

## *Emerging From Isolation: A View Towards the Future of American Orthodoxy*

By: YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Henry Kissinger once visited China on behalf of President Richard Nixon, exploring the possibility of closer relations with the West. His hosts felt obligated to show off their city, but had to take him someplace out of the limelight, because the visit was secret and sensitive. They decided upon the Beijing zoo. Kissinger diplomatically feigned interest, until he came upon a scene that startled him. Next to a placid lion calmly sat a lamb, oblivious to any danger. This seemed to Kissinger like something straight out of the *Tanach* he had studied in his youth. Was *Mashiach* hiding out in Beijing? Kissinger found a way to convince his sponsors to take him back to the zoo another time, where he witnessed the same idyllic scene. Kissinger asked the person in charge to explain how he accomplished such miraculous coexistence between natural enemies.

The zookeeper was puzzled. “Nothing miraculous at all. This is the time of day that we bring the lion her lunch. She gets to it when she is in the mood. Every day, we repeat the process.”

We often rush to conclusions about where history is taking us, especially if we are desperate for a change. False messiahs capitalized on this, leaving behind enormous dejection when messianic pretensions were soundly trounced by harsh realities.

We are just as misguided when we ignore signs of actual, incontrovertible change. Especially when we don’t particularly relish the change, we tend to plod along, blinders in place, unaware that our ship has set out on a new course.

This essay will make the case that the American Orthodox community needs to wake up to fundamental differences in our rules of engagement with others, both Jewish and non-Jewish. It will try to show that the assumptions we have used to go about our Orthodox lives are no longer valid, and that we must learn to adjust. Different parts of our community

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will need to adjust in different ways, but all will need to rethink our roles vis-à-vis others. I will try to demonstrate that this adjustment must be in the way we think, not just in the way we act. Lastly, I will argue that this change in attitude might provide ancillary benefits in transmitting Torah values to future generations.

### **The Past**

The post-war decades provided a near-perfect incubator for growth of the American Jewish community. The overt anti-Semitism of Father Coughlin, Henry Ford, and the Department of State gave way to openness to and acceptance of Jews—at least in public discourse. Institutions and neighborhoods that had locked Jews out came to be populated, staffed and headed by Jews. In government, entertainment and academia, Jews achieved outsized prominence and influence. The “Jewish vote” helped assure protection of domestic Jewish interests, and strong bilateral support for Israel. Today, Jews remain the single most admired religious group in America.<sup>1</sup>

The Orthodox community, a minority within a minority, piggy-backed on this good fortune. The growing tolerance of Americans to difference meant that they could accept Jews who dressed differently, had different eating habits, and practiced rituals that seemed strange to them. The courts extended constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion to demand that employers reasonably accommodate the religious practices of their employees, including the observance of Shabbos and Yom Tov, opening up myriad opportunities to *frum* Jews. Identity politics lost its negative connotations; Orthodox Jews were able to turn their votes on the local level to special accommodations, now taken for granted, that added extra cushions to an already comfortable Orthodox life. We could rely on government officials to provide garbage pickup before *Pesach*, and approve our plans for community *eruvim*. They came to our dinners, and spoke about how much they appreciated our contribution to American life.

Whatever we contributed, however, was largely an unplanned consequence of our activity. We were busy for decades with the process of rebuilding Torah life after the catastrophe of the Shoah, largely ignoring everyone else. We lived largely as a community apart from the 95% of American Jews who were not Orthodox. They founded and maintained Jewish hospitals, cultural organizations, social service agencies and JCCs. They were the ones who lobbied Congress. We built Torah schools and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/02/15/americans-express-increasingly-warm-feelings-toward-religious-groups/> accessed 7/2/17

shuls and *mikvaos* and *tzedakah* institutions largely serving our own. We told ourselves that we could not possibly be expected to do everything, and we were entitled to put our limited resources of time and money into concerns that ranked higher on *Hakadosh Baruch Hu's* list of priorities. Very, very little of our donations went to Federations. To be sure, we came together when it was mutually convenient, especially when the State of Israel was existentially threatened.

