

The End of the Middle of
the Road: Re-envisioning
Modern Orthodoxy for the
Twenty-first Century

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The close of the millennium's first decade gives us cause to celebrate several victories, won gradually, for the Modern Orthodox community.¹ On the non-Orthodox front, we have demonstrated the invaluable role day schools play in Jewish continuity and the centrality of classical texts and literacy in Jewish expression. On the yeshivish front, we have advanced the cases for a degree of higher education, support for the State of Israel, and an increased role for women in Jewish leadership. And yet, the changing landscape of American religion gives me cause to doubt whether the tantalizing sense of triumphalism is truly fit for indulgence.²

For decades, our centrist religious community has gambled with becoming an “excluded middle”: neither too insular nor too assimilated, neither too obscurantist nor too unbelieving, neither too rigid nor too progressive. We have aimed at maintaining a balance just right, not “too” much of anything. Given the growth of our schools, camps, youth groups, and neighborhoods, we can safely say that the middle of the road has led us to accomplishments beyond our predecessors’ most distant horizons.³ But our challenges differ from those past, and if we do not reorient ourselves, we risk approaching the end of the middle of the road, a moment when we will become, to borrow Arthur Schlesinger’s distinction, a dead—not a vital—center.⁴

A year ago, on behalf of the Orthodox Forum, I assembled a focus group of fifteen peers—rabbis, educators, and academicians—to discuss the challenges they saw themselves inheriting as young leaders in our community. Three themes emerged: (1) the paucity of inspiring theological discourse emerging from our brain centers, (2) the perceived apathetic disposition of the rank and file in our community, and (3) the lack of clarity as to what it means to be Modern Orthodox. This last point gave rise to an emotional ambivalence regarding labels as a whole and this one in specific: what distinguishes Modern Orthodoxy from other groups—besides our own compromises—now that other groups have acceded to our original claims?

This essay attempts to re-envision Modern Orthodoxy in light of the profound changes in American religion over the past generation. Creed no longer unifies or homogenizes people as it once did, and individuals within our community find themselves more and less attached in complex ways to multiple identities. Our institutions should relinquish their imagined control over the term “Modern Orthodox,” constantly rendering judgment over which interpretation is or is not loyal. This ultra-orthodoxization of Modern Orthodoxy limits the real possibilities—and now responsibilities—of a paradox-based Judaism to speak to the widest spectrum of Jews today. Instead, we need to recognize the wide web of associations within which our institutions are embedded, develop the network, and harness its diversity to generate bolder and more powerful ideas. The notion of a

Modern Orthodoxy ought to be a point of fascination to the American Jewish public, not simply an aggregate of schools and synagogues.

For the purposes of this essay, I refer to the corporate, institutional Modern Orthodoxy in upper case, whereas the *dynamic set of ideas* characterized as modern orthodox will appear in the lower case. It is the sincere, self-conscious embrace of the paradoxical challenges—not the answers or communal structures—that needs to grow at the core of a twenty-first-century vision of Judaism.

Attempts at invigorating Modern Orthodox day schools or synagogues through doctrinaire claims to centrism will withstand neither the passion of fundamentalism nor the critique of liberalism. Learning to live in the paradox, tolerate opposites, and change one's mind can provide such defenses, though they may also erode communal barriers—a danger of which I am aware. But rather than belonging to a Modern Orthodoxy that comprises but a sliver of a portion of American Jews and a shadow of other shades of gray, I prefer to engage in the questions a modern orthodoxy brings to bear on the varieties of contemporary Jewish expression.

Modern Orthodoxy has lost its meaning, in part, because institutional lines have become confused with theological or philosophical ones. How profound is the difference between the modern orthodoxy of a lawyer living in Passaic and one living in Teaneck? A doctor who attends an Orthodox Union shul versus one who davens *nusah ha-Ari*? The flavor might be different, but the essential religious positioning is the same. It is our own ideological navel-gazing that has contributed to the contrasting shades of gray, rather than celebrating slight nuances. The appeal of a modern orthodoxy has increased to the point where *hasidim* and secular Jews alike will engage in some of it, and while it may be dangerous to our institutions to concede that point, it is a peril to our ideas not to.

