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SOME COMMENTS ON CENTRIST ORTHODOXY

Carl Becker, the great American historian, once said: "It is important, every so often, to look at the things that go without saying to be sure that they are still going." I would add the need for intellectual vigilance to this reminder for practical caution by paraphrasing his aphorism: "It is important, every so often, to look at what we are saying about the things that go without saying to make sure we know what we are talking about."

In reflecting on some of the foundations of our *Weltanschauung*, I do not presume to be imparting new information. The task I have set for myself is to summarize and clarify, rather than to innovate. Dr. Johnson once said that it is important not only to instruct people but also to remind them. I shall take his sage advice for this discourse.

We seem to be suffering from a terminological identity crisis. We now call ourselves "Centrist Orthodoxy." There was a time, not too long ago, when we referred to ourselves as "Modern Orthodox." Others tell us that we should call ourselves simply "Orthodox," without any qualifiers, and leave it to the other Orthodox groups to conjure up adjectives for themselves. I agree with the last view in principle, but shall defer to the advocates of "Centrist Orthodoxy" for two reasons: First, it is a waste of intellectual effort and precious time to argue about titles when there are so many truly significant issues that clamor for our attention. In no way should the choice of one adjective over the other be invested with any substantive significance or assumed to be a "signal" of ideological position.

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We are what we are, and we should neither brag nor be apologetic about it. These days, we do more of the latter than the former, and I find that reprehensible. Let us be open and forthright about our convictions: They are לכתחילה and not בדיעבד. We must not be intimidated by those who question our legitimacy for whatever reason. Nevertheless—or maybe because of our ideological self-confidence—we must be ready to confront, firmly but respectfully, any challenges to our position.

It is in this spirit that I mention an argument that is often offered to refute our Centrist outlook: that, after all, we have introduced “changes,” and that such changes bespeak our lack of fealty to Torah and Halakhah. We are taunted by the old aphorism, חדש אסור מן התורה, that anything new, any change, constitutes an offense against Torah. (It is interesting how a homiletical *bon mot* by the immortal Hatam Sofer has been adopted as an Article of Faith. I wonder how many good Jews really believe that it is an ancient warning against any new ideas and not a halakhic proscription of certain types of grain at certain times of the year . . .)

Have we really introduced “changes?” Yes and No. No, not a single fundamental of Judaism has been disturbed by us. We adhere to the same *ikkarim*, we are loyal to the same Torah, we strive for the same study of Torah and observance of the *mitsvot* that our parents and grandparents before us cherished throughout the generations, from Sinai onward.

But yes, we have introduced innovations, certainly relative to the East European model which is our cherished touchstone, our intellectual and spiritual origin, and the source of our nostalgia. We are Orthodox Jews, most of us of East European descent, who have, however, undergone the modern experience—and survived it; who refuse to accept modernity uncritically, but equally so refuse to reject it unthinkingly; who have lived through the most fateful period of the history of our people and want to derive some invaluable lessons from this experience, truths that may have been latent heretofore. In this sense, we have indeed changed from the idealized, romanticized, and in many ways real picture of the *shtetl*, whether of “lomdisch” Lithuania or the Hasidic courts.

Do these changes delegitimize us as Orthodox Jews, as followers of Halakhah, as *benei Torah*? My answer is a full and unequivocal No.

The “changes” we have introduced into the theory and practice of Orthodox Judaism have resulted not in the diminution of Torah but in its expansion. Some changes are, indeed, for the good. And such positive and welcome changes were introduced at many a critical juncture in Jewish history.

These changes (actually changes in emphasis rather than substance), which we will describe and explain presently, were occasioned by the radically new life experiences of the last several generations. They are genuine Torah responses to unprecedented challenges to our whole way of life and way of thinking. They include: modernity—its openness, its critical stance, its historicism; the democratic experience which, most recently, has raised the serious challenge of the new role of women in family and society; the growth of science and technology, and the scientific method applied to so many fields beyond the natural sciences; almost universal higher worldly education amongst Jews—which destroys the common assumption of bygone generations that an *am ha-aretz* in Torah is an unlettered ignoramus in general; the historically wrenching experience of the Holocaust; the miraculous rise of the State of Israel; and the reduction of observant and believing Jews to a small minority of the Jewish people—a condition unknown since the darkest periods of the biblical era.

What are some of our contributions to Torah Judaism? Let us adumbrate several of the more characteristic foundations of our *Weltanschauung*, some of which may appear more innovative and some of which are “different” only because of the emphasis we place upon them relative to other ideas and ideals. They deal with the general areas of education, moderation, and the people of Israel.