We were not of one mind within our Orthodox community. Some of us embraced much of the American ethos of equality and mutual respect, and gingerly edged out into limited association with the world beyond. Others were wary, especially so soon after the Shoah. They passed along to successive generations some of the survival tools of Jewish life in Eastern Europe for centuries: an indifference (or worse) to the well-being of the general population, and a fierce desire to stay isolated from its culture and its concerns. They had no interest in being understood by Americans. If anything, they hoped that they could fly beneath the radar, living as they wished without the neighbors probing too much into the whys and wherefores of their practices. Even the most extreme proponents of blessed isolation, however, saw the need to appear in photo-ops with the politicians they hoped would turn their votes into favors.

The division of labor was perhaps not ideal, but it worked. We lived parallel and somewhat symbiotic lives. We provided spill-over benefits to the non-Orthodox community, just as they did to us. We were there to provide their children with a Judaism that was more intensive and authentic when they wanted it, and we offered the promise of Jewish continuity when they began to doubt their own ability to stay the course of the Jewish future. For providing both of these, we were sometimes admired, sometimes despised, and sometimes both.

Throughout, most of us maintained belief in some mythic Jewish unity. We saw ourselves as part of a larger Jewish family. In any family there are differences. That was to be expected in our own, larger Jewish one as well. So the umbrella of the Jewish family was wide enough to include Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, unaffiliated and even atheist Jews. We had all been shaped by a long, remarkable history, even if we had different visions for the future. While we no longer agreed about religious observance, we shared enough to keep the conversation going. Jewish movements that discarded or downplayed mitzvos still swore alle-

giance to what they saw as the values embraced by the Torah. We supported the State of Israel,<sup>2</sup> memorialized the Shoah, and combated anti-Semitism. We voted Democratic.

### The Present

All this has changed. It may soon vanish altogether. Whatever held the mythic<sup>3</sup> Jewish community together has ceased to exist. We have come apart. The mortar that used to hold the different bricks together has crumbled. Minimally, the Orthodox are one group, and all the non-Orthodox are separate and distinct.

These two groups no longer agree about anything at all—not the Jewish past, not the present, and certainly not about the future. Furthermore, we cannot be said to share the same values. If anything, we often line up on opposite sides on important issues.

We do not agree about the centrality of Israel. A few years ago, the Israeli Consulate in Los Angeles brought together a small group of rabbis in a secret meeting, in an effort to devise ways of shoring up popular support for Israel during a crisis period. I naively proposed that rabbis speak about Israel during the coming *Yamim Nora'im*, when they had captive audiences. A very pro-Israel Reform rabbi sadly ventured that this could not happen. Israel was a no-fly zone for pulpit discussion, because the

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<sup>2</sup> Some within our Orthodox world did so enthusiastically. Others had reservations about full participation in the functions of a secular government, while begrudgingly accepting the need to aggressively defend its existence and interests. They knew that in the eyes of the non-Jewish world, Israel meant the Jews, and the Jews meant Israel.

<sup>3</sup> I speak here only in terms of a single Jewish polis, acting in some concert. My glum presentation is not a denial, *chas v'shalom*, of the *kedushah* of every Jew, and the unity of the Jewish people in its attachment to *Knesses Yisrael*, the Jewish national soul. The presence of that *kedushah*, however, does not mean that all people can touch it at all times, and that it can be used to predict how people or groups of people will act. See R. Tzadok HaKohen Mi-Lublin, *Machshavos Charutz* 11:4, *Har Berachah* ed., pp. 91–92, explaining *Chazal's* treatment of some famous evildoers. The Mishnah identified a few that would not merit *Olam Haba*. The Gemara, however, tells us that the *dorshei reshumos* (*Sanhedrin* 104B) disagreed. The authors of the Mishnah came to the conclusion they did because they used the Torah that is accessible to us in our current existence. According to the rules of that Torah, nothing could be said in favor of their achieving eternal life. But the *dorshei reshumos*, however, were able to tap into a Torah that will be available to us in the future, through which they could detect the ineluctable, faint traces (i.e., *reshumos*) of *kedushah* left on any Jewish soul. Those traces would gain for the most estranged Jew a place in the World to Come.

topic was too divisive. Some congregants were supporters, while many, many others were embarrassed by her.

