



# THE REAL CHALLENGE OF ORTHODOXY

Arthur Green

*The President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and a Contributing Editor, Arthur Green is the editor of the recently published Jewish Spirituality (Crossroad Books).*

We have all been witness the past two decades to a remarkable growth and resurgence of Orthodoxy, both in the United States and in Israel. The Orthodox community, once thought in this country to be a slowly dying remnant of East European Jewish life, has grown in numbers, has attracted many serious young Jews looking for a way to return to the tradition, and has about it a new sense of pride and an awareness of a great role in the future of the Jewish people. Demography seems to indicate that of the surviving Jewish community in the next century, an increasingly significant minority will belong to the Orthodox.

How are we non-Orthodox Jews to relate to all this? The truth is that we are in conflict about it. On one level, we know that the resurgence of Orthodoxy is "good for the Jews." A larger number of committed observant Jews in our community will do much for the survival of the Jewish people and Jewish tradition in future generations. The growth of Orthodoxy, beyond what it means for the bare bones of Jewish survival, will do much for the continued existence of Jewish learning and reverence for the tradition to which we are all devoted. As lovers of the Jewish tradition, we cannot but rejoice at seeing a greater number of Jews, particularly those who were formerly alienated, living full Jewish lives.

At the same time, there are many areas in which we find ourselves offended by the values promulgated in the

Orthodox community. This offense we feel is not only that of modern Westerners and liberals. It is felt also because of the particular Jewish ethic that has evolved for us over the past two hundred years — of living both as Jews and as citizens and active participants in the world. We are upset to see young Jews having to check their intellectual baggage at the doorway as they enter the world of the yeshivah. The bifurcated mind that allows for scientific method and critical consciousness applied to the profane realm but not to that of the sacred strikes us as intellectually dishonest. Insofar as our Judaism and our religious search are a pursuit of truth, we cannot tolerate the negation of those means we know best to employ in such a search.

We are also often disturbed by questions of psychological self-awareness, wondering whether both the *ba'alei teshuvah* and those who welcome them with such open arms are sufficiently aware of the psychological complexities involved in a turn toward any sort of orthodoxy. Religion should serve to open the mind, to raise questions, to expand spiritual horizons. It displeases and disturbs us when a religious attitude has ready answers to all doubts and can reply to questions before they are even asked. We cannot but wonder whether some of the same motivations that lead people to cult groups and other fundamentalist religious movements, including the search for security, operate to a degree in

some "returns" to Orthodoxy.

We must also add that we are hurt, both as Westerners and as Jews, by certain attitudes that persist in many circles of the Orthodox community. These include attitudes toward non-Jews, whose full humanity does not always seem to be recognized. Very sadly in North America, attitudes toward the goy often seem to combine with purely American stereotypes concerning blacks, Hispanics, and other non-Europeans.

Attitudes toward women within the Orthodox community are also a major concern of ours. I refer here not to the halakhically demanded separations between men and women, but to the persistence of an old and dated view that women are less than fully serious in intellectual capacities and professional potentials.

We are also worried and disturbed by Orthodox attitudes toward heterodox Jews. The categories that tradition offers for understanding our behavior are insufficient and demeaning. We know that ways can be found even within the framework of full Orthodox observance to repair some of these attitudes. We note with special dismay the fact that our open-minded friends in the liberal Orthodox community increasingly see themselves as a threatened and embattled minority.

### ***The Orthodox Challenge***

Most importantly, however, the growth of Orthodoxy challenges us to ask and define

who we are as religious but non-Orthodox Jews. Jewish life in North America has been dominated since the days of the great immigration by a coalition of religious liberals and secularists, having in common a positive nostalgic relationship towards the tradition but a certain disdain for Orthodoxy. Now we liberal Jews are on the defensive, not yet a minority, but nevertheless called upon to define ourselves. It is almost as though we are the political party now out of office, and parties do well in such times to examine their conscience, goals, and commitments. I would like to articulate some of those values which I believe we share, particularly insofar as they are called forth by the challenge of Orthodoxy.

The essential question Orthodoxy poses to us is this: Are you serious about your Jewish life? Can you really be reli-

---

## **We believe that the Torah is a human creation written in the spirit of divine revelation.**

---

giously serious within Judaism and not be Orthodox? The form that challenge usually takes has to do with the issue of demand. Are you willing to let the tradition make demands on you? Or are you in fact non-Orthodox because you cannot or have chosen not to live up to the demands of tradition in their full intensity?

Our answers to this challenge are often pat. How many times have we said, "It's easier to be Orthodox, where all the decisions are made for you."

The fact is that such a response is somewhat dishonest. It is hard to be an Orthodox Jew in the modern world. This difficulty is not only the obvious physical one, including the great inconvenience of the regimen of the mitzvot in daily life, but is more significantly a psychological one. We should not underestimate the energy that must be devoted to maintaining a system of belief and way of living that, on the surface, is so at odds with the surrounding society and its values.

---

### ***The Torah***

---

Where then do *we* start? The Torah is not divine for us in the sense that it was for prior generations of Jews. We do not believe that the text was dictated by God in an authoritative manner. In general we believe that the Torah is a human creation written in

the spirit of, or response to, divine revelation. Sinai remains essential for us as a symbolic moment. It is the place and time where *Anokhi* ("I am") was revealed to the Jewish people (or where Israel "discovered" God, if you prefer) and where the cluster of responses — theological, devotional, and ethical/moral — of the Jewish people to that "I am" of God began to crystallize.

