

## Questions and Answers Regarding Orthodox Judaism in America

11/15/1954

(Editor's note: As part of its 50th year jubilee, the Editors of the Daily Morning Journal contacted Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveichik of Boston, one of the greatest Rabbis and Geonim in America, and an important leader of the Orthodox Judaism wing of American Jews, to provide his viewpoint and opinion regarding the important problems facing the Orthodox Jewish community in America. We present below the questions that were presented to Rabbi Soloveichik and his responses that he wrote specially for the Daily Morning Journal)

Question: In America, there appears today to be a general revival and rejuvenation of religion. Membership in religious organizations has increased, religious meetings are better attended, etc. Also, we have recently observed on the "Jewish Street" a livelier interest in religious topics. Do you believe that such a religious arousal is applicable to the Orthodox Community in America?

Answer: I have also come across articles and newspapers that portray the religious rejuvenation on the American street. As it appears, religion has become fashionable and association with a religious institution is in accord with the general societal taste. Usually, this point of view has its impact on the Jewish Street as well, especially in situations where the Jewish population has recently begun to concentrate. In these areas, in order to have a "good feeling", the Jew is required to join the temple, in order that he be able to portray himself to his gentile neighbor as an important person ("Macher") in the synagogue, like the elder role his gentile neighbor plays in the church.

I do not wish to belittle this awakening. It has its positive side; however, I cannot classify it as a religious experience. The deepest, most powerful yet complicated experience for the Jew has little basis in current fashion or etiquette. It stems from the depths of human personality, from the depths of his paradoxical subconscious,

that from one perspective is saturated with both a tragic, internal and senseless existence that is extinguished with his death, ומותר האדם מן הבהמה אין כי הכל הבל. While from the other perspective, he feels the joy of having a great and Godly existence that is connected to eternity, אתה הבדלת אנוש מראש ותכירהו לעמוד לפניך.

The individual, who merits to experience the true religious awakening, lives his life through a religious upheaval, a change in his value system, a new perspective on long held ideals and goals. It changes his entire outlook on the natural world, mankind and even his sense of "I". His life is now colored differently, new dimensions of feeling, thought and desires are born. Therefore, it is self-evident, that a superficial religious approach consisting of participation in a religious service once a week cannot be considered as the great experience of the person that wishes to approach the Eternal One. The entire situation (of a perceived increase in religious participation) carries more of a social character than a religious one. It fits the conservative political climate, that has garnered publicity in recent years.

My impression is this increased interest in religion is not a manifestation of longing for coming closer to God, nor is it a protest against the atheistic-materialistic system of government on one side and loyalty to the democratic ideal on the other. No matter how noble such a stance may be, it is still very far from being a true religious activity that is most definitely not interested in appeasing community opinion or conforming to conventional standards of good and evil. The opposite is true: often the religious perspective and personality is in opposition to accepted norms and outlooks. The willingness to conform to current societal convention regarding religion is a sad tragedy of a truth that society does not wish to accept. Was not Abraham the greatest of loners? Was not Moses our Teacher alone and introspective on that dark dawn when he alone climbed Mount Sinai to receive the Torah the second time? As it says, "ואיש לא יעלה עמך וגם איש אל ירא בכל". When religion becomes fashionable, we must carefully verify if its popularity has staying power or is a fleeting fad. We should not anticipate great salvations from this so-called religious renaissance.

However, even if we were to accept that the general movement towards religion has deep religious roots, it still has a very insignificant meaning for us Jews

battling for a traditional lifestyle. The challenging task of infusing Torah in the Jewish heart in America is unique. We must view this mission from a completely different perspective from, for example, the conservative or reform movements. Judaism always preached the idea of absolute unity of human existence across all domains, *אחדות הרשויות*, an idea to which the modern person is unaccustomed. Contemporary man, even the most ardent searcher for God, divides his life in two domains - sacred and secular. To the first arena, the secular, where he spends most of his time, he bars entry to God. Nor does he recognize any religious norms or laws. In his business and private life there is not an iota of Divine Authority. The person is driven in all his endeavors through programmed secular motives and does not pause for anything he feels may keep him from attaining his every day, mundane, egotistic goal. In the secular domain, contemporary man is arrogant, vulgar and immoral and never encounters God.

When he does occasionally seek God, he must enter a different domain, a domain that occupies a tiny corner in his life. and one where he has, *כביכול*, confined the Countenance of the Almighty, *שכינה*. At the time that contemporary man steps over the doorstep of the sacred arena, he is transformed and imbued with a strange spirit. He approaches God as a modest, humble, spiritual person. One who prays and strikes his heart when reciting *על חטא וודוי*. He bends down on his knee and murmurs quietly “not my will, but Your will shall transpire”. He sings ecstatically a beautiful song and experiences something wonderful and uplifting.

However, this newfound personality is short lived. In the instant that the praying individual takes leave of the darkened house of prayer and emerges into the sun-drenched street, the mystical-religious feeling dissipates. The humble personality is gone, and in its place the everyday man who lives in the secular arena, the jaded, cynical or expedient executive or politician, reappears.

The Protestant and Catholic Churches have come to terms with the remarkable duality of contemporary man. They are therefore able to reconcile with a religious Franco of Spain, and the protestants have come to accept a religious Malan in South Africa. Judaism never has and never will reconcile itself to accept a similar dichotomy of personality. Halacha prohibits the Jew from living in two domains. A

single domain is the objective. Secular and Sacred do not exist in authentic Judaism. It is either all secular or all sacred. God does not allow Himself to be confined to a small corner in the life of the Jew. The שכינה extends over the entire landscape of human existence: from the most intimate moments to his behavior in society and in public.