To assess the possibilities and responsibilities of modern orthodoxy, we need to change the way we conceive of visioning. If the point of departure is a narrow canon, our scope will not extend much wider. We must be able to breathe before we think. We should not re-envision modern orthodoxy from within, and it is wrong to ask what

is the creed of modern orthodoxy. Neither should we ask what are the goals of a modern orthodox school. This essay, instead, will take a fresh look at modern orthodoxy from the outside in. Where do we stand in our network? What are the strengths and weaknesses of our label? We must first see how our broader culture perceives modern orthodoxy and then how we can build on it given our particular tradition. To accomplish these goals, I have drawn from contemporary sociologists, philosophers, news media, and popular culture. I began with the most popular source of information nowadays: Google.com.

One of Google's many obliging features is GoogleTrends, which displays the number of searches performed for keywords, as well as which terms are "hot," that is, most googled this week. Trends can also disclose the volume of keywords on news websites. I looked to see when in the past decade did "Modern Orthodox" hit the news hard. I noticed three identifiable peaks since 2000: August 2000, December 2004, and August 2007.⁵ What follows is my analysis of the major events which prompted public consciousness of modern orthodoxy and what we ought to learn from them.

AUGUST 2000: SEN. JOSEPH LIEBERMAN WINS VICE-PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATION

The highest peak on the GoogleTrends graph reflects the nomination of Sen. Joseph Lieberman for vice president of the United States. The internal satisfaction and pride of the Modern Orthodox community was shared in the pages of the mainstream media. Here is a piece from *New York* magazine:

"This is a great thing for the modern Orthodox community," says Dr. Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University. "Because after all the bad press that Orthodoxy has gotten here and elsewhere, we finally have a rational, practical, dignified, and honorable man who represents what we stand for." Indeed, it is hard to overestimate the joy in the Orthodox community. "I'm extremely excited about this," says Rabbi Marc Schneier

... "Senator Lieberman's Orthodoxy is my Orthodoxy. It's based on inclusiveness and tolerance."⁶

Lieberman's nomination signified that Modern Orthodoxy had arrived in America, that though we do not constitute the majority, we can nevertheless be part of it.⁷

Perhaps more significant than the Modern Orthodox response was the way the general American public received Lieberman's nomination. The connection between President Clinton's extramarital affair while in office and Lieberman's nomination is unmistakable; rather than Lieberman's Jewish observance representing backwardness, anachronism, or shame, it symbolized moral rectitude and integrity. An op-ed in the *New York Times* claimed:

The far more significant contribution by Mr. Lieberman is that he has given the Democratic ticket a kind of moral armor that the party has not enjoyed since Jimmy Carter's first campaign in 1976. With the advent of Ronald Reagan in 1980, religiously conservative Christians flocked to the Republican side and stayed there. Mr. Lieberman is pulling some of those voters back, confounding predictions that his Orthodox Jewish faith might arouse anti-Semitic feelings. What has happened instead is that many fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants and culturally conservative Catholics are more attracted by Mr. Lieberman's devoutness than they are put off by doctrinal differences between Christianity and Judaism. What this amounts to is a new Democratic purchase on that category of voters the strategists call "people of faith."⁸

A different generation of American politics would never have tolerated a Jewish nominee, yet specifically because of—not despite—his religiosity, Lieberman was able to gain wide acceptance, even among Christians.

This phenomenon reflects the reorganization of American religion away from denominationalism and toward a political

bifurcation into liberals and conservatives. This division cuts through every denomination to a greater or lesser extent. According to the sociologist Robert Wuthnow, this reorientation resulted from many social processes:

The erosion of the divisions separating . . . members of different denominations... came about gradually. It was legitimated from within by norms of love and humility that promoted interfaith cooperation. It was reinforced from without by . . . rising educational levels, memories of the Holocaust, and the civil rights movement. . . . Regional migration brought Catholics and Protestants and Jews and Christians into closer physical proximity with one another. Denominational ghettos, forged by immigration and ethnic ties, were gradually replaced by religiously and ethnically plural communities.