Many non-Orthodox clergy and laypeople continue to work tirelessly on behalf of the Jewish State. But they are a shrinking number, and they are not a good bet for the future. They are not doing all that should and must be done today. The situation on campus is even worse. To many—if not most—young Jews on campus, Israel is a liability, not an asset. Growing up well after the Six Day War, they are the second generation of Jews to have seen Israel depicted only as an “occupier,” the big bully of the neighborhood that oppresses the Palestinians who are beloved by the liberal academic establishment. The belief that Jews are entitled to their own country as much as any other people is dismissed and mocked as hopelessly colonialist, and a sure sign of white-privilege belief.

The bottom line is that Israel just does not make it high enough on the priority list of non-Orthodox Jews any longer. It is not as important to them as abortion rights, protecting the environment, and allowing people to use the restroom of whichever gender they identify with. All of this means that the interests of the largest community of *Yidden* on the planet can count on a shrinking pool of advocates at a time that the assault against its right to exist grows daily.

It’s not just Israel. Other key values of the non-Orthodox are no longer our values. Decades ago, people quipped that Episcopalians were Republicans at prayer.<sup>4</sup> Today, the secular religion of the non-Orthodox hews tightly to the platform of the Democratic Party. The social justice/ “*tikkun olam*” concerns of the non-Orthodox have become the expression of Jewish conscience and responsibility—even to the minority that cares at all about G-d or religion. To many, they have become the sole concerns. Many of those concerns do not resonate with us, the Orthodox. In regard to some very important ones—especially in regard to the LGBT agenda—we take strong opposite positions. In other words, values no longer unite us, but mark out our confrontation zones.

What used to be cracks in a façade have become deep, deep fissures. We do not operate as a single community, and those outside of it can sense it. They know that for the most part there is no Jewish vote—at least not in regard to the issues that are most important to us as Torah Jews. Outside of the Orthodox community, 81% of Jews voted for Hillary. The Orthodox are increasingly Republican.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> That, too, completely reversed itself in the years that followed.

<sup>5</sup> Claims about the Orthodox vote vary. I believe that Republican strength in our community is underestimated. Many Orthodox Jews vote Democratic on the

The impact of this is that our influence as Jews is going to wane. The total number of American Jews is declining, and is heading into free-fall. Outside of the Orthodox, 71% of American Jews marry out.<sup>6</sup> Working off the data from the 2013 Pew study of the Jewish community, the Jerusalem-based Jewish People Policy Institute finds that among all non-*chariedi* American Jews in the child-bearing ages of 25–54, only 13% report being married to a Jewish spouse and raising a child that is Jewish-by-religion.<sup>7</sup> Non-Orthodox Jews defer marriage, avoid it altogether, and have so few children that they might as well be Scandinavians. There is nothing in sight that will change this; it is a community on the brink of extinction.

Orthodox numbers, on the other hand, are quite different. The Orthodox do not intermarry, and they have children far in excess of the break-even point. Their retention rate—far from perfect—is still far better than that of other religions. We are burgeoning and flourishing, *baruch Hashem*.

Writing in the *Forward*,<sup>8</sup> sociologist Steven M. Cohen of Hebrew Union College summed it up:

The Orthodox population (Haredi, centrist, and modern) is exploding. The non-Orthodox are in sharp decline... The growth of the Orthodox and the decline of the others means that the Orthodox “market share” has been soaring. Among the oldest generation, they’re 5% of all Jews. Among the middle generation, they rise to

