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The Future of Modern Orthodoxy

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This paper does not aim to conduct a wholesale analysis and *heshbon hanefesh* of Modern Orthodox ideology and its adherents; others, including Rabbi Norman Lamm and Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, have done this in foundational treatments of Modern Orthodoxy.¹ Nor is it a sociological study of Modern Orthodoxy; that is left to experts in the field like Dr. Chaim I. Waxman and others.² My goals, rather, are to impart some personal perspectives and insights about recent trends and developments in the Modern Orthodox community, to share some concerns about the current state of the community, and to propose some directions for re-imagining its future.

Over the last several years, the public discourse of Modern Orthodoxy has become increasingly strident in tone and narrow in focus. Hot-button divisive issues have dominated communal conversation and continue to threaten to widen communal fissures. These issues include women's participation in ritual and leadership

roles, conversion standards, interfaith dialogue, biblical criticism, and acceptance of homosexuals.

In the first few months of 2010 alone, the Modern Orthodox community witnessed several rounds of recriminations. First, it was a new rabbinic organization established, in part, to promote decentralized conversion standards. Then it was a public forum on homosexuality in the Orthodox community. And the third controversy centered on the decision by two rabbis to bestow the title of *rabbah*, a feminized version of “rabbi,” on a woman previously ordained with the title of *maharat*. In recent months, some of the same battle-lines have been redrawn on the Statement of Principles advocating a welcoming posture toward homosexual Jews and on the suggestion to change the liturgy of the morning blessings (from *she-lo asa’ni ishah* to *she-asa’ni Yisrael*).

Each of these episodes sparked public pronouncements followed by denouncements that generated name-calling and more rhetoric: *hillul Hashem* (desecration of God’s name). Conservative. Fundamentalist. Haredi. Beyond the pale. Off the reservation.

Significant sociological shifts within the American Jewish community have contributed to the current climate of hyperbolic debate. On one end of the spectrum, the gulf that existed between certain segments of the Haredi world and some elements of the Modern Orthodox world has narrowed due to changes in both communities.³ More Orthodox Jews than ever subscribe to many central tenets of Modern Orthodoxy, even if they may not self-identify as such. Today, nearly all Orthodox Jews identify with, and care about, the well-being of Israel (or, in their parlance, *Erez Yisroel*) and its citizens. Likewise, Orthodox Jewish girls across the spectrum are better educated and encouraged to pursue various careers. Moreover, the utilitarian worth of a college education and, even more significantly, the value of critical thinking have made inroads in the Haredi world in America.⁴ At the same time, the continued influence of the gap year(s) in Israel and other, related phenomena have created a more submissive and Haredi-like mentality among some young people who grew up in Modern Orthodox homes and schools.⁵

At the other end of the spectrum, Orthodox day schools have been more successful than Conservative and Reform schools in promoting Jewish identity. In this realm, Modern Orthodoxy has won the most important battle—the battle of Jewish continuity—against the more progressive denominations.⁶ In recent years, Torah study and *mitzvot* have been increasingly championed by other denominations. Perhaps more importantly, Orthodoxy, especially the modern variety, is no longer a denominational label to be avoided. On the contrary, Orthodoxy is a desirable term associated with authenticity and success. The ascendancy of Orthodoxy, along with the Bar-Ilan-driven democratization of halakhic research, has spawned a genre of academic articles and monographs that has redefined or crossed the line of Orthodox practice and theology for some, and blurred the lines for many others.⁷

What has emerged is a community expanding in multiple, and sometimes opposing, directions. While the expansion and diversity hold the potential for deepening the community's impact, other factors imperil the future of the Modern Orthodox community.

This larger threat can be described in sociological terms, with psychological insights and via halakhic formulae. Sociologically, the phenomenon known as the Big Sort explains how America has become a country of increasing religious and cultural division, economic separation, and political polarization.⁸ The eponymous book portrays, anecdotally and statistically, how Americans have sorted themselves geographically into like-minded communities over the last three decades. In one particularly striking anecdote, the authors tell the story of a real estate developer who successfully designed two totally different ideological communities on different sides of a thoroughfare.