Wuthnow likewise cites rising rates of intermarriage, expanding friendship circles, and religious experimentation.⁹ In short, the tripartite division of American society into Protestant, Catholic, and Jew, as expressed by Will Herberg in an essay by that title, has been replaced by a polarized split between liberal and conservative across the board religiously.¹⁰

Lieberman's nomination speaks not only to the acceptance of an individual in a political context, but, perhaps more importantly, to a different idea of what it means to be religious. The eminent philosopher Charles Taylor differentiates between a "neo-Durkheimian" society and a "post-Durkheimian" one. A neo-Durkheimian culture is pluralistic in the sense that one can belong to any religion one wishes, as long as that religion provides a full denominational structure of churches and Sunday services. One cannot exist socially or spiritually between multiple structures; such a person is called a "heretic." On the other hand, in a post-Durkheimian society, taking religion "seriously is to take it personally, more devotionally, inwardly, more committed. Just taking part in external rituals . . . is devalued in this kind of

understanding.”¹¹ Taylor names this new religious sensibility “the ideal of authenticity.”

The dominant way of thinking now about moral action, according to Taylor, is rooted in self-fulfillment and, by extension, not impinging on anyone else’s ability to self-actualize unless it would cause harm to another person. In a different culture, religiosity could be dismissed if it were doctrinally aberrant or philosophically incoherent; now, so long as a person is true to himself, his religious path can be widely respected.¹² In Lieberman’s challenge to President Clinton over his affair, he demonstrated conviction and claimed a sincere moral voice in the eyes of an American public which saw consistency in other parts of Lieberman’s life. In twenty-first-century American culture, being authentically religious is more significant than being Jewish.

But Lieberman appealed to more than the religious segment of American society. Even among the less religiously committed, Lieberman’s nomination highlighted “America’s fascination with Joe Lieberman’s style of observance,” according to *Time*.¹³ What is at the core of this intrigue? David Brooks, in his social commentary on the “new upper middle class,” identifies contradictory trends in that group. On one hand, its members are thoroughly *bourgeois*, concerned with social ascension and material success. On the other, he argues, it is no longer “in” to display one’s accomplishments or power in the same way. They are *bohemian* in their desire for earthiness, authenticity, and individuality. The marriage of bohemia and bourgeois—from the 1960s to the 1980s—produced the label “Bobos”—the Bohemian Bourgeois.

David Brooks, in his work *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Middle Class and How They Got There*, traces the impact of Boboism in the way people design their homes, tour “meaningfully,” socialize at parties, and, finally, practice their religion. For the example par excellence of Bobo religiosity, Brooks cites “Flexodoxy,” a flexible orthodoxy. It satisfies the desire of many to engage in authentic, ancient ritual, while still maintaining their autonomy and individualism: “It is rigor without submission. . . . They are rigorous observers, but they also pick and choose, discarding those ancient rules that don’t accord with modern sensibilities.”¹⁴

Though Brooks treats Bobos particularly with a loving derision, his characterization applies broadly to the changes in American society. The point Brooks makes is that whereas Americans used to see the idea of orthodoxy as something backward, antiquated, and outdated, they now look upon it as representing authenticity, integrity, and originality. The fascination that caught Americans—not just the religious ones—reflects the trends Brooks describes.

Thus, our observations of Lieberman's nomination highlight the rising importance of "authenticity" in two ways: (1) in how American religion is becoming "de-denominationalized," only to be replaced by the values of personal spiritual understanding, and (2) in how for orthodoxy specifically, the image has changed from one of backwardness to originality. These factors ushered in a decade of Orthodox public prominence: Matisyahu topping the billboards, the pope visiting an Orthodox synagogue, *People* magazine featuring an Orthodox wedding ceremony, and several top-level political appointees. Were it not for our own scandals involving greed and sexual abuse, we would have completely reaped the benefits of this public relations boon. America in the twenty-first century has an appetite for modern orthodox approaches to religion and contemporary society. We have only begun to understand what this could mean for our community and what responsibilities it entails. But what this decade also shows is that we still remain something of a secret.