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local level, because they have had decades of relationship with Democratic politicians. However, they align themselves on many issues—beginning but not ending with Israel—with the more conservative thinking of Republicans, while regarding Democrats as galloping off to the left. According to Pew in 2013—i.e., well before the last presidential election, 57% of Orthodox Jews were Republican or leaned in that direction. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/10/17/eight-facts-about-orthodox-jews-from-the-pew-research-survey/> Accessed July 16, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> <http://israelmatzav.blogspot.com/2013/10/pew-poll-71-of-non-orthodox-us-jews.html>, accessed June 23, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Fishbane, S. and Cohen, S., “Family, Engagement, and Jewish Continuity among American Jews,” <http://jppi.org.il/new/en/article/english-raising-jewish-children-research-and-indications-for-intervention/english-family-engagement-and-jewish-continuity-among-american-jews/english-findings/english-fewer-young-jews-are-raising-children-as-jews-by-religion/#.WUzImWjyPY>, accessed June 23, 2017, Table 5.

<sup>8</sup> <http://forward.com/opinion/357517/dramatic-orthodox-growth-is-transforming-the-american-jewish-community/> accessed July 16, 2017.

15%. And among children, the Orthodox are home to 27% of the total. Within two generations, the Orthodox fraction of the Jewish population has more than quintupled. And it continues to grow.

Meanwhile, the growth of certain non-Jewish groups threatens to diminish our importance. One estimate has it that by 2050, there will be more Muslims in America than Jews.<sup>9</sup> While we don't know where that community will go, we know where it is now. It has its political advocacy groups, its defense agencies, and it is hostile to Israel. There will increasingly be competition for favors and status with politicians. And we, as our total numbers shrink, will increasingly get shut out. We will have to content ourselves with less of the market share; this will likely impact responsiveness of government to our needs. Orthodox Jews—with their own agenda apart from the rest of a dwindling larger Jewish community—will be no match in the competition with other minorities. That does not augur well for maintaining our comfortable, bourgeois lifestyle in America.

There is more. Tolerance is a celebrated value in America. But it is in shorter supply today than just a few years ago in regard to strong religious belief. Barack Obama came into the White House opposed to gay marriage. By the time he left, the Supreme Court had made it the law of the realm, and governments were prosecuting bakers and florists who refused, as a matter of religious conscience, to service ceremonies they considered to be abominable in G-d's eyes. States and localities that tried to prevent anatomical boys who "identified" as girls from sharing locker rooms with their daughters were treated with contempt and boycotts. The fastest growing religious group in America is the "nones," i.e., those who answer "none" to pollsters asking about their religious affiliation.<sup>10</sup> (Within that population, the largest subgroup claims it simply no longer has any use for a G-d concept, once exposed to the explanations of science, or considered the lack of evidence, etc.)<sup>11</sup> Much of America seems to have made a choice for autonomy over authority. To do that, they have had to jettison viewing the Bible as a work that stakes out normative positions, and grow contemptuous of those who do. The only absolute that remains is that there absolutely are no absolutes. The decreasing strength in religious faith will make a small Orthodox community less of a tolerated part of the quilt-work of American religious expression, and more of a

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/14/muslims-expected-to-surpass-jews-as-second-largest-u-s-religious-group/> Accessed July 16, 2017

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/> accessed July 2, 2017

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/> Accessed July 23, 2017.

group of those frowned upon as an anachronistic source of intolerance of the life-styles of others.

Let us summarize what we have said thus far. We in the Orthodox community have relied on others to tend to some Jewish concerns while we occupied a position of relative isolation. We no longer can. At the same time, we can look to a future in which there is far less Jewish influence than there was in the past.

How do we navigate through the new realities? It would seem to me that we could draw two easy conclusions. Firstly, we must recognize our numerical strength, and begin the work that we did not have to do in the past. If we represent ourselves as the future of the American Jewish community, we need to step into the leadership role now. We must take responsibility for things we did not have to previously—especially regarding the defense of Israel in the court of public opinion against all her enemies.