In the last decade, sorting has gone beyond geographical neighborhoods; it has extended to the political best-sellers we read, the cable news networks we watch, and the Internet news and opinion sites we bookmark, all of which reinforce and radicalize our own views while demonizing other viewpoints. Political debates have transformed into culture wars. Local city and county governments are becoming more and more radical in their politics. Nationally, Congress has lost most of its moderate members and is mired in seemingly intractable conflict.

This is the great danger of the Big Sort; people living in homogeneous bubbles tend to grow both more certain and more extreme in their beliefs. Without a cross-pollination of ideas, we stagnate ideologically, politically, and culturally. Different viewpoints are perceived solely through an *us-versus-them* lens.

This sorting is playing out within the Modern Orthodox community as well; having served as a rabbi in Manhattan, Woodmere, and Riverdale, I can attest that the geographical and ideological sorting and subsorting is astounding. I understand well the impulse that Orthodox Jews may feel to be surrounded by people whose homes are like theirs in terms of religious observance and values. But there is a price to pay for protecting ourselves and our children; all too often, our communities, our shuls, our friends, our rabbis all reinforce our beliefs and radicalize our views.

The ratcheted-up rhetoric is due to psychological factors as well. In 1917, Freud coined the term “narcissism of small differences.” Referring to earlier work by the British anthropologist Ernest Crawley, Freud said that we reserve our most virulent emotions—aggression, hatred, envy—toward those who resemble us the most. We feel threatened not by the Other with whom we have little in common, but by the “nearly-we” who most reflect ourselves. As a result, our most negative feelings are directed at people who most resemble us, while we take pride in and underscore the small differences that distinguish us from them.⁹

In halakhic parlance, this phenomenon is known as *minah mahriv bah*, *de-lav minah lo mahriv bah*, “its category destroys; a different category does not destroy.”¹⁰ According to the first *mishnah* in *Zevahim*, a sin-offering is disqualified when it is slaughtered with the intent that it is a different (sin- or other type) offering. Imprecise intent, according to the *mishnah*, destroys the validity of the sin-offering. However, the Talmud adds, if one slaughtered a sin-offering with the intent that it serve as unconsecrated meat (*hullin*), the sacrifice remains kosher. According to the principle of *minah mahriv*, only the competing intent of one sacrifice to another registers as a true threat and destructive force in the world of sacrifices.

So, too, within the world of Modern Orthodoxy, the people and views closest to our own are often perceived as the most pernicious threat, requiring swift denunciation and demonizing. If you read James Kugel, you are a heretic; if you protest his appearance at Yeshiva University, you are a backward traditionalist. If you favor women religious leaders, you are Reform; if you reject female Orthodox rabbis, you are a misogynist.

Perhaps it is time, then, for us to state the inevitable or to admit that which already has occurred. There is no longer a cohesive, singular, Modern Orthodoxy. Separate rabbinical schools and separate rabbinic organizations reflect the reality of a community institutionally and ideologically divided. Maybe we would all be better off if we acknowledged and supported an official split into different camps.

Those who view these issues in a binary fashion—modernity vs. *mesorah*, authority vs. autonomy, progress vs. tradition—would feel validated by such a split. Ideologues armed with the “truth” of tradition and rabbinic authority would declare triumphantly that the assault on Orthodoxy was now over, with the supporters of innovation officially relegated to Conservative Judaism status. Their ideological counterparts also would finally have conclusive proof that the shift to the right and the delegitimizing of the left had created the need for new institutions that uphold the “true” values of Modern Orthodoxy as opposed to Haredi-lite monolithic positions.

However, the big losers in the schism sweepstakes are, and would be, all of the adherents and potential adherents of Modern Orthodoxy and even the broader Jewish community. The many challenges and opportunities confronting our rich and diverse community, and the real people who inhabit it, are being ignored or overlooked due to the continuous internecine battles. With so much time and energy focused on the latest controversy, all of the challenges and issues that this Orthodox Forum has explored—and many others challenges—are given short shrift. An attempt at an official split would only exacerbate the problem, with each side claiming to be the “true” Modern Orthodoxy while projecting itself as the victim of attacks and blaming the other side for the schism.