DECEMBER 2004:

MODERN ORTHODOX ON STAGE OFF-BROADWAY

The second spike on my GoogleTrends survey was the least predictable, since it related to an event that touched relatively few in our community: an off-Broadway show titled *Modern Orthodox*.¹⁵ The show received mixed reviews from all the major theater publications, attracting their attention mostly through an all-star cast. I attended a performance at the kind invitation of the producers, expecting an insider's portrayal of a Modern Orthodox community or lifestyle.

Instead, *Modern Orthodox* depicts the relationship between a modern, secular couple and an Orthodox diamond dealer from

Brooklyn who wears a black velvet yarmulke with a Yankees logo.

In my debriefing with the producers, I expressed my confusion as to the way the Orthodox character was cast, since, to use the *New York Times* reviewer's language, "Hershel's abrasive behavior tends to indicate colossal bad manners more powerfully than spiritual enlightenment."¹⁶ The character suffers from all the old Jewish stereotypes: He is greedy, sexually repressed, self-deprecating, and opportunistic. Meanwhile, the assimilated Jewish roles enjoy freedom from those trappings. The producers responded that this construction belonged to the playwright, Daniel Goldfarb, a professor at New York University, originally from Toronto. We made a coffee date.

I explained to the playwright that an entire community—schools, camps, synagogues, yeshivahs—identifies itself as Modern Orthodox, yet it surprisingly does not make its way into his play of that very name. He responded that his inspiration for the character came from the hasidic women at Do-All Travel, a travel agency in the diamond district from which Goldfarb purchased his semi-regular flights back to Toronto. He was amused at how they refused to book him flights on Saturdays or how they ordered kosher meals for him without asking. Despite the fact that he had taught creative writing to several Modern Orthodox students at NYU, still, in his mind, the intersection of modernity with traditional Judaism took place in the diamond district.

Here is what I learned: The recognition—and much less so understanding—of modern orthodoxy within the public consciousness is still quite thin. Moreover, Modern Orthodoxy in the public mind is found less in corporate Modern Orthodoxy than it is in exception-to-the-rule Orthodox individuals. The public interest in Lieberman led more to an appreciation of a *person* than to understanding of a community.

Modern Orthodoxy, then, has no monopoly on modern orthodoxy. The infusion of *ba'alei teshuvah* into the ranks of Chabad communities and the impact on *sheluhim* of being "out there" in the world certainly lends Chabad, for example, an air of worldliness. The increasing levels of secular education, wealth, political clout, and outreach efforts of the yeshivish community have no less forced it to

come to terms with many aspects of modernity. For most of America, modernity is not synonymous with a liberal arts or science curriculum any more than it is with using Blackberries or rooting for the Yankees.¹⁷ American society exhibits an intense interest in the fusion and negotiation between modernity and religious tradition, though our community is far from the first thing that comes to mind.

JULY 2007: NOAH FELDMAN PUBLISHES “ORTHODOX PARADOX”

Perhaps the most explicit public discussion of Modern Orthodoxy occurred at the prompting of Harvard Law Professor Noah Feldman. In his article “Orthodox Paradox,” Feldman describes his educational experience at the Maimonides School in Boston and some of his discontents, namely the allegation that his non-Jewish wife was excised from a photograph in a publication for alumni. This incident becomes a metaphor for Feldman’s belonging but unbelonging to the Orthodox community, or, as he puts it, feeling “of but not in” the community.¹⁸

If there was any doubt that Feldman was “not in” the community, it certainly vanished after the publication of his piece in the *New York Times Magazine*. One after the next, Modern Orthodox leaders condemned Feldman in Jewish and mainstream media. The lone rabbinic voice to his defense came from Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, who argued that intermarriage is neither beneficial for one’s marriage nor permitted by Jewish law, but it is considered a *hok*, not an immoral act. The community should not excommunicate the intermarried.¹⁹

The important part of Feldman’s identification with Modern Orthodoxy is not the “not in,” but the “of.” What does it mean to be “of” the Modern Orthodox community? How many people out there are Modern Orthodox “of”s? At Boteach’s recommendation, we invited Feldman, Boteach, and Michael Steinhardt to discuss their ideas of Jewish identity and values for this generation. We booked the Great Hall at the Cooper Union, the largest available hall near NYU. Close to one thousand people attended the event we called “A Debate on Jewish Values.”

