THE GREAT ESTRANGEMENT

The Rabbi and the Student

While a certain amount of tension and misunderstanding between the generations is to be expected, the current rejection of adult overtures to the college youth is both painful and bewildering. The cleft cuts right across ideological and denominational lines. It would seem that their defiant stance is a protest, not against us qua adults, but against our inability to communicate meaningfully with them.

A new phenomenon on the campus is the articulate and ever-growing organization known as Yavneh. The majority of its members are committed to traditional Judaism and many of them had a good dosage of Jewish education. But in practically all chapters can be found the marginally religious, the earnest seekers, the sincere doubters, boys and girls in the twilight zone of religious cognition, some of whom find direction and a deeper commitment to Judaism through Yavneh. This is a potent spiritual force on the American scene largely ignored by non-traditional leaders and exasperatingly incomprehensible to many Orthodox leaders. Yet, in its groping and often immature ways it has shown greater creativity and vitality than some high-sounding, headlining organizations.

In this hotbed of budding Orthodox intellectual life one can find an almost unanimous disdain for the institutions and personages of organized Orthodox society. The roots for what may be called “The Great Estrangement” lie partially in the differ-
ence between the basic psychological orientations of the adult and youth worlds. Youth is idealistic and uncompromising; what it cherishes, it cherishes with unbridled fervor; compromise and expediency are concessions to the devil. Young people never could understand how parents claim to strive for the best and then settle for second best or less. They cannot forgive the adult world for not always upholding their values in the face of stark realities.

The “ought” of the synagogue is to educate, to honor the learned, give strength to the pious, charity to the poor and succor to the downtrodden. The student is appalled at the vulgarization of the synagogue and kindred organizations, and at the sycophancy towards heavy but sometimes unworthy contributors. They are mercilessly critical of leaders who are a far cry, in learning and personal conduct, from the principles expounded by these organizations. The student cringes when he reads in synagogue bulletins of vaudeville shows and a plethora of social events totally unrelated and often inimical to the ideals of the institution. The rabbi does not fare much better in this scathing criticism. The student’s “ought image” of the rabbi is the prophetic figure, the scholar, the courageous “knight of faith” who teaches, admonishes and battles. The “is” rabbi to the student is the compromiser par excellence, the adept “eye-closer.” He sits inane at tasteless Bar Mitzvah banquets and he invokes God’s blessing on godless events, but is silent in the face of injustice.

But what is even more crucial and painful to the student is the fact that the rabbi (I am generalizing, of course) is not communicating meaningfully with him. As one Yavneh member put it, “The rabbis come to address us as if we were a sisterhood.” The rabbi becomes so involved in the overall popularity contest that he cannot respond to the deeper need of the student, which is not a “good story,” a joke, or the popular science and psychology which go over so well with the average synagogue member. The student does not want to hear the talks that glorify Judaism, flay assimilation, and discuss the art of living — the kind of material in which sermon manuals abound. I dare submit that too many rabbis are neither intellectually
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nor emotionally equipped to cope with the contemporary student — even the orthodox student. Again a Yavneh member confided that in his city, which has a listed orthodox rabbinate large enough to form a sizeable community of its own, Yavneh could find only ten rabbis whom they could meaningfully involve in their programming.

To a great extent the problem began in the yeshivah world in which the contemporary rabbi was raised. The yeshivah has persisted in its anachronistic attitude towards the non-observant Jew and his intellectual problems.* Its curriculum is geared to produce the traditional *landan* (scholar) and not the *possek* (legal authority) and intellectual leader, the man of thought and decision required in American life.

The yeshivah student of yesterday who is the rabbi, lay leader, or professional of today went to college with a troubled conscience. Because of the attitude of his “Hebrew Department” and *Roshei Yeshivah*, he went resolved to inure himself against the ideas prevalent in the other world, which had to remain outside his life-thought process. He bifurcated his intellectual life. His ideological orientation was totally traditional; at college one exercised one’s mind and aimed for grades; any disturbing thoughts could be cavalierly dismissed upon returning to the security of yeshivah life. Some of these “graduates of ambivalence” found a *modus vivendi* between the Torah life and modern life in which we are a “minority of a minority.” But many become habituated in their schizophrenic alternation between two worlds, without a true dialectic between them. One of the results of this ambivalence is the relative infecundity and lack of initiative displayed by the Association of Orthodox Scientists — an organization which ought to play a much more creative and articulate role in American Jewish leadership.