The first is Torah Umadda, the “synthesis” of Torah and worldly knowledge. For the latter term, *Madda*, we can just as well substitute the Hirschian *Derekh Eretz*, though I prefer *Hokhmah* to both; it is the term used both in the Midrash and in the writings of Maimonides.

For us, the study of worldly wisdom is not a concession to economic necessity. It is *de jure*, not *de facto*. I have never understood how the excuse of permitting “college” for the sake of “*parnasah*” or earning a living can be advocated by religiously serious people. If all secular learning is regarded as dangerous spiritually and forbidden halakhically, what right does one have to tolerate it at all? Why not restrict careers for Orthodox Jews to the trades and small businesses? Is the difference in wages between a computer programmer and a shoe salesman large enough to dismiss the “halakhic” prohibition of the academic training necessary for the former? The Hasidic communities and part of the Mitnagdic yeshiva world, which indeed proscribe any and all contact with secular academic learning, have at least the virtue of consistency. One cannot say the same for the more moderate or modernist factions of the “yeshiva world” which condone “college” for purposes of a livelihood (while insisting upon rather arbitrary and even bizarre distinctions

amongst various courses and disciplines) at the same time that they criticize, usually intemperately, the Centrist Orthodox for their open attitude towards the world of culture.

For us, the study of worldly wisdom *enhances* Torah. It reveals not a lowering of the value of Torah in the hierarchy of values, but a symbiotic or synergistic view.

Critics of the *Torah Umadda* school have argued that our view is premised on a flawed appreciation of Torah, namely, that we do not subscribe to the wholeness and self-sufficiency of Torah. *Torah Umadda* implies, they aver, that Torah is not complete, that it is lacking; else, why the need for secular learning?

This critique is usually based upon the Mishnah in *Avot* (5:26) that “הפך בה והפך בה דכולא בה”—delve into Torah intensively, and you will discover that it contains everything. Hence, the Tannaim believed that Torah is the repository of all wisdom, and therefore independent study of other systems of thought and culture is a denial of this authoritative comprehensiveness of Torah.

Truth to tell, this is indeed the interpretation of this particular Mishnah by the Gaon of Vilna in his Commentary: The Torah contains, in hidden as well as revealed form, the totality of knowledge. But does this really imply that there is no independent role for *Madda* or *Hokhmah*?

Not at all. First, the Gaon himself is quoted by one of his students, R. Baruch of Shklov, as saying that ignorance of other forms of wisdom results in a hundredfold ignorance of Torah: כי כפי התורה כי התורה והחכמה נצמדים יחד (הקדמה לספר אוקלידוס, האג, תק"ם) מה שיחסר לאדם ידיעות משארי החכמות לעומת זה יחסרו לו מאה ידות בחכמת. The last clause itself belies the view that all wisdom, including worldly wisdom, is contained within the Torah. While it is true that the Gaon was extremely adept at demonstrating, through various complex and arcane means, that the many aspects of Torah interpenetrate each other so that, for instance, elements of the Oral Torah are discoverable in the text of Scripture, still we may not be correct in assuming that his interpretation of this Mishnah is anything more than its face value. In all probability it does *not* represent the essence of his encompassing view on the nature of Torah. Moreover, even if one insists upon ascribing to the Gaon such a radical view of Torah based upon this comment, he clearly does maintain that the secular disciplines are necessary to unlock the vault of Torah in order to reveal the profane wisdom that lies latent within it.

Second, we find instances where the Sages clearly delineate Torah from Wisdom, *Hokhmah*. Thus, in Midrash Ekhah, 2, we read: אם יאמר לך אדם יש חכמה בגויים תאמין . . . יש תורה בגויים אל תאמין—if you are told that the Gentiles possess wisdom, believe it;

that they possess Torah, do not believe it. What we have here is not a confrontation between sacred and secular wisdom, but an expression of their complementarity: Each is valuable, each has its particular sphere. "Torah" is our particularist corpus of sacred wisdom, confined to the people of Israel, while "Wisdom" is the universal heritage of all mankind in which Jews share equally even though it is not their own exclusive preserve.