Michael Steinhardt talked about education and philanthropy. Boteach discussed how some Jewish rituals have universal appeal and value. Feldman spoke about the centrality of Talmud Torah. He cut through the earlier attempts at universalization, saying that statements about Judaism must be grounded in halakhah, not simply abstracted from what Jews do. When asked how he intended to raise his children, he responded that he intended to raise them in his tradition, teaching them Hebrew and Torah, enabling them to become educated Jews. Then he said that his wife is not Jewish and the children will be raised in her tradition as well.

Despite his hesitancy in this last response, Feldman's overall presentation resonated more than those of the other presenters to the Orthodox students in attendance.

In my own processing of the event, I realized that part of what angered the Modern Orthodox establishment was the possibility that Modern Orthodoxy could be defined by someone from the outside. But in a religious climate which is increasingly de-institutionalized, we do not always have that kind of control; we do not have a monopoly on modern orthodoxy. Feldman says that he benefited immensely from observing the struggle between modernity and tradition, and it is this struggle which animates much of his professional and personal life. The establishment can control who is in the community (who can attend day school, get an *aliyah* in shul, or form a club at Yeshiva University), but it cannot determine who is "of" the community and where they take their experience.

My observations of the hundreds of Orthodox students I meet every year—not just NYU students, but all of their friends who visit from Yeshiva University, Touro, Queens, Harvard, and so on—is that "of the community" is becoming a more popular designation. This is due in part to the increased mobilization of American society and the shifting of religious identity away from communal membership and toward personal self-conception. Building on our earlier discussion of de-denominationalization, it is crucial in this context to point out the privatization of religious identity.

Robert Wuthnow articulates the causes and particular forms of this phenomenon:

The idea that religious expression is becoming increasingly the product of individual biographies is supported by the very fact of America's pluralistic religious culture. With several hundred different denominations, sects, and cults to choose from, every individual can pretty much tailor his or her religious views to personal taste. As individuals are increasingly exposed to the teachings of different faiths through books, television, travel, and geographic mobility, eclecticism becomes the likely result.²⁰

As Wuthnow states, the privatization of religious identity contributes to its taking a *narrative* form in today's society. Rather than casting it in terms of belonging, identity is now constructed by way of personal narrative. In other words, when someone is asked "What religion are you?" they are now less likely to respond, "I belong to such-and-such church," but more likely to respond, "Well, my father was X, my mother was Y, but they sent me to school Z. Then in college I belonged to the Q, but I ended up marrying a woman who was R, and we've decided to raise our children S." Personal narratives in a pluralistic society are not easily controlled by institutions.²¹

True, the Orthodox community may be less susceptible to this phenomenon than religious groups with lower social barriers, but the implications for our educational system must be considered. If we think about all the different potential narratives of alumni of yeshivah high schools, we notice that although many alumni will turn out pretty much like their parents, apples not falling far from the tree, many others will journey. Some will lapse in their observance until they have children or beyond. Others will become yeshivish or even hasidic. Some will intermarry or come out of the closet. The fact that these paths exist ought to come as no surprise, nor should the roles a Modern Orthodox high school play in propelling a student in these different directions. What Feldman correctly points out is the manifold trajectories that result from the powerful collision between modernity and tradition, including his own legal career and intermarriage.

My peers in the focus group I assembled a year ago expressed ambivalence with regard to adopting the label "Modern Orthodox."