Secondly, to protect what we have, we cannot go it alone. Having become unglued from the rest of the (shrinking) Jewish community in many ways, we are too small to count. We will prevail only if we can build alliances with other groups. The alliances will likely be with groups with which we have considerable overlap in values. Alliances can never be all take and no give. We must be prepared to give. And they are born of relationships. We will have to emerge from our isolation to interact more with other groups—particularly conservative Christian groups, including Black and Hispanic subgroups.<sup>12</sup>

This will not be the work of Orthodox politicians and muckety-mucks alone. Something else has changed about America that will not allow the alliances to be just the work of leaders negotiating in cigar smoke-filled rooms. The flying-under-the-radar attitude we mentioned above no longer works. The internet has changed that forever. There are no secrets. With the click of a mouse, outsiders can easily learn not only what we are doing, but what we are thinking. They are privy to the conversation at the Kiddush clubs of the Five Towns, and at the Boro Park *mikveh*.

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<sup>12</sup> According to Pew, white evangelicals show the highest level of support for Israel of any religious groups. Black and Hispanic show less—but this is all relative. Members of both of these groups show, by a large plurality, more preference for Israel than for the Palestinians. <http://www.people-press.org/2014/07/15/as-mideast-violence-continues-a-wide-partisan-gap-in-israel-palestinian-sympathies/> accessed July 16, 2017. The number of strongly supportive Black and Hispanic churches is still huge, and we need to keep it that way.



Tolerance comes at a price. Americans will tolerate people who look and act differently, as long as the tolerance is reciprocated.<sup>13</sup> They want to believe that we have the same basic level of respect for them that they have for us. One of the most difficult things to tolerate is intolerance. We could ask for a seat at the table in the past, because the others assumed that we regarded them positively, and cared for them from a distance, even as we lived our separate lives. For most of the Orthodox community, this was true. But there are too many exceptions, and they will put any coalition building in jeopardy.

We are going to have to work harder to combat intolerance within our own community. Attitudes that became ingrained through two millennia of hatred of Jews in Europe can't be reversed overnight. But we are well past overnight. There are some attitudes that need to change because people change—and they have changed. It is simply not true that all non-Jews hate all Jews. There are plenty—millions—who love us.<sup>14</sup> We have no idea how long this will last, but it would be foolish to pretend that it is not so, and to squander a *berachah* that Hashem has given us, at least for the moment. There are reasons for the transformation, and they ought to be studied, appreciated and utilized in formulating our response.

We have to take a harder look at some of the memes about non-Jews that some of us pass along. It is untrue that every non-Jew is an unrefined drunkard, without values, and without kindness.<sup>15</sup> It is untrue that all non-

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<sup>13</sup> In the aftermath of the presidential election, there has been much discussion about whether many Americans feel that they have paid too high a price for tolerance. Many have cited Karen Stenner's 2005 study, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*: "All the available evidence indicates that exposure to difference, talking about difference, and applauding difference—the hallmarks of liberal democracy—are the surest ways to aggravate those who are innately intolerant, and to guarantee the increased expression of their predispositions in manifestly intolerant attitudes and behaviors. Paradoxically, then, it would seem that we can best limit intolerance of difference by parading, talking about, and applauding our sameness... Ultimately, nothing inspires greater tolerance from the intolerant than an abundance of common and unifying beliefs, practices, rituals, institutions, and processes."

<sup>14</sup> Adequate treatment of *Chazal's* statement that *הלכה היא בידוע שעשו שונא ליעקב* is beyond the scope of this essay. We will suffice for the moment with the words of the Netziv (*Bereishis* 33:4), who wrote that Esav is described as sincerely moved to love his previously estranged brother when they met. This is meant to teach us that whenever Esav shows us that love, we are to reciprocate it.

<sup>15</sup> Children who are actually taught this—and it pains me to write that there are still some who are—will be at great risk of abandoning Judaism later in life when they meet the many counterexamples, and discover that this is not true. They

Jews only pay lip service to the existence of G-d, and do not take Him seriously. It is true that only we have Torah—and it allows us to build a kind of relationship that others do not have. It is also true that He doesn't expect them to follow the Torah, but He allows any human being to approach Him.