Finally, the debate on the meaning of the Gaon's words notwithstanding, his is not the only authoritative interpretation of the passage in the Mishnah. Meiri sees this passage as teaching that any problem within Torah itself is solvable without having recourse to sources outside of Torah. Torah, thus, is self-sufficient as sacred teaching; it makes no claims on being the sole repository of all wisdom, divine and human. This much more modest exegesis is certainly more palatable for us, living in an age of the explosion of knowledge and the incredible advances of science and technology. The view some ascribe to the Gaon, that there is no autonomous wisdom other than Torah, because it is all contained in Torah, would leave us profoundly perplexed. No amount of intellectual legerdemain or midrashic pyrotechnics can convince us that the Torah, somehow, possesses within itself the secrets of quantum mechanics and the synthesis of DNA and the mathematics that underlie the prediction of macroeconomic fluctuations and . . . and . . . No such problems arise if we adopt the simpler explanation of Meiri.

For those of us in the Centrist camp, *Torah Umadda* does not imply the coequality of the two poles. Torah remains the unchallenged and pre-eminent center of our lives, our community, our value system. But centrality is not the same as exclusivity. It does not imply the rejection of all other forms or sources of knowledge, such that non-sacred learning constitutes a transgression. It does not yield the astounding conclusion that ignorance of Wisdom becomes a virtue. I cannot reconcile myself, or my reading of the whole Torah tradition, with the idea that ignorance—any ignorance—should be raised to the level of a transcendental good and a source of ideological pride.

Time does not permit a more extensive analysis, based upon appropriate sources, of the relationship between *Torah* and *Madda* within the context of *Torah Umadda*. But this one note should be added: Granting that Wisdom has autonomous rights, it does not remain outside the purview of Torah as a world-view, even though it may not be absorbed in Torah as a corpus of texts or body of knowledge. Ultimately, as Rav Kook taught, both the sacred and the profane are profoundly interrelated; the קודש הקדשים is the source of both יסוד הקודש ויסוד החול. The Author of the Book of Exodus, the

repository of the beginnings of the halakhic portions of the Torah, is the self-same Author of the Book of Genesis, the teachings about God as the universal Creator, and hence the subject matter of all the non-halakhic disciplines. Truly, “both these and these are the words of the living God!” (This may provide an alternative answer to the famous question of Rashi at the beginning of Genesis, as to why the Torah begins with the story of the genesis of the world rather than with the first *mitsvah* as recorded in Exodus.)

The second important principle that distinguishes Centrist Orthodoxy is that of *moderation*. Of course, this should by no means be considered a “change” or “innovation”; moderation is, if anything, more mainstream than extremism. But in today’s environment, true moderation appears as an aberration or, worse, a manifestation of spinelessness, a lack of commitment. And that is precisely what moderation is not. It is the result neither of guile nor of indifference nor of prudence; it is a matter of sacred principle. Moderation must not be understood as the mindless application of an arithmetic average or mean to any and all problems. It is the expression of an earnest, sober, and intelligent assessment of each situation, bearing in mind two things: the need to consider the realities of any particular situation as well as general abstract theories or principles; and the awareness of the complexities of life, the “stubborn and irreducible” facts of existence, as William James called them, which refuse to yield to simplistic or single-minded solutions. Moderation issues from a broad *Weltanschauung* or world view rather than from tunnel vision.

It was, as is well known, Maimonides who established moderation as a principle of Judaism when he elaborated his doctrine of “the middle way” (דרך הבינונית, דרך האמצעית) as the Judaized version of the Aristotelian Golden Mean in his *Hilkhot De’ot* as well as in his earlier “Eight Chapters.” The mean is, for Rambam, the right way and the way of the virtuous (הדרך הישרה, דרך הטובים). The mean is not absolute; Maimonides records two standard exceptions and describes certain general situations where the mean does not apply. This alone demonstrates that the principle of moderation is not, as I previously mentioned, a “mindless application of arithmetic averages” to his philosophy of character.

Of course, Maimonides is speaking primarily of moral dispositions and individual personality, not of political or social conduct. Yet, there is good reason to assume that the broad outlines of his doctrine of moderation apply as well to the social and political spheres. First, there is no *prima facie* reason to assume that because Maimonides exemplifies his principle by references to personal or characterological dispositions, that this concept does not apply to

collectivities, such as the polis or society or the nation, *mutatis mutandis*. Indeed, there is less justification for mass extremism than for individual imbalance. Second, his own historical record reveals a balanced approach to communal problems which, while often heroic, is not at all extremist. Special mention might be made of his conciliatory attitude towards the Karaites despite his judgment as to their halakhic status. But this is a subject which will take us far afield and must be left for another time.