I would probably consider myself “half modern orthodox, half just Jewish.” As the Generation Y (or as some say, Millennial) research argues, the younger generation eschews simple labels, defining itself along multiple identity lines, analogous to multiple windows open on one computer screen.²² The complexity of one’s identity almost forces an individual to create a story of coherence.

To be “of but not in” the community is to acknowledge the role that participation “in” the community has played in shaping one’s current self. Most of our institutions focus on keeping people in, serving as a link of a cradle-to-grave chain of religious institutions from preschool, day school, yeshivah high school, yeshivah in Israel, YU or Orthodox college community, and the singles scene in Washington Heights or the Upper West Side, to marriage, synagogue affiliation, *daf yomi*, and the PTA. But many will not go this path. Do they count? If they do, how do we teach the tools of creating a self-narrative that inculcates the best of modern orthodoxy, whether an alumnus goes the way of the yeshivish or the lapsed?

My review of the spikes on GoogleTrends has uncovered the following features of modern orthodoxy this century, not coincidentally related to social trends discussed generally by philosophers and sociologists, and no less coincidentally reflected in the decade’s popular culture. August 2000 teaches that the notion of orthodoxy is more accepted in mainstream American culture than ever before. Rather than being viewed as backward or antiquated, it is seen as authentic and personally meaningful. December 2004 shows that nevertheless, the Modern Orthodox community has not succeeded in presenting itself as the champion of the fusion of modernity and tradition. It has neither a monopoly over nor the most creative ideas regarding its core tension. The sum of the years 2000 and 2004 yields this result: We face a historic challenge that we are not meeting, namely, to address and inspire America and American Jewry in their hunger for grounded authenticity.

Lastly, August 2007 shows that since identity is increasingly constructed as a personal narrative, there are more people who identify with the community in some tenuous way but do not fully participate in it. The opportunity we can capture is the ability to continuously

sustain and enrich our own while they participate fully in a multiplicity of other networks. Our broadest impact may come, ironically, through those who are not exclusively “in.”

The overall picture of modern orthodoxy at the beginning of the twenty-first century is one of de-institutionalization. Intellectual resources and communal power are no longer centralized: There are multiple Torah and college options, multiple rabbinical schools, multiple forms of Orthodox Zionism, multiple ways of engaging with modernity, multiple entry and exit points to the community. The boundaries of the community are no longer clear: Many communities exhibit modern orthodox values but claim they are not, many claim they are who are not, many who are not but wish they were, and many who are and wish they were not.

In a moment of de-institutionalization, the focus on reclaiming the vital middle, announcing it as dogma and denouncing the rest as either not modern or not orthodox, constitutes misplaced attention. Where, then, ought we to direct our energy in the decades to come?

THE ROAD AHEAD

The de-institutionalization of Modern Orthodoxy resembles many other developments in our society, especially given the advent of the digital age. The key strategy proffered by many in the field consists of reorienting an organization around networking rather than building hierarchies. By forming relationships with other organizations that can perform certain tasks better than we can, we enable ourselves to concentrate on our strengths and move the whole team ahead.²³ But what are our unique strengths? Who are suitable partners in our communal endeavors? How far should these relationships go? How do we prioritize? Below I propose five core principles that need to be taken under consideration.

First, all issues of “foreign” communal policy should be on the table. Despite the de-centralization, we are currently strong institutionally, and this fact ought to inform how we relate to the Other: other Jewish groups, other religions, other ethnic groups. It is important to consider policies from the 1950s and 1960s in their historical context, but not to elevate them to the level of halakhah if

they were not intended to be. Defensive positioning, to the right or the left, is necessary or constructive in those decades.

Second, Modern Orthodoxy is best positioned to serve—potentially—as the most apt connector. Our authenticity and openness, our ability to speak in multiple discourses, our varied educational and professional backgrounds uniquely place us not in the middle of a spectrum (where we only connect to the immediate left or right) but at the hub of a wheel. To the degree to which we nurture our relationships by encouraging and modeling respect, we can serve as the nerve center and essential translator. To be effective, this openness must be developed philosophically and promoted communally. If, on the contrary, we stake out our dogmatic territory and condemn the heretics, we cut off strands of the web.