The yeshivah student of today who attends university is more eager than his predecessor to integrate into the western world. He is interested not only in receiving its benefits but also in sharing the thought processes and institutions that created them. He wishes to enter into a dialectical relationship with *chakhmat*

* Cf. Rabbi Jakobovits’ observations in “Rabbis and Deans — Part II” in this issue pp. 74-79. —Ed.
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edom and hopes to achieve at least a meaningful state of co-existence between the Yeshivah and the University. It is in Yavneh where this confrontation can take place.

In order to address oneself effectively to these young people, one must be intellectually and emotionally prepared to engage in crucial contemporary issues. Just as one must risk one's life in times of war in order to secure victory so, in a sense, one must risk one's Orthodoxy in times of conflict of ideas and intellectual uncertainty. One cannot “guide the perplexed” unless one has faced up to the perplexities, just as the psychoanalyst does not enter his profession without having been psychoanalyzed himself. One cannot hope to inspire those who question without having existentially experienced the problems of the twentieth century Jew and grappled with them out of the depth of one's Torah knowledge and commitment.

What bothers the student? May I suggest a few of the more disturbing areas of concern, beginning with “Judaism and Scientism.” I am not referring to any specific scientific theory and its degree of conformance with traditional concepts. Evolution is not the crucial question any more. Scientism is a pose, an ontological attitude towards reality which still predominates on the campus in spite of all the uncertainties of science and its inability to cope with man's moral problems. Scientism is the assumption that reality is either scientifically known or knowable. It is the philosophy of Bertrand Russell and its world is the “phenomenal” world of Kant and the “it” world of Buber. There is no room here for the providential God of Jewish tradition, not even for the ethical God of the “liberal,” and not even for the circumscribed and “natural” God of Mordecai Kaplan.

This spirit of scientism dominates education from kindergarten on. Our public schools (in spite of the spectacular controversy regarding opening prayers) are as atheistic as any Russian school and in a more invidiously subtle manner. There is nothing left for God to do or say after the student is through with his school subjects — something that every afternoon Talmud Torah teacher is keenly aware of. R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad, is reputed to have said that while
the Book of Esther does not contain the name of God, the entire book is an affirmation of His name. Conversely, we may say of western education while it does not patently deny the existence of God, its total curriculum is a denial of Him.

Another sensitive area is the problem of Biblical criticism. Franz Rosensweig wrote to Jacob Rosenheim, "Where we differ from orthodoxy is in our reluctance to draw from our belief in the holiness and uniqueness of the Torah and its character of revelation any conclusion as to the literary genesis and philosophical value of the text as it has come down to us. If all of Wellhausen's theories were correct, and the Samaritans really had the better text, our faith would not be shaken in the least. The Orthodox student who is committed to Torah mi-Sinai knows he cannot accept Rosensweig's proposition yet he envies his inspiration and faith. Orthodox scholarship has not paid sufficient attention to Bible criticism, as well as to what Louis Jacobs calls the "moral difficulties" of the Bible."

Another area of concern to the student is the tension in Judaism between its universalism and its occasionally virulent particularism. The egalitarian scholastic society refuses to look upon man in terms of race, religion, or color; it addresses itself to the universal man and aspires to a society governed by social justice and civil rights. In such a setting it is not easy to affirm one's distinctiveness and chosenness. But the crucial aspect of the problem is not so much the conciliation of the different strains in Jewish thought; after all, philosophy thrives on paradoxes. What is more difficult is to gloss over without anguish some halakhic manifestations of our extreme particularism. To the student such Talmudic treatments of pikuach nefesh or some civil laws, etc., are more disturbing than the question of whether the world is five thousand seven hundred and twenty-six or three billion years old.