Initially, one meets God not in the synagogue, but rather at home, in business, in the factory, on the street, among his friends and acquaintances. If one does not recognize God in these places, he will not be able to find Him in the synagogue. The act of stealing precludes prayer. Anarchy and unchecked pursuit of genius erodes our mission to seek modesty and uniqueness. Taking advantage of an employee or acting cruelly towards the helpless and needy, cause the gates of heaven to close to our prayers.

Synagogue attendance is important as long as it is an extension of general religious conduct. If morality disappears, synagogue attendance becomes meaningless. The prophets preached this idea even with regards to the Temple. How much space has the Talmud devoted to the laws pertaining to the synagogue? A small number of folios in the tractate מגילה! In comparison, how much space is devoted to the ethical/moral public and private behavior of man? The entire corpus of Halachic literature! Judaism contains and demands very little ceremony. Rather, it demands from man discipline and self-control in order that he sanctify his physiological instincts and desires by imbuing them with spiritual meaning and worth. It is not easy to develop such an approach. This type of Judaism cannot truly be supported from a general religious consensus that manifests itself in ceremony and cult initiatives.

Our task is significantly more complicated. There are no shortcuts to studying geometry and other mathematical disciplines, as they are organized didactically. Each principle is built on the previous, and one cannot skip over axioms and theorems. The same is true regarding the study of Judaism: there are no shortcuts. We will not be successful in implanting Judaism in American youth through miracles and fast tracking. The path to Judaism is a long one, full of difficulty, requiring great effort. It is a narrow path up a mountain one must climb by

incrementally creeping higher. It cannot be accomplished through involvement in the Synagogue, or through Oneg Shabbos gatherings, lectures, Chanukah parties or organized ceremonial Passover Sedorim. It requires focused, didactic effort on Jewish education and establishing Jewish elementary schools. We must start with the basics, the Aleph Bet, and slowly climb higher and higher up the mountain “מי? יעלה בהר ה' ומי קום במקום קדשו”

Question: In global circles there is an opinion that the Orthodox movement suffers from unwarranted optimism regarding its future. Those people believe that the socio-cultural climate of America is unsuitable for Torah-based Judaism. Do you believe the Orthodox are correct in their optimism?

Answer: I believe that I have already provided half an answer to this question in my previous answer. If the Orthodox borrow the methods and approach of the Conservative and Reform wings, and are satisfied with superficial accomplishments and empty propaganda, then of course, they will accomplish nothing. However, if it will choose the difficult path of building Yeshivot and raise not only a pious but Torah-true youth, then I believe the Orthodox movement can attain its optimistic goals. My belief in the future of Halachic Judaism is based on three reasons:

- 1) We believe in the eternity of the Jewish People and in the promise that ultimately, they will repent, “וסופן של ישראל לעשות תשובה”. Every Jew, no matter how far he may stray from Judaism, is incapable of extinguishing the deeply ingrained, mysterious love for God, “מים רבים לא יוכלו לכבות את האהבה”, “ונהרות לא ישטפוה”. Therefore, we must never lose hope for a Jew. He is always capable of returning.
- 2) The general mood of modern man, who despite his accomplishments experiences the tragedies spoken of in Ecclesiastes “הגדלתי מעשי וכח' והנה הכל” “הבל ורעות רוח”, is poised to awaken in the Jew a desire for religious-Halachic orientation. Modern man in general, and the Jew in particular, is unhappy and unsatisfied. He is unsure of himself. He is restless and afraid. He feels that there is a significant gap in his life, something important is missing. He feels disconnected from his past. He does not look forward to the coming morning, and therefore he does not enjoy life. The opposite is true, his spiritual situation is a result of man losing his absolute self-worth. He does

not recognize transcendent laws or the vision of sanctity. Everything has been rendered relative and mundane. I believe that only Halachic Judaism, with its laws and requirements, can fill the chasm that has been created in the secular heart. It is because Halacha is authoritative and intervenes in all aspects of human existence, that only Halacha can provide man a Godly and spiritual path, norms and religious discipline, complete and balanced sense of lawfulness, integrity and a normative outlook. In a word, the gifts man seeks so desperately.

- 3) This experience teaches us that the realization of Orthodox Torah Judaism is possible in America. In the past twenty years, thousands of young Jews have grown up in this country who conduct themselves according to Torah and Mitzvot. These young people, most of them Yeshiva students, do not often encounter non-religious Jews. However, it is a fact that the Orthodox movement has successfully raised a Torah-educated generation which does not suffer from the American Orthodox Jewish weakness of the previous generation. The newly raised generation of young Orthodox students is combative, proud and self-sustaining. Their children will also attend Yeshivot and will likely grow up to be faithful Jews.

In Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan alone we find hundreds of students whose parents were born in America. This number of students is small in comparison to the vast number of young Jewish students who grow up completely ignorant of Judaism. However, as the Ramban said regarding the long lives enjoyed by the generations between Adam and Abraham, if those people lived such extended lives, then the other, anonymous people who lived in their generations also enjoyed long lives. So too I say: if a small segment of Jewish youth has been successfully raised and educated in a Torah-true spirit, it is possible for all the others as well. What is possible for the minority is possible for the majority. The entire scientific, inductive, experimental process is based on the same logic. What we observe in a small sample can be extrapolated to work with a larger population. All we require is a strong resolve to demonstrate our successes with the small samples and a willing spirit to undertake the mission. The rest of the task will be completed by God, as it says “לא עליך המלאכה לגמור ולא אתה בן חורין להבטל ממנה”.

Copyright 2023 by Rabbi Josh Rapps. Permission to distribute this summary for individual use, with this notice, is granted. Distribution through electronic or printed media without the author's permission is prohibited.