Third, we have the ability to convene the network—potentially—as no one else can. Beyond serving as connectors and translators, we can contract the network to achieve maximal diversity of perspectives on a given subject. I wonder, for example, whether we would gain by broadening the tent at this Forum to include the range of self-identified modern orthodox voices. The power of convening can be a great source of creativity and new realizations.

Fourth, as far as a communal label goes, “Modern Orthodox” owns great potential in our current religious climate. It conveys the struggle, balance, or anxiety we experience, but also our authenticity, openness, sincerity, and creativity. I sympathize with my colleagues who work within the Conservative movement, because they have a much more difficult task in refashioning their identity, given the political associations that accompany the name and the constituency they are trying to reach. If only we internalized the loftier side of what modern orthodoxy actually means in America—not what it used to mean or “ought to mean”—then we would be granted a deeper appreciation of the culture we are interdependent with and our responsibilities to it. By holding America up as our mirror, we become aware of ourselves. The portrait is inspiring.

Fifth, networking will encourage us to ask bigger questions and get bigger ideas. The big questions for individual institutions usually revolve around money, members, or freshmen. For academics, the big

questions center on publication or research funds. The resulting big answers often come in the form of a clever pitch or marketing strategy. By dwelling in the network, we become aware of the broader communal or global questions we ought to be asking. The significance of any idea is in proportion to the question that prompts it. Leadership in a network society is found in the ability to articulate the big questions, not to provide easy answers.

The social, intellectual, economic, and political forces that animate the twenty-first century differ significantly from the ones that inspired *Halakhic Man*, *Lonely Man of Faith*, and *Confrontation*. We owe the greatness and relevance of Rabbi Soloveitchik's ideas in part to the questions he asks. We must recommit to the nuclear energy of the ideas inherent in modern orthodox approaches, not to the ultra-Orthodox adoption of the corporate Modern Orthodox dogma. We need to explore theological ideas and discussions that respond to our questions, though they challenge the assumptions of a generation ago.

True, we would not be mistaken in celebrating our successes at the outset of this century. But the middle of the road may well reach its end. Our responsibility is to clear the paths that reach beyond.

NOTES

1. I owe a great debt to my colleagues and friends for their assistance: Dr. Josh Rosenzweig, Rabbi Dr. Elyahu Stern, Rabbi Dan Smokler, and Prof. Aaron Koller. I offer my profound thanks to Rabbi Dr. Alan Brill for his ongoing guidance, as well as for introducing me to the works of Robert Wuthnow and Alasdair MacIntyre. I reserve my deepest thanks of all to soon-to-be-Dr. Michelle Waldman Sarna for her keen insight, analysis, support, and encouragement.
2. See, for example, the chart by Antony Gordon and Richard M. Horowitz, "Will Your Grandchildren Be Jewish?" at SimpleToRemember.com, 2007; Rabbi Norman Lamm, cited in Matthew Wagner's "'We Will Soon Say Kaddish' for Reform, Conservative Judaism, YU," *Jerusalem Post* (May 11, 2009) and responses such as Jonathan D. Sarna, "Saying Kaddish Too Soon," *Forward* (May 27, 2009).
3. See the growth of Modern Orthodox day schools in Marvin Schick, *A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States, 2008–2009* (Avi Chai Foundation: October 2009).

