

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

A Reply to Yoel Finkelman

In his response to my essay, Yoel Finkelman disagrees with my interpretation of the Rav's views on religion and public life, as well as with my description of the history of the United States with regard to this issue. I will briefly address each of these contested areas.

Let me begin with the Rav. Finkelman's central complaint appears to be that my essay focuses on the Rav's written instructions in "On Interfaith Relationships," rather than the Rav's other writings. Finkelman refers to "On Interfaith Relationships" as a "policy statement," but of course, it is more than policy: it is *pesak*. These guidelines, as I noted in my essay, were printed as an open letter in the *Rabbinical Council of America Record*. By expressing his views in that particular medium, the Rav, as the *posek par excellence* of the Rabbinical Council of America, set out in precise terms, to Jewish Orthodoxy and to the world, the nature, goals and limits of the RCA's interfaith dialogue with the Catholic Church. It is surprising, then, that Finkelman in effect questions whether "On Interfaith Relations" is the best source for defining the Rav's position. He is essentially asking why, in seeking practical instruction as to how American Orthodoxy should engage the Christian community, I look first and foremost to the Rav's practical instruction as to how American Orthodoxy should engage the Christian community.

Further, the Rav's stated opinion in "On Interfaith Relationships" is not contradicted by the other writings of the Rav that Finkelman cites in his reply. Finkelman's central citations are taken from *The Lonely Man of Faith*, which for him is the "essay by the Rav containing the most extensive reflections on the relationship between religion and public

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life.” As is well known, *The Lonely Man of Faith* describes two human personae, Adam the first and Adam the second. In Finkelman’s words, “pragmatic concerns of security, wealth, and collective needs” is “part of the majestic community of Adam the first,” whereas “Adam the second represents a private and highly personal religious experience.” Finkelman then argues that the Rav “emphasizes the mutual incompatibility of the two figures.” For the Rav, he asserts, “the two figures can never be merged.” It is by means of his reading of *The Lonely Man of Faith* that Finkelman seeks to challenge my view that, for the Rav, religion has an important role to play in the public square.

Yet, as Finkelman himself admits, the Rav then goes on to state in *The Lonely Man of Faith* that for Judaism, no aspect of life remains fundamentally secular, and that it is through the Halakhah that the realm of religion and the realm of public affairs are synthesized. Indeed, the Rav writes that “the Halakhah believes that there is only one world—not divisible into secular and hallowed sectors” (p. 84). This, of course, is precisely the sentiment that the Rav expressed in “On Interfaith Relationships,” wherein the Rav asserted that for Jews, all of “our thoughts, feelings, perceptions and terminology bear the imprint of a religious world outlook.” This is a theme found throughout the Rav’s writings: that through the Halakhah, a synthesis, or balance, can be achieved between secular and sacred, physical and spiritual, public and private.

Finkelman therefore finds himself in an interpretive pickle; by his own admission, an explicit later part of *The Lonely Man of Faith* appears to undo the entire argument that Finkelman is making from *The Lonely Man of Faith*. Finkelman attempts to meet this problem by making the suggestion that the Rav felt conflicted about it. “It seems likely to me,” Finkelman writes, “that this contradiction reflects the Rav’s discomfort with the implications of his presentation of private religion as distinct from, and unrelated to, public society.” Thus Finkelman appears to insist that if only the Rav had had the true courage of his philosophical convictions, he would not have suggested the unification of the Adams. I, however, prefer to take the Rav at his word: that through the Halakhah, the unification of Adam the first and Adam the second is indeed achievable. To deny that the Rav endorsed the synthesis of Adam the first and Adam the second is to claim to understand the Rav better than the Rav understood himself.