Third, Maimonides refers to a specific verse which, upon further investigation, reveals significant insights. He identifies the Middle Way with the “way of the Lord,” citing Genesis 18:19—*כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך ה' לעשות צדקה ומשפט*. The Middle Way is the Divine Way, the Way of the Lord, and the assurance of a just and moral world (“to do righteousness and justice”). It is the essential legacy that one generation must aspire to bequeath to the next: “that he (Abraham) may command his children and his household after him that they may keep the way of the Lord. . . .”

Now consider the context of this verse, which Maimonides sees as the source of the teaching of moderation. It appears just after the very beginning of the story of the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah. Verses 16, 17, and 18, just preceding the passages we have cited, tell of the angels looking upon Sodom as Abraham accompanies them onto their way. “And the Lord said: Shall I hide from Abraham that which I am doing [to Sodom], seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations shall be blessed in him? For I have known him (or, preferably: I love him) to the end that he may command his children and his household after him that they may keep the way of the Lord. . . .” God wants Abraham to exercise his quality of moderation, the Way of the Lord, on the Lord Himself as it were, praying for the Lord to moderate the extreme decree of destruction against Sodom and Gomorrah. And Abraham almost succeeds: What follows is the immortal passage of the Lord informing Abraham of His intention to utterly destroy the two cities of wickedness, and Abraham pleading for their survival if they contain at least ten innocent people.

Surely, the “way of the Lord” refers to more than personal temperance alone; the doctrine of moderation, which the term implies according to Maimonides, is set in the context of Abraham’s office of a blessing to all the peoples of the earth, and of his heroic defense of Sodom and Gomorrah—symbols of the very antithesis of all Abraham stands for. A more political or communal example of moderation and temperance, of tolerance and sensitivity, is hard to come by. Yet for Maimonides, this is the Way of the Lord. The Way

of the Lord speaks, therefore, not only of personal attributes but of the widest and broadest scopes of human endeavor as well.

Our times are marked by a painful absence of moderation. Extremism is rampant, especially in our religious life. Of course, there are reasons—unhappily, too often they are very good reasons—for the new expressions of zealotry. There is so very much in contemporary life that is reprehensible and ugly, that it is hard to fault those who reject all of it with unconcealed and indiscriminate contempt. Moreover, extremism is psychologically more satisfying and intellectually easier to handle. It requires fewer fine distinctions, it imposes no burden of selection and evaluation, and substitutes passion for subtlety. Simplicism and extremism go hand in hand. Yet one must always bear in mind what Murray Nicholas Butler once said: The extremes are more logical and more consistent—but they are absurd.

It is this moral recoil from absurdity and the penchant for simplistic solutions and intellectual short-cuts, as well as the positive Jewish teaching of moderation as the “way of the Lord,” that must inform our public policy in Jewish matters today. The Way of the Lord that was imparted to Abraham at the eve of the great cataclysm of antiquity must remain the guiding principle for Jews of our era who have emerged from an incomparably greater and more evil catastrophe. Moderation, in our times, requires courage and the willingness to risk not only criticism but abuse.

Test the accuracy of this statement by an exercise of the imagination. Speculate on what the reactions would be to Abraham if he were to be alive today, in the 1980's, pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah. Placards would no doubt rise on every wall of Jerusalem: “שומר שמים על זאת . . .”, the scandal of a purportedly Orthodox leader daring to speak out on behalf of the wicked evildoers and defying the opinions of all the “Gedolim” of our times! Emergency meetings of rabbinic organizations in New York would be convened, resulting in a statement to the press that what could one expect of a man who had stooped to a dialogue with the King of Sodom himself. Rumors would fly that the dialogue was occasioned by self-interest—the concern for his nephew Lot. American-born Neturei Karta demonstrators in Israel would parade their signs before the foreign press and TV cameras: “WASTE SODOM . . . NUKE GOMORRAH . . . ABRAHAM DOESN'T SPEAK FOR RELIGIOUS JEWRY.” Halakhic periodicals would carry editorials granting that Abraham was indeed a *talmid hakham*, but he has violated the principle of *emunat hakhamim* (assumed to be the warrant for a kind of intellectual authoritarianism) by ignoring the weight of rabbinic opinion that Sodom and Gomorrah, like Amalek, must be extermi-

nated. Indeed, what can one expect other than pernicious results from one who is well known to have flirted with Zionism . . . ? And beyond words and demonstrations, Abraham would be physically threatened by the Kach strongmen, shaking their fists and shouting accusations of treason at him. And so on and so on.