Moreover, an attempt at an official split would not produce the sociological outcome of two totally separate camps, for two reasons. First, the belief that the Modern Orthodox establishment can preserve the traditional soul of Modern Orthodoxy by declaring innovators to be beyond the pale is mistaken. This narrow view fails to recognize that despite denouncements, the founders of partnership *minyanim* and the ordainers of female rabbis still view themselves as within the fold and will never have a Mordechai Kaplanesque “I’m not Orthodox” eureka moment. Second, many Modern Orthodox Jews defy neat labels. These Jews, a majority perhaps, would not feel at home with either subdenomination or its leaders. Indeed, in interacting with my congregants and students I sense that they are becoming increasingly tired of and disappointed in the extreme rhetoric of Modern Orthodox discourse.

But there is an additional trend which makes the focus on ideological divides particularly self-defeating. For many people raised Modern Orthodox, and for some who have drifted toward Modern Orthodox values, any outsider-imposed label is out of touch with the reality of their personal religiosity. The postmodernist emphasis on religious meaning for the individual has undermined old religious hierarchies and weakened many institutional power structures.¹¹ Even someone like me, who was raised in a home proud of institutional Modern Orthodoxy, and who developed religiously and intellectually in schools affiliated with the flagship, often wonders how these institutions can remain relevant and enhance their influence in this deinstitutionalized moment.

Going forward, the Modern Orthodox establishment will only inspire more commitment and unity within its ranks by re-imagining its leadership role. If it does not, these institutions will be irrelevant at best and destructive forces at worst.

The first step is to press the reset button on communal discourse. Rather than expending our time and energy on divisive and futile debates about who is Orthodox, our institutions and leaders must focus on the substance and complexity of each issue. This would be, in a certain sense, a conscious rededication of ourselves to the age-old ideals of Modern Orthodox centrism. As Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein

once wrote, “It is of centrism’s very essence to shy away from simplistic and one-sided approaches, of its very fabric to strive to encompass and encounter reality in its complexity and, with that encounter, to seek the unity which transcends the diversity.”¹²

We will only address matters as a mature community and break the cycle of labeling and attacks when we refuse to oversimplify complex issues. Simply stating that something is not technically a violation of a specific transgression and therefore should be embraced by all true Modern Orthodox Jews, or, alternatively, maintaining that any change in *mesorah* is categorically forbidden and the innovators are obviously not Orthodox, ignores the complexity of each issue and reduces discussion to *ad hominem* attacks.

As a direct function of fostering a more nuanced and thoughtful approach to complex issues, we would then more easily locate the “unity that transcends diversity” and even acknowledges diversity. If the conversation recognizes the multiple values at play, the models proposed in a subsequent dialogue will take into account the variegated and complex social and halakhic realities of our individual and collective communities.

To illustrate, let us turn to the discussion of female rabbis and women’s leadership. The substantive issues of this complex topic have been completely drowned out amid the cacophony of controversy and calls for condemnation. The intersection of modern egalitarian ethos, halakhic considerations, and meta-halakhic values such as *mesorah* should be examined thoroughly and thoughtfully in a joint conversation among halakhic decisors, communal rabbis, and lay leaders (especially female leaders). A meaningful conversation on this complex issue would then, I imagine, yield consensus for halakhically and communally accepted positions for female scholars to serve as spiritual, pastoral, and educational resources in some of our communities. In the past few years, several Modern Orthodox rabbis and their communities have hired qualified women to serve in these substantive capacities, recognizing what these individuals have to offer. A consensus already exists among these rabbis and their communities that employing women in these roles is beneficial and halakhically desirable, even as each rabbi and community has chosen a different

job description and title in an effort to best navigate the issues raised earlier. We bemoan the dearth of educators and leaders in Modern Orthodoxy; encouraging our best and brightest men and women to enter *Avodat ha-Kodesh* and assuring them that they will have our support and our respect will increase the ranks of qualified leaders.