It is true that *avodah zarah* is repugnant to Hashem. It is also true that atheism is worse than *avodah zarah*,<sup>16</sup> and that belief systems which accept the existence of a Supreme Being but see that Being sharing/delegating some power to other beings may not even be forbidden to non-Jews.<sup>17</sup>

It is absolutely forbidden for a Jew to maintain Christian beliefs. Held to a different standard by the Torah in which we are obligated, belief in the Trinity is certainly a repudiation of a normative understanding of Hashem's Oneness. On the other hand, it is simply untrue that all Christians believe in a single, unnuanced, simplistic notion that any fool could see through. It is especially true that most will give full-throated declaration to their belief in G-d's Oneness—and that many have not even contemplated how their belief in one part of the Trinity might conflict with that declaration. They just don't go there. In their minds, they are monotheists.

It is not true that *Chazal* wished that we avoid any and all contact with non-Jews, for fear that we would be poisoned by the encounter. (Medieval Christians and Muslims, on the other hand, were, at times and places, instructed to do just that in regard to Jews!) *Chazal* could have forbidden all contact with non-Jews. Instead, they created halachic barriers that allowed for the contact—but served as powerful reminders that there are lines that we should not cross. These *halachos* allow the contact, but remove much of the threat.

If the American Orthodox community wants to protect its interest for any length of time, *chas v'shalom*, before the arrival of *Mashiach* (or before Jews undertake mass *Aliyah*, even without his stewardship), it will

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begin to wonder whether their teachers lied to them about other ideas as well. I know Muslims who began shedding their Islamic orthodoxy when they encountered Jews they really liked. They realized that their teachers had invented facts about Jews, and they began to question other ideas as well. Why would we believe that Jews will react differently when they experience a disconnect between what they are taught and what they experience?

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Ezra, *Shemos* 20:1.

<sup>17</sup> I don't mean to treat a complicated issue lightly, or push the discussion in one direction. There is much to be said—and has been said—about different opinions about this. Again, it is beyond the scope of this essay. But it is not one-sided, open-and-shut. People should become acquainted with the *mekoros*.

have to learn about these truths and untruths. We cannot forge the alliances we need without this. Looking at our neighbors with a bit more *hasbkeafic* sophistication will be a small but important emergence from our self-imposed isolation.

This emergence just might have greater value to us than its pragmatic benefit. Here is why.

We have seen, at least in parts of the surrounding community, a shift in attitude towards Jews. It is not just a matter of putting prejudice aside, and rejecting various stereotypes about Jews. It is not just that a half-century ago, the Vatican instructed Catholics<sup>18</sup> to drop the notions of deicide and replacement theology (which had been responsible for immeasurable spilling of Jewish blood for centuries), and emphasized that anti-Semitism was a sin. The trajectory that Jewish-Christian relationships have taken is a work in progress, and a good deal more complicated.

Much of the change was a consequence of Christian self-reflection after the Holocaust. Christians conceded that church-inspired anti-Semitism had played a role in poisoning the minds of countless Christians whom Hitler had (correctly) predicted would be all too happy to assist in ridding their countries of the Jews. Denomination after denomination vowed to look at Jews in new ways, and to build bridges of understanding.

When these efforts were successful, they turned the hatred and contempt of two thousand years into tolerance and respect. But it did not end there.

In reexamining their relationship with Jews, some Christians took a closer look at the roots of their faith within Judaism. They saw how so much of their religion literally stood on Jewish thought, on the Jewish experience with G-d, and how many of their practices were really adaptations of Judaism. Some took a harder look at the passages in their Scripture that spoke of Christians as grafted onto a trunk of Judaism, and saw this as an indication of a continued and unbreakable covenant with the Jewish people—the very opposite of replacement theology, which saw all covenants passing to the New Jews—i.e., Christians—while the old Jews were banished to wander and suffer till they would see the light at the end of history. (Others did not need to do this. The covenant with Avraham Avinu was enough to recommend Jews and Judaism to them, and assure them of eternal Jewish purpose.) In some cases, this led to intense interest in things Jewish, to appropriation of Jewish practices (attending a *Pesach Seder* was a popular one), and to some forms of philo-Semitism that take Jews by embarrassed surprise. I could not guess at the number of people

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<sup>18</sup> Keeping in mind that Catholics are the largest Christian group, but a minority of the Christian world is Catholic.

with these attitudes, but it is not a trivial number, and certainly exceeds the number of Jews in the world.