I cannot leave the subject of moderation without at least some reference to a matter which never fails to irritate me, and that is: bad manners. Some may dismiss this concern as mere etiquette and unworthy of serious consideration. But I beg to differ. The chronic nastiness that characterizes so much of our internal polemics in Jewish life is more than esthetically repugnant; it is both the cause and effect of extremism, insensitivity, and intolerance in our ranks. We savage each other mercilessly, thinking we are scoring points with “our side”—whichever side that is—and are unaware that we are winning naught but scorn from the “outside world.” Our debates are measured in decibels, or numbers of media outlets reached, rather than by the ideas propounded and the cogency of our arguments. True, when one takes things seriously it is difficult to observe all the canons of propriety; tolerance comes easier to men of convenience than to men of conviction. But there is a world of difference between a *crie de coeur* that occasionally issues from genuine outrage and the hoarse cry of coarseness for its own sake that infects our public discourse like a foul plague.

Let others do as they wish. We, of our camp, must know and do better. If our encounter with our dissenting fellow Jews of any persuasion is to be conducted out of love and concern rather than enmity and contempt, then moderation must mark the form and style as well as substance of our position.

That is our task as part of our affirmation of moderation as a guiding principle of Centrist Orthodoxy. Our halakhic decisions, whether favorable or unfavorable to the questioner, whether strict or liberal, must never be phrased in a manner designed to repel people and cause Torah to be lowered in their esteem. Unfortunately, that often happens—even in our own circles, especially when we try to outdo others in manifestations of our piety.

The third principle of Centrist Orthodoxy is the centrality of the people of Israel. אהבת ישראל, the love of Israel, and the high significance it attains in our lives is the only value that can in any way challenge the preeminence of Torah and its corollary, אהבת התורה, the love of Torah.

The tension between these two values, Torah and Israel, has lain dormant for centuries. Thus, in the High Middle Ages we find divergent approaches by R. Saadia Gaon and by R. Yehuda Halevi. The former asserts the undisputed primacy of Torah: It is that which

fashioned Israel and which remains, therefore, axiologically central. Saadia avers: "our people Israel is a people only by virtue of its Torahs" (i.e., the Written and the Oral Torah; *Emunot ve-De'ot* 3:7). Halevi maintains the reverse position: "If not for the Children of Israel, there would be no Torah in the world" (*Kuzari* 2:56). Israel precedes Torah both chronologically and axiologically. Hints of the one position or the other may be found scattered through the literature, both before and after Saadia and Halevi. Perhaps the most explicit is that of Tanna de-Vei Eliahu, which tells of an encounter between a scholar and an incompletely educated Jew. The scholar records the following conversation: אמר לי: רבי, שני דברים יש לי בלבבי, ואני אוהבן אהבה גדולה, תורה וישראל, אבל איני יודע אי זה מהן קודם. אמרתי לו, דרכן של בני אדם שאומרים תורה קדומה לכל, שנאמר ה' קנני ראשית דרכו, אבל (אני) הייתי אומר ישראל קדושים [קודמין], שנאמר קדוש ישראל לה' ראשית תבואתו. The sage's interlocutor wishes to know which of his two loves, Torah or Israel, takes precedence. His response is that most people think that Torah precedes Israel, but that is not so: The love of Israel takes precedence over Torah (סדר אליהו רבה, הוצ' מאיר א"ש, [פי"ד] פט"ו, עמ' 17).

Now, these two opposing viewpoints have lived peacefully, side by side, for centuries, their conflict latent—until our own days when, as a result of the trauma of the Holocaust and the reduction of Orthodoxy to a decided minority, the problem assumes large, poignant, and possibly tragic proportions. The confrontation between the two, if allowed to get out of hand, can have the most cataclysmic effects on the future of the House of Israel as well as the State of Israel. History calls upon us to abandon tired formulas and ossified cliches and make a deliberate, conscious effort to develop policies which, even if choices between the two must be made, will lead us to embrace both and retain the maximum of each. We shall have to undertake a difficult analytic calculus: Which of the two leads to the other and which does not lead to the other?—and give primacy to the preference which inexorably moves us on to the next love, so that in the end we lose neither. Ultimately, there can be no Torah without Israel and no Israel without Torah. **ישראל ואורייתא חד הוא.**

If indeed such a calculus has to be undertaken, then Orthodox Jews will have to rethink their policy. Heretofore, the attitude most prevalent has been that Torah takes precedence—witness the readiness of our fellow Orthodox Jews to turn exclusivist, to the extent that psychologically, though certainly not halakhically, many of our people no longer regard non-Orthodox Jews as part of *Kelal Yisrael*. But this choice of love of Torah over love of Israel is a dead end: Such a decision is a final one, for it cuts off the rest of the Jewish