Yet another mistake that Finkelman makes is misreading the point I make about secularists and the Rav. First, Finkelman claims that, according to my essay, the Rav must maintain that “cooperation with secularists

is not possible.” However, I did not suggest that *no* cooperation with secularists is possible; instead I pointed out that, for the Rav, religious Jews and Christians share a notion of human nature that they do not share with secularists. Moreover, the reason that I ascribe this opinion to the Rav is that *the Rav says this explicitly*, noting in “On Interfaith Relationships” that Jews and Christians share a notion of human dignity deriving from a belief in man’s being created “in God’s likeness,” a belief that is “quite often incomprehensible to the secularist.” Finkelman seems to disagree with this premise, and with its public policy implications—but his problem is not, ultimately, with me, but with the Rav.

Having addressed at least part of what it is problematic about Finkelman’s reading of the Rav, let me now briefly address his incorrect assertions about America. Finkelman, noting that America has evolved over time, challenges my insistence that we have an obligation to preserve “the way that America has always seen itself.” My essay asks several simple historical questions: Has America, *throughout its expansion and evolution*, always seen itself as a democratic republic that is “under God”? Has America reflected that belief in invoking the Divine in civic society, and thought that invocation important to the preservation of America’s political character? The answer is undeniably yes. Finkelman suggests that my answer to these questions is founded solely upon quotations from the Founding Fathers. Here, too, Finkelman has missed a key point, as I devote the final section of my essay to arguing at some length that “the best illustration that America is not a ‘secular democracy’” is the fact that from America’s founding until today God is constantly invoked in the public square, and that such invocation is meant to be religious in nature. In other words, the religious nature of American society is to be deduced not only from numerous quotations from the Founding Fathers, but also from rituals and observances that have been an essential part of American civil and social fabric for the past two hundred years.

This brings me to my final point about America’s relationship with religion. It appears to me that, in his assertions about current American affairs, Finkelman is simply misinformed. For example, Finkelman asserts that the subjects of “homosexual marriage, abortion and euthanasia” are topics “borrowed from the rhetoric of American evangelical Christianity.” But abortion in particular, and the sanctity of human life in general, was an issue of concern for the American Catholic Church for some time before ever becoming so for the evangelical community, and continues to be so. As the prominent evangelical Timothy George has noted, “Two years before *Roe v. Wade*, the Southern Baptist Convention called for the

liberalizing and legalizing of abortion,” adding that “Southern Baptists have belatedly joined with many other persons of faith, especially Catholics,” to protest the “disregard for the sanctity of human life.”¹ Similarly, as a brief look at the news reveals, same-sex marriage has exercised not only evangelicals but also traditionally religious Americans of diverse backgrounds—Catholic, Protestant, Mormon and Jewish alike. Notwithstanding Finkelman’s mischaracterization, nothing about these issues is uniquely “evangelical.” In another incorrect statement relating to the evangelical community, Finkelman asserts that the view of America as “particularistically Protestant, often to the exclusion of Jews, Catholics and Native Americans” is “being heard loud and clear today from circles of the evangelical right.” Finkelman offers no support for this bald and untrue statement.

Finkelman then concludes his essay by accusing me of drafting the Rav in order to advance my “neo-conservative stance.” I would be delighted to be considered a neoconservative, as I greatly admire neo-conservatives, but it is not clear in what way the term “neoconservative” applies to me or to the “stance” reflected in my essay. The term, meaning “new conservative,” often refers to prominent public intellectuals once affiliated with liberalism who later embraced conservatism, such as Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz. Recently the term has been used to refer to a hawkish approach to foreign policy. However, the issues about which I wrote are of concern to *all* conservatives—conservative evangelicals, conservative Catholics, conservative Mormons— and to religious Americans who may not describe themselves as conservatives. By misusing the term in discussing my own political views, Finkelman implies that the views advanced in my piece are held by a small number of people, when in fact they are held by a broad coalition of traditionally religious Americans.

It is essential that positions advanced in the debate about religion and the public square be firmly grounded in an accurate description of American public affairs. It is also essential that in determining the Rav’s position we treat him as a *gadol be-Yisrael* whose explicit instructions and *piskei halakhah* should be taken as representing his considered position. These requirements, alas, are not met in Yoel Finkelman’s essay.

Notes

1. “Evangelicals and Others,” *First Things* #160 (February 2006): 22.