So hatred turned to tolerance. Tolerance turned to fascination and respect.<sup>19</sup> And then things got complicated. The appreciation of a continued role for Judaism turned to expectation—sometimes explicit, sometimes not. It is as if they stumbled upon **כי היא חכמתכם ובינתכם בעיני העמים** before we really took it seriously. If we had this ancient communication from G-d that was eternal, what sage advice did we have for them about the problems they faced? What did Torah say about sundry new issues in a rapidly changing world? Why weren't they hearing from the Jews, who supposedly had some of the answers?

More. They were too polite to say it, but Jews in the flesh just didn't compute with the holiness-driven Jews of the Bible. They leave them with a sense of cognitive dissonance. Why were the Jews they met on the opposite side of so many of the issues that concerned them? Why had they never met a Jew who observed Shabbos? When they heard from the local Reform rabbi, why was her chief concern legitimizing homosexuality?<sup>20</sup>

It should be perfectly clear that there is only one group of Jews who can sustain a conversation with those Christians who want to believe in Jews, and that is Orthodox Jews.<sup>21, 22</sup> The Christians know it; all we have to do is convince the Jews. If we can do that, if we can draw Orthodox Jews into the conversation, we can vouchsafe support for Israel from this

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<sup>19</sup> Consider the words of Anglican professor Gerald McDermott of Beeson Divinity School: "We also need to remember that we have much to learn from Jews who know and love their tradition, for it is a treasure of wise and pious reflection on G-d and Scripture...So we should enter the dialogue with the intent of learning and not just professing or teaching" (in *The New Christian Zionism*, ed. G. McDermott, IVP 2016 p. 329).

<sup>20</sup> I once spoke for a group of conservative Christians deep in the Bible Belt. They sheepishly related that the year before, the Reform rabbi had provided a *Pesach Seder* for them. Her first words were, "Now we Jews don't actually believe that any of these miracles occurred or that there was an Exodus. It is, however, a lovely story and celebration of human freedom."

<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, encounters with Orthodox Judaism are not always positive for Christians either. In some cases, they gawk at apparent over-the-top materialism in the community, and wonder where to find the passion for holiness. But that is for a different essay.

<sup>22</sup> This phenomenon is not limited to Christians. A friend of mine is an evangelical pastor attempting dialogue with Muslim clerics. His preference is to use only Orthodox rabbis, because they are the only ones who have common vocabulary of serious faith with which to converse with religiously serious Muslims.

important group. Conservative Christians around the world are the last large group of consistent and vocal supporters of Israel.

We can forge the alliances we need for survival even as a smaller, less important Jewish remnant. I do not mean, of course, all Orthodox Jews or even most. I do mean more than are doing so today, both rabbis and laypeople who have the education, the personalities, and the people skills to engage their neighbors, whether in publications, in formal meetings, or in friendly conversation with neighbors and coworkers.

I've saved the biggest payoff for last. No one disputes the fact that we are supposed to be an *ohr lagoyim*,<sup>23</sup> a light unto the nations. For many centuries, we understood this in a passive sense. Indeed, Divine Providence allowed us no other way to implement this instruction other than tenacious, unshakeable loyalty to G-d's Word, in the face of all the inducements and all the horrors they could throw at us. We understood that by holding the course, we were teaching the world what it meant to be in a serious relationship with Hashem. It was all we could do. We were sure of that. When Jews were positioned to contribute more directly to societies around them, they had to learn to bite their lips. Anything they said or did would likely be used against them by the next ruler.