That is the kind of conversation our community should be having. Ultimately, institutional Modern Orthodoxy will better serve the community by taking the lead in convening and promoting substantive and sophisticated conversations about complex issues, rather than allowing the extreme voices to dominate the communal discourse and agenda, thereby diverting attention from the areas of consensus.

The return to centrist ideals requires an attitudinal transformation so that it does not result in an even more dogmatic Modern Orthodoxy. Institutional Modern Orthodoxy and its leaders need to take up the project of unsorting the community. I am aware that this all may sound Pollyannaish. I do not think that dialogue alone will solve the problems, but the alternative has been unproductive and often destructive. In order to end the current Modern Orthodox culture wars, we have to reject the fallacy that conversation alone legitimizes the alternative viewpoint. If leaders will not even sit down and talk with their ideological opponents, they have abdicated the role of true communal leadership.

As a lifelong centrist, I sometimes find it necessary to remind myself of an observation by the comedian George Carlin about the two categories of drivers: the maniacs who drive faster than he does, and the idiots who drive slower.¹³ Whether leader or layman, we cannot adopt the opinion that everyone an iota to the left is a heretic and everyone a smidge to the right is a fundamentalist. To play a leading, positive role in the lives of Modern Orthodox Jews, we need to recognize that there are many others traveling on the same road, in the same direction. To achieve this mentality, the notion of *arvut* (collective responsibility) must loom large.

Kol Yisrael arevin zeh ba-zeh (“All Jews are guarantors for one another”)¹⁴ finds halakhic manifestation in the principle of *yatza motzi*, the rule that one can recite certain liturgical commandments

on behalf of another even though one has already performed the particular mitzvah.¹⁵ Some argue that the mechanism of *arvut* teaches us something radical about one's own personal mitzvah fulfillment.¹⁶ Namely, even after one has performed and seemingly fulfilled a mitzvah, the principle of *arvut* redefines one's own personal fulfillment of the mitzvah and suggests that since we are all guarantors for one another, one's mitzvah is incomplete so long as even one fellow Jew's mitzvah has not been fulfilled. One may recite *Kiddush* on another's behalf because, in halakhic reality, it is being recited on one's own behalf. One remains, to a certain extent, personally obligated in the mitzvah until all Jews have fulfilled that mitzvah. This notion of brotherhood, so visceral and so interconnected, is quite ambitious: I assist in your mitzvah because it is really my mitzvah; I feel your pain because it is my pain. It is the kind of *arvut* that is evident in the most tight-knit of communities. It is the feeling of nationhood that is palpable during times of great national tragedy and overwhelming national joy.

But there is an alternative understanding of *arvut* when it comes to mitzvah fulfillment for another.¹⁷ This perspective may be less radical in a sense, though it is no less ambitious. According to this view, my personal mitzvah remains intact; it has been completely fulfilled and is not affected whatsoever by someone else's incomplete obligation. And yet, the idea of *arvut* allows me to traverse the gap between my fulfillment and another Jew's obligation in order to perform a mitzvah on another's behalf. That we are all responsible for one another does not mean that someone else's lack of fulfillment affects the status of my mitzvah. Rather, because we are all responsible for one another, we may assist one another even when we have already fully discharged our own personal obligation.

This second approach to *arvut* must be our guide as Modern Orthodoxy moves forward. The diversity of Modern Orthodoxy can be a great strength if we orient ourselves to this perspective. We do not have to, nor should we, all agree on every issue. My personal views can remain intact just as my mitzvah remains intact, but we are obligated to respect others' viewpoints, and should not hastily dismiss another's views as fanatical or heretical. Rather, we must relate to other people's views with an eye on traversing the gap between us, even if, after

thoughtful conversation, we ultimately maintain our own positions.

We have thus far outlined how recognition of the complexity of issues will help everyone engage in more meaningful dialogue, while an appreciation of and reorientation to *arvut* in all its dimensions will promote diversified unity. However, there is one final ingredient necessary to effectively reach, engage, and influence those on the margins of Modern Orthodoxy. Our institutions can be relevant and inspiring forces, even in our de-institutionalized moment, if our leaders relate to the vast array of declared and undeclared adherents of Modern Orthodoxy with a dual mission.