4. “When I named the book I wrote in 1949 *The Vital Center*, the ‘center’ I referred to was liberal democracy, as against its mortal international enemies—fascism to the right, communism to the left. I used the phrase in a global context . . . [Others recently have been] using the phrase in a domestic context. . . . In my view, as I have said elsewhere, that middle of the road is definitely not the vital center. It is the dead center.” Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “It’s My Vital Center,” *Slate Magazine* (Jan. 10, 1997). Many in our community advocate re-energizing the “middle of the road.” See Rabbi Benny Lau, “The Middle-of-the-Road Approach,” *Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals* (March 18, 2009).
5. The search results can be viewed at http://www.google.com/archivesearch?q=modern+orthodox&scoring=t&sa=N&sugg=d&as_ldate=2000&as_hdate=2099&lnav=hist10
6. Craig Horowitz, “The Kosher Campaign,” *New York* (August 21, 2000).
7. Ironically, this point was reinforced following the 2004 election, which Nathan Diament called “a watershed for our community,” since the Orthodox vote, but not the overall Jewish one, reflected the majority American electorate. “The quickly forming cliché from the 2004 election is that ‘values’ drove religious traditionalists to support President Bush; this dynamic was certainly present in the Orthodox community. Exit polls indicate that just as Bush decisively won the votes of Catholics and Protestants who attend church weekly, so too did he win the votes of those going weekly or more to minyan at synagogues.” “How the GOP Won the Orthodox Vote,” *Forward* (November 11, 2004).
8. Howell Raines, “Editorial Observer; When Devotion Counts More Than Doctrine,” *New York Times* (September 17, 2000).
9. Robert Wuthnow, *The Struggle for America’s Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals, and Secularism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 32.
10. Will Herberg, *Catholic, Protestant, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955).
11. Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 11.
12. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 16–17.
13. David Van Biema and Josh Tyrangiel, “Democratic Convention: Caught in the Middle,” *Time* (August 21, 2000).
14. David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Middle Class and How They Got There* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), p. 243.
15. The review in the *Village Voice* summarizes the plot: “Ben Jacobson (Craig Bierko), a secular Upper West Side financial consultant, is about to propose to his live-in girlfriend, Hannah, a doctor (Molly Ringwald). In the opening scene, he buys an engagement ring from a young Orthodox diamond salesman, Hershel Klein (Jason Biggs), and the battle lines are drawn. Peppering every utterance with Hebrew or Yiddish phrases, Hershel scoffs at Ben’s unobservant ways and pronounces him ‘a gentile.’ Comic contrivances land Hershel in Ben and Hannah’s

- apartment as an intolerable—and intolerant—houseguest: The Yid who came to dinner and was appalled that it wasn't kosher. Eventually, as a standard comic foil must, Hershel teaches his modern friends a thing or two: Hannah calls it a sense of 'what is meaningful—no, magical—in life.' In the bargain, Hershel (through a kiss stolen from Hannah) gets a dose of 'manliness' that enables him to enjoy racy dinner conversation with a woman found through an Orthodox Internet dating service." Alisa Solomon, "Chuppah Blues," *Village Voice* (December 7, 2004).
16. Charles Isherwood, "They've Got Those Upper West Side, Not Jewish Enough Blues," *New York Times*, December 7, 2004.
 17. See Yehuda Mirsky's "Modernizing Orthodoxies: The Case of Feminism," in *To Be a Jewish Woman / Lihiyot Ishah Yehudiyah*, Kolech Proceedings 4 (Jerusalem: Kolech Religious Women's Forum, 2007), English sec., pp. 37–51. See especially pp. 43–44 and n. 15.
 18. Noah Feldman, "Orthodox Paradox," *New York Times Magazine* (July 22, 2007).
 19. Shmuley Boteach, "Stop Ostracizing Those Who Marry Out," *Huffington Post* (July 22, 2007).
 20. Robert Wuthnow, *The Struggle for America's Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals, and Secularism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 116.
 21. The sociological observation parallels trends in philosophy and theology toward narrative identity. See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 205–225, esp. p. 217; Paul Ricoeur in *Refiguring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), pp. 12–13.
 22. The definitive work on the "millennial" generation is Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000). The most extensive studies on Gen Y Jews includes Linda Saxe's "America's Jewish Freshmen: Current Characteristics and Recent Trends Among Students Entering College" (Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, June 2002); Anna Greenberg and Jen Bertkold, "Grand Soy Vanilla Latte With Cinnamon. No Foam. Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices" (Reboot, 2006); and Anna Greenberg, "OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era" (Reboot, 2005).
 23. For example, see Paul Skidmore, "Leading Between: Leadership and Trust in a Network Society" (Demos).