Another trouble spot is the ancient problem of good and evil. At times the problem is brought into relief as the main feature of human concern, and no reference to its antiquity can assuage man's anger at his fate. Our post-Auschwitz generation is experiencing such a moment. It is not coincidental that interest in the Book of Job has increased considerably among students.
and seekers. The mid-twentieth century has witnessed what could Biblically be called \textit{heستر panim} or what Buber called "the eclipse of God," unprecedented even in our calamitous history. The holocaust was more cruel and absurd than the burning of the Temple in 70 C.E. or any adversity thereafter. In Auschwitz the Jew did not die as a symbol of national defeat; he was not even given the privilege to translate his death into \textit{Kiddush Hashem} for he was not given the choice of opting out of faith and fate.

I do not wish to imply that: a) there are answers to all these questions; b) that answers are necessary for a commitment of faith; c) that given all the answers commitment is assured. One Talmudic opinion ascribed to Moses authorship of the Book of Job. The very same Moses who saw God \textit{be'aspaklariah ha-me'irah} (with the clarity of perception unequalled by any prophet), who heard the voice of God so precisely and with such definitude that he was able to receive the concrete word "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not," the same Moses wrestles with the problem of evil through forty-two chapters only to have Job stand in submission before the \textit{mysterium tremendum} that remonstrated with him from amidst the whirlwind. The student is aware that a measure of incomprehensibility, mystery, and ineffability are existentially part of the faith experience. As a matter of fact he is very suspicious of "instant answers," casuistry, homiletics, or "do it yourself" instructions for solving gnawing intellectual dilemmas. He resents the ignoring of problems, the not facing up to them. He abhors condescension; he expects a sympathetic understanding and a dialogical engagement in his faith tensions.

Another very important area of concern is the "updating" of Halakhah or adjusting the Halakhah \textit{within} the modern world. I use the word \textit{within} advisedly — not \textit{to} the modern world — to avoid a prevalent confusion between the demands of "liberal" Orthodoxy and Conservative Halakhism. I can do no better on this subject than refer to the superb article by Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits in a recent issue of \textit{ Tradition}. We wish to address ourselves to the contemporary situation but do not intend to bow before it in submission. To us the Talmud and \textit{Rishonim}
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are not just guidelines to modern decisions but the very machinery of these decisions. What we seek is a revitalization and full use of Halakhic dynamics for a technologically and sociologically changing world. This requires, in addition to profound scholarship and familiarity with the intricacies of modern life, spiritual courage to render decisions that might arouse the ire of the intransigent knights of the status quo. The student expects this courage in his leaders.

To reach our students the rabbis must re-evaluate their tools and attitudes. Other professional groups institute refresher courses and seminars of intensive study. Rabbis, too, must re-learn what was once learned, and fill the gaps left by the inadequacies of yeshivah curriculum; knowledge of contemporary thought and parlance of communication must be supplemented in depth.

Mosheh Rabenu, the teacher par excellence who was the prince of prophets, was also the humblest of all men. To be Rabenu to our students pomposity, affected speech, and other rabbinic trappings must be abandoned. The young serious traditional student is not so deferential as loyal baalebatim; at times he is even rude. But if we can reach him he will listen with interest. Then the rabbis will be better prepared to face the great mass of non-observant Jewry, particularly the alienated intellectuals about whom everybody is so obsessively concerned. The rabbis might find more meaning in the labyrinth of menial tasks and contradictions imposed upon them.

Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg has aptly described the decline of the American rabbinate. It seems that the “vanishing Jew” has found good company in the “vanishing rabbi.” We would like to qualify this thesis. The book reviewer, cultural commentator, and entertainer rabbi may be on his way out; one may add the fund-raiser, the public relations man, and the banquet decorator. The future belongs to the rabbi who will be machazir attarah le’yoshnah, return the crown to its former glory — the intellectual rabbi.
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NOTES

1. Nachum N. Glatzer, Franz Rosenzweig, His Life and Thought, New York, Schocken Books and Farrar, Strauss and Young, p. 158.