The ethicist and theologian William F. May has noted that love has two sides, accepting love and transforming love.¹⁸ He describes them in the context of parent-child relationships.

Parenting entails a double passion and loyalty. . . . On the one hand, parents need to accept the child as he is. Parenting requires accepting love. On the other hand, parenting requires transforming love. If they merely accept the child as she is, they neglect the important business of her full growth and flourishing. . . . Attachment becomes too quietistic if it slackens into mere acceptance of the child as he is. Love must will the well-being and not merely the being of the other. But attachment lapses into a Gnostic revulsion against the world, if, in the name of well-being, it recoils from the child as it is.

Much as in our human relationships, Modern Orthodox leaders must be committed to both the being and the well-being of all of their constituents. Some leaders, much like some parents in a permissive society, unwittingly neglect their obligation to transform and inspire. Due to an overriding impulse to accept people as they are, leaders may shortchange their responsibility to cultivate the spiritual growth of their members by challenging them to strive for greater commitment to religious norms and greater sensitivity to ethical imperatives.

More common, however, are religious leaders who view acting as a vehicle of transformation as their sole role. They demand religious

compliance, along with accomplishments and results that conform to their own aspirations and standards. Leaders often seize upon the community and individuals as products to be perfected, and when expectations are not met, rejection follows. As May notes: “We find it difficult to maintain equilibrium between the two sides of love. Accepting love, without transforming love, slides into indulgence and finally neglect. Transforming love without accepting love badgers and ultimately rejects.” Our leaders need to appreciate and accept the positive aspects of our diversity and all those who feel a connection to the community. This “openness to the unbidden,” as May describes it, enlarges our own humanity and would open up new vistas for religious and moral development.¹⁹

And yet, we must continue to promote the well-being of an “ideal” Modern Orthodoxy. We must lead by encouraging more people to appreciate the value of a life filled with all of the complexity and challenges that a commitment to Orthodoxy and modernity entails. Promoting and aspiring to a certain communal ideal does not necessitate, and should not entail, condemning all those who may fail to live up to that lofty standard.

To borrow May’s terminology, we must embrace all and demonstrate, through actions and words, that we accept them. At the same time, we must seek to transform them. This dissonance, accepting while still transforming, has its roots in the words of the Sages (*Avot* 1:12): “Hillel said: Be like a student of Aaron; love peace and pursue peace, love mankind and bring them close to Torah.”

Though the first half of the statement is more well known (and is germane to the central argument of this paper), the second half contains a dual charge, much like the model of accepting and transforming love developed by May. Hillel did not say that we should love others only on condition that they follow the Torah, and certainly he did not suggest that we love them to manipulate them into observance. Nor did Hillel state that one should love others and leave it at that. Rather, we have a dual mandate. Hillel charged that we must accept others with unconditional love, and we must also strive to bring them closer to Torah, to transform them. It is precisely the unconditional love of acceptance that fosters the ability to draw others closer to Torah. If our

leaders dedicate themselves to both types of love, they will be most successful in promoting our ideals.

Long ago, W. B. Yeats had an apocalyptic vision that captures the current climate of Modern Orthodoxy in America:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.²⁰

Our challenge, to paraphrase the great American historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., is to make sure that the vital center holds and grows,²¹ as the best hope for our future lies in the widening and deepening of the center of Modern Orthodoxy. We cannot afford to continue letting loose the blood-dimmed tide. Our best, not just our most extreme, must display a sense of conviction with passionate intensity.

