how to reach the hearts and minds of sincere, committed Jews whose lifestyles and lack of Jewish knowledge are not the results of their choices, but the acceptance of the ideologies of the Reform and Conservative movements by their parents and grandparents. I am not alone in this belief.

The Summer 1998 issue of *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* is devoted to “The Sea Change in American Orthodox Judaism.” It is a symposium of wonderful opinion pieces by outstanding Orthodox scholars, and the consensus seems to be that the call of the hour is to share the richness of our heritage with those who have lost touch with *Torah miSinai* through these movements. Some excerpts follow:

Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein (Los Angeles): *The deviationists pose no threat to us. Whomever they could entice from observance fell victim in the 1950s. They have nothing to offer our better-educated laity today. We will lose nothing for finding more and more opportunities to reach out to them as neighbors and co-workers. They know so little about us save for the disinformation fed by their leaders.*

Rabbi Reuven Bulka (Ottawa): *It is...imperative for the Orthodox to reach out to the non-Orthodox movements in brotherhood and love and share with them the insights of our faith and the ele-*

ments of our system which are working for us, and demonstrate how they can work for the non-Orthodox. Finally, the main challenge to Orthodoxy, is...to realize its larger responsibility to the community.

Victor Geller (New York): *Other than feeding our already inflated self-righteousness, [combatting Conservative, Reform and secular Jews] would serve no purpose. What should Orthodoxy do? First, continue kiruv work.*

So how can Orthodox Jewry realize its larger responsibility to the community? In order to decide intelligently, we must examine the facts. First and foremost, education is the key. Like us, today’s Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist leaders have concluded that without the Torah, and without day schools and informal Jewish education, such as summer camps and youth movements, there can be no Jewish continuity. We understand, of course, that when the Reform speak about Torah, it is void of Sinai and adherence to *mitzvot* and *mesorah*. We understand further that when Conservative leaders speak about Torah, they do not accept that the Oral Torah was given by God directly to Moshe, mandating adherence to rabbinic law. (But there has been a quantitative shift in the direction of practice that should be encouraged.)

In an ideal world, all Jewish children should receive a yeshivah day school education where *halachah* and Oral Torah are taught. However, in the real world, there are other realities. A child whose education exposes him or her to Hebrew, Bible, *Tanach*, Jewish holidays, Jewish culture, the State of Israel and pride in being part of the Jewish People is surely a better candidate to marry Jewish and live a Jewish life than one who has not been taught at all. A person with *any* Jewish identi-

ty rooted in *any* Jewish education may be less likely to seek spiritual solace in Eastern religions or secular hedonism.

The recent merger of United Jewish Appeal/United Israel Appeal/Council of Jewish Federations presents the opportunity for all Jews to rethink commitment to Jewish education for all children. Successful Jewish education, whether formal or informal, requires massive funding. Only Federation and the major foundations currently possess the means for such support. It is both surprising and sad that at the recent Jewish Council for Public Affairs meeting in Washington, when the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist delegations *unanimously* decided to urge a resolution for increased Federation funding of Jewish education across the board, it was summarily rejected by Federation representatives.

Why such shabby treatment of religious education? I believe that many national Federation leaders do not fully comprehend the critical need for Jewish education and cannot bring themselves to allocate huge sums to it – perhaps because such education conflicts too strongly with their personal secular philosophies. It is hard to change the mindset that one can be a good Jew without a meaningful Jewish education. The Federation movements are prone to use terms like “renaissance” and “continuity,” but their concepts are often without religious substance. Can anyone foster continuity without history, Judaism without religion?

The time has come to acknowledge that only through all Jews working together can we successfully convince Federation to help achieve the goal of a Jewish education for every child. This cooperation is so critical to Jewish survival that we must find the venue to work in concert toward this end, despite our continued opposition to non-halachic Judaism. For the sake of future generations, unity is essential to reaching the goal of universal Jewish education – the key to continuity and *teshuvah*. 