Things are different today, or at least seem that way. We have never lived in a society as open and—so far—so tolerant. Ashkenazic Jews certainly haven't lived in a society where many non-Jews actually wanted to hear from them, and found their words helpful to their own faith in G-d.

Does that change anything? Does the fact that Hashem has put us in such a position create new demands upon us? Could it mean that we are expected to be able to distill Torah values and share them more aggressively with the world—not to convert anyone, but to showcase Hashem's wisdom?

Consider the poignant words of R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, ז"ל:<sup>24</sup>

Chazal say<sup>25</sup> there are ten words used to describe prophecy. One of them is burden, or *masa*... In *Moreh Nevuchim*,<sup>26</sup> Maimonides explains that prophecy is truly a burden... The prophet encounters a sublime truth that others have not. He is compelled to share this message with others... Sharing his vision may put him in grave danger... Yet the burden of prophecy gives him no rest. He must repeat what he hears from G-d... When it comes to a great truth, when it comes to

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<sup>23</sup> *Yeshayah* 49:6.

<sup>24</sup> *Derashot HaRav*, pgs. 147–148.

<sup>25</sup> *Bereishis Rabbah* 44:6.

<sup>26</sup> *Moreh Nevuchim* 2:37.

Torah or to tradition, a Jew should be unable to withhold this knowledge.

On the other hand, might we be deluding ourselves into thinking that traditional enemies have changed the way they see us? Are we looking at a lamb in a lion's cage?

When we teach history, we point to the words *בִּינו שְׁנוֹת דּוֹר וְדוֹר*. R. Menachem Ben-Tzion Zacks explains<sup>27</sup> this as related to the word *shinui*, change. We are instructed not only to remember the past, but to see the changes that Hashem works into the fabric of Jewish history, and respond to them. If we have an opportunity to speak—even if only for the moment—might we not be expected to use it?

If we would, we might find ourselves with a solution to a growing problem. Much of Orthodox success in America was a product of people with a clear sense of mission and purpose. They brought passion to their work. They could never have anticipated the dramatic growth of our community. In the process of that growth, some of us have become robotic. We go through the motions, but can't really explain to others—or ourselves—what it is all about. In all parts of the Orthodox community, there is often a sense of malaise. We know we are doing the right thing, but just why is it important? We have neglected too many of the classic works that make clear what it is all about.

For several years, I have helped lead a summer program for talented and curious yeshivah men sponsored by the Tikvah Fund, in which we examine the importance of the political process to the Torah community. I ask candidates why they wish to join a program that will eat up the better part of a week of their summer break. The most frequent answer I receive is that they deeply sense that Torah must have a good deal to say about the questions that preoccupy much of mankind, but are not generally discussed in typical yeshivos. Spending time with peers and *rabbeim* who believe the same is something that sounds intriguing to them.

Indeed, Torah has much to say about everything important in life. Like any other part of Torah inquiry, we get sophisticated results only when people with finely-honed skills in Torah study apply themselves to the questions. If our emergence from isolation includes a willingness to speak with Torah conviction to parts of the non-Jewish world, we will be extending our Torah conversation and our *hasbkefic* inquiry to new places. Many of us are aware of the huge *kiddush Hashem* that Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks routinely makes in government, academic and religious circles. What might the effect be on our own community if in the next decade we

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<sup>27</sup> Menachem Tzion, *Devarim* 32:7.

produced a few hundred *bnei Torah* equipped with even only some of his skills? My guess is that it would spark in many of us a new sense of pride in Torah, and a new line in our national mission statement: directly and actively bringing honor to Hashem and His Torah by showcasing its wisdom to the larger world. That might give us all a needed boost.

Whether or not this boost occurs, and whether or not we produce *bnei Torah* who can showcase the power of Torah thought; the other elements of our analysis seem certain. To survive the changes already taking place in America, much more of the Orthodox community must come out of its isolation. We need to take over more of the workload previously assumed by the non-Orthodox, and we need develop strong relationships with other groups. Each generation has its challenge. This will be part of the challenge in the years to come. 