NOTES

1. R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "The Future of Centrist Orthodoxy," in *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Living* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2004), pp. 309–330; R. Norman Lamm, "Some Comments on Centrist Orthodoxy," *Tradition* 22, no. 3. For an important critique of these perspectives articulating the need for a new framework and language for the culture of Modern Orthodoxy, see, R. Alan Brill, "Judaism in Culture: Beyond the Bifurcation of Torah and Mada," *Edah Journal* 4, no. 1 (http://www.edah.org/backend/JournalArticle/4_1_brill.pdf). See also the response of R. Yitzchak Blau "Contemporary Fads and Torah u-Mada: A Response to Alan Brill," *Edah Journal* 4, no. 2 (http://www.edah.org/backend/JournalArticle/4_2_Blau.pdf). Also see R. Blau's paper in this volume, which updates the earlier treatments of Rabbis Lamm and Lichtenstein.
2. See Chaim Waxman, "Dilemmas of Modern Orthodoxy: Sociological and Philosophical," *Judaism* (Winter 1993) and, more recently, Yehuda Turetsky and Chaim I. Waxman, "Sliding to the Left? Contemporary American Modern Orthodoxy," *Modern Judaism* (2011). See also R. Yehuda Sarna's brilliant usage of Google trends in his contribution to this volume.

3. The radicalization of some segments of the Haredi world has also alienated some of the more moderate members of that community.
4. For example, an honoree at a recent Mir Yeshiva Dinner is a student of Prof. David Weiss Halivni. Other examples of this trend include the growth of the Jewish community in Waterbury, CT, the *Hakirah* journal published out of Flatbush, and a *Mishpocha* magazine cover story featuring a Yeshiva University *rosh yeshivah*.
5. A recent study on this subject by Dr. David Pelcovitz and Steven Eisenberg, "The Year in Israel Experience" (January 2010), explores how pervasive this phenomenon really is (<http://www.yuschoolpartnership.org/attachments/article/1442/The%20Year%20in%20Israel%20Experience.pdf>). Nevertheless, the gap year is still a major influence on many who grew up Modern Orthodox. A more subtle manifestation of the increasing haredization of Modern Orthodoxy is the attempt to project certain YU *roshei yeshivah* as a Modern Orthodox *moetzes* through vehicles like the website www.Torahweb.org.
6. See the findings of the most recent census on Jewish day schools commissioned by the Avi Chai Foundation and conducted by Marvin Schick; <http://avichai.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Census-of-JDS-in-the-US-2008-09-Final.pdf>
7. Examples include the article on partnership *minyanim* by Mendel Shapiro, "Qeri'at ha-Torah by Women: A Halakhic Analysis," *Edah Journal* 1, no. 2 (http://www.edah.org/backend/journalarticle/1_2_shapiro.pdf) and the works of Marc B. Shapiro and Mark Kellner on the principles of faith.
8. Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).
9. See Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality* (Penguin Freud Library, vol. 7, 1991), p. 272.
10. See *Bavli Zevaḥim* 3a.
11. The best research on the subject is the Pew Center's Study on millennials available at <http://pewresearch.org/millennials/>
12. See R. Lichtenstein, "Future of Centrist Orthodoxy," p. 323.
13. See, for example, the quotation at http://www.digitaldreamdoor.com/pages/quotes/george_carlin.html
14. The different formulations of this principle may yield different conceptual connotations. The original source for this rabbinic adage is found in *Sifra Behukkotai* 2:5. A full treatment of the topic is beyond the scope of this paper.
15. See *Bavli Rosh Hashanah* 29a.
16. Ritva, *Hilkhot Berakhot* 5:1 and commentary to *Rosh Hashanah* 29a.
17. See Hazon Ish, *Orah Hayyim* 19:1.
18. See the reports of the Presidential Council on Bioethics, <http://bioethics.georgetown.edu/pcbe/background/sandelpaper.html>
19. I believe that this is the most ambitious explanation of the talmudic adage *U-Mitalmedai yoter m'kulam* (*Bavli Ta'anit* 7a), that one learns from one's students more than one learns from teachers and colleagues. This does not just mean that students help refine a teacher's argument with questions that force

the teacher to reformulate and clarify more precisely. More broadly, students can facilitate new approaches to a topic in particular and to learning methodology in general. But perhaps most broadly and importantly, the exposure to diverse students and their unique personalities, values, and life experiences also helps the teacher to expand his religious and moral persona.

20. Yeats, "The Second Coming," at <http://www.potw.org/archive/potw351.html>
21. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949).