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The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: cst@tauex.tau.ac.il. We are glad to share with you the thirteenth issue of Perspectives.

United We Stand

Jewish Orthodoxy must start cooperating with the Reform

Ronen Lubitch

The question of how to respond to liberal movements in Judaism preoccupied Orthodox Jews in Europe throughout the nineteenth century. The conundrum continued to be a topic of lively debate through the twentieth century in the United States, and then migrated to Israel.

There were two main trends in Orthodox Judaism's attitude toward other Jewish religious denominations through both centuries.

According to one, the boundaries of Orthodoxy are the boundaries of Judaism, and such liberal movements are a distortion of Judaism. Hence Orthodox Jews should stay away from other streams and totally segregate from them.

According to the other, non-Orthodox movements have strayed from the path of authentic Judaism, but their existence is a fact, and one must inescapably collaborate with them over specific concerns that affect the entire Jewish community.

The decisive response to the Reform movement began taking shape in Europe as early as 1818, with the opening of the first Reform synagogue, the Temple, in Hamburg, Germany.

Rabbi Moshe Sofer (the *Hatam Sofer*) voiced firm opposition to the Reform movement, coining the slogan: “The new is forbidden from the Torah.” He established that it is forbidden to alter any traditional rulings or customs.

A year later, forty *responsa* from rabbis and rabbinic courts across Europe were published in Hamburg, opposing the Reform Synagogue and categorizing its founders as both wicked and heretical. This position became accepted in ultra-Orthodox Judaism, continuing within it to this very day.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the leader of Neo-Orthodoxy in Germany, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, also demanded that the Orthodox community detach itself from the broader Jewish community there, most of which had already identified with the liberal movements of Judaism.

In contrast, a more measured approach also began to emerge at that time, as Rabbi Yitzchak Dov Bamberger and other rabbis took a stand against detaching from the liberal movements. Controversy over this issue effectively continued until the liquidation of German Jewry in the Holocaust.

For twentieth-century American Jewry, the question of how to relate to Reform or Conservative Jews expressed itself in an array of concrete halakhic issues.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein was very uncompromising in his approach to Reform and Conservative Judaism, generally drawing no distinction between them.

He maintained that Jewish law required distancing yourself as far as possible from the two movements, which, in his approach, denied the basic tenets of the Jewish religion and many of the Torah’s commandments.

He ruled that conversions, as well as marriages and betrothals, conducted by a Reform or a Conservative rabbi were not valid because they did not strictly apply Jewish law.

He also ruled that a Reform rabbi should not be accorded any honors in a synagogue, nor recite any of the seven blessings under the bridal canopy (the *huppah*), because their blessings are null and void since they do not believe in the Giver of the Torah.

He prohibited renting a room in a Conservative synagogue to pray in, banned burial of any Orthodox Jew in a Conservative cemetery, and ruled that whoever served as a cantor, ritual slaughterer, or teacher for the Conservative community could not thereafter be appointed to a similar role in an Orthodox community.

Rabbi Feinstein’s principled stand and his Halachic rulings on this issue were accepted almost without question by most rabbis not only in the United States but also in Israel and around the world, among them rabbis who were not ultra-Orthodox, such as Rabbi Shlomo Aviner or the Zionist rabbis of Eretz Hemda Institute.

A representative of the conciliatory approach was Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (1903-1993), the leader of Modern Orthodoxy in the United States.

He refrained from joining the 1956 ban by yeshiva leaders on ties and meetings among Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis.

For many years, he took part in the Jewish Synagogues Organization in the United States, which included the three movements.

He even reached agreements with Rabbi Professor Saul Lieberman of the Jewish Theological Seminary on issues pertaining to the problem of “chained wives” (*agunot*).

Rabbi Soloveitchik established the principle that one should cooperate with the liberal movements in activities regarding the non-Jewish world but that it was forbidden to come together over spiritual-ideological matters.

He warned that too much harmony might be confusing and blur the boundaries between Orthodoxy and other movements.

Contrary to Rabbi Feinstein, who stated that Jewish law required keeping the same distance from non-Orthodox movements as from idol worship, Rabbi Soloveitchik reasoned that the approach towards these movements was a matter of public leadership and that one had to exercise judgment according to the time and the place.

Both Rabbi Feinstein’s uncompromising attitude and Rabbi Soloveitchik’s qualified approach were formulated, as I understand it, against the background of the balance of power prevailing in American Jewry at the time.

Throughout the twentieth century, Orthodox Judaism in the United States felt existentially threatened by the other Jewish religious movements.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Conservative movement more than doubled its size, while the Reform movement doubled its membership.

Sociologists analyzing the state of play in the Jewish movements in the 1970s concluded that Orthodox Jewry would decline to a fraction of one percent of the United States’ Jewish population.

This situation created a sense of existential threat among Orthodox Jewry and increased the need for segregation from the other movements.

The segregationist trend increased in response to changes to Jewish legal norms in the Conservative movement and in light of the growing acceptance of non-Jews in Reform communities.

In our era, circumstances have changed dramatically. Orthodox Jewry today is stable, strong, and confident of its ability to survive and even prosper both in the United States and, of course, in Israel.

In contrast, the proportion of mixed marriages between Jews and members of other religious groups has grown significantly in the United States over the past fifty years.

In 1970 it was 17%, but since 2000 it has grown to 60%. The problem is most grave among Jews who do not belong to any Jewish religious movement: more than two-thirds of them are intermarried.

I hold that Orthodox Jewry should today take a third approach.

Essentially: despite our disapproval of the ideology and practices of the liberal movements, it should be recognized that they make an important contribution to the preservation of Jewish identity, and it is necessary to cooperate with them to strengthen the unity and continuity of the Jewish people.

In my view, it is possible to derive calls for this approach from the words of the great thinker Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, who advocated pulling together all forces of the people of Israel and preventing factionalism.

This approach was reflected in Rabbi Kook's relations with secular Jews in Israel, as well as in his firm opposition to the separation between Orthodox and Reform communities in Europe. His son and disciple, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, followed in his father's footsteps, objecting to separate public organization by the Orthodox.

Rabbi Kook recognized the benefits and vital importance of each movement and denomination.

He wrote about three factions dominant among the people of Israel in his time: "The Orthodox ... who carry the banner of sanctity, Torah and commandments; the nationalist ... who fight for the renewal of national life ... and the liberal who demand education, culture, and ethics." He claimed that these were three forces of equal value that should cooperate harmoniously.

The words of Rabbi Kook about the main constituents of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel may also inspire collaboration between the three major movements of contemporary Judaism.

These collaborations should be expressed in activities for the sake of Diaspora Jewry. Representatives of the Orthodox community in Israel should work hand in hand with their brethren from the other movements.

There is also room for cooperation in Israel. For example, joint study evenings that will draw a diverse audience. It is possible for rabbis from all streams to meet to discuss contemporary issues (a topic that has recently been the center of considerable controversy among Orthodox rabbis).

It is fitting to promote the operation of joint learning centers for prospective converts in the format once proposed by the Ne'eman Committee (1998), as well as to involve representatives of all the movements in the appointment of conversion judges, as proposed by the Nissim Committee (2018).

The vast challenges facing the Jewish people today require close collaboration between the various movements and organizations to strengthen Jewish identity in Israel and around the world and promote unity among all factions of the Jewish people.

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