In this sense, oral and written Torah are not distinguished for us. Both are in fact oral



Torah, creations of Israel in response to the divine imperative for holy living. Surely the Torah remains a bearer of holiness for us. It remains the sacred text in Jewish tradition for us as well as for the Orthodox. Rather than seeing the entire document as binding upon us, however, we see ourselves as commanded to *seek out* holiness in the Torah — where Torah refers broadly to the sources, texts, and forms of the Jewish tradition. Our Judaism proclaims to us that the divine presence is to be found in these sources as it is also found in examining ourselves, in loving relationships with others, and in the beauty of the natural world.

### **Holiness**

As Jews we find a focus to our feelings of, and strivings for, holiness through the symbolic language that Torah, in its broadest sense, communicates to us. Holiness is found in the tradition not because it was dictated by God, but for more subtle and more complex reasons. The countless generations of Jews who lived holy lives, who sought faith by reading these texts and by living these forms, have left their mark. The cumulative *kavvanah* (meditative intention) of the generations is not lost. It serves to enrich, to deepen, and ultimately to sanctify its traditions as bearers of the presence of God.

Holiness enters the tradition in the way the Talmud tells us the messiah will come — only *beheseh hada'at*, when we are

not looking for it. If you ask us the question in a positivistic vein, “Do you believe that Torah is divine revelation?” our answer has to be in the negative. But if you phrase your question in a different trope and say, “Do you believe

mystery of nature, we share with all of humanity. We would want to say that the sanctity in the commandments comes about through Israel.

The point is that there is a world of holiness here for us, and something deep within us

---

### **We believe that the traditions of Israel contain somewhere within them the presence of God.**

---

that the traditions of Israel contain somewhere within them the presence of God?” our answer is an unswerving affirmative. Of course, that presence is revelatory, though not in a literal sense; it is even demanding, as it calls upon us to seek further, to strive more deeply, to act more fully in consonance with its vision. It does not obligate us, however, to live the life chosen by Orthodoxy.

The rabbinic sources discuss two sorts of holiness under the categories of distinction between Shabbat and other holy days. In the Shabbat liturgy, we praise God “who sanctified Israel and the seasons.” The rabbis here remind us that the holiness of Shabbat precedes and exists independently of that of Israel; it dates from the Creation itself. The festivals, on the other hand, derive their holiness only from Israel, who celebrates them and invests those days with sacred presence.

We are now saying that all the holiness that is specifically Jewish is of the latter sort. The holiness of Creation, our awe before the grandeur and

responds to it. Traditional Jewish prayer, even if we do not intellectually “believe” each word of it, calls forth a response from the heart that we cannot ignore. The cycle of the year as lived by tradition, sacred celebration of the cycle of life itself, the use of Jewish religious language — all of these are terribly important to us. Our lives both as Jews and as human beings would be incredibly impoverished, almost unthinkable, without these. In this sense, we are deeply serious about our Jewishness.

---

### **Buber**

---

Why does such an attitude of positive embrace not suffice to carry us to full observance of the commandments? Even if we do not do so for authoritarian reasons, why does this religious existentialism not lead us to a full life of observance, as the German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig would have hoped? In his formulation, can the mitzvot not become *commandments* for us even if they are not to be *law*?

The fact is that Rosenzweig’s protagonist in the debate over

observance, Martin Buber, perhaps knew us better. Buber claims that there is something in law itself or even in the notion of commandment that tends to stifle the spirit. Law, especially in the ritual realm, is properly concerned with the details of acceptable performance. This concern, early in the history of Judaism, already spilled over into an overwhelming preoccupation, even an obsessiveness, with detail. *The freedom we find ourselves needing, that which allows us to live fully in the image of God in our times, is choked in the course of such obsessive concern.*

### No Longer Servants

It is this general objection to the life of halakhah, beyond the specifics that may offend us for some particular moral reason or other, that seems to motivate us. Buber was much influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche and his proclamation of freedom from the religious restraints of old. While Nietzsche has been much abused in the twentieth century, the tradition that he (as well as Buber, Sartre, Camus, and others) represents needs to be taken seriously. We are no

longer content to see ourselves as "servants" of God or as bearers of "the yoke of the commandments." We insist that we have a certain freedom to create our own lives, to choose our own patterns, to find where it is among the multiple paths of tradition that we find holiness.

**We are no longer content to be bearers of "the yoke of the commandments." We insist that we have a certain freedom to choose our own patterns.**

The freedom we know as moderns is not the freedom of the maxim of the tradition — "Only those engaged in Torah are free." We are not seeking protection from the dangers of night or the evil spirits by turning to a traditional religious life. It is enrichment, depth, and personal fulfillment that we seek in our return to the sources of Judaism. Of course, Freudians would disagree that we have the power or freedom to create our own lives. But here our Judaism must oppose Freudian orthodoxy and its determinism just as it opposed the determinism of certain strands of astrological thought long ago. We seek a religious life that works toward the maximalization of

human growth that will allow us to stretch toward the life of divinity.

### Spiritual Freedom

The fact is that we are *Yisrael*, strugglers, wrestlers with God in the way we relate to our tradition, not submitters

to its authority. We are thankful for the fact that submission to divine will is not the only paradigm we have for relationship with God or with religion. So here we are, lovers of the tradition even down to its finest details (how we love to hear about them when we read them in an Agnon or Shalom Aleichem story!), but we are unwilling to bear that tradition as a yoke.

I like to think that this unwillingness is for a new reason, that of spiritual freedom. We fit into neither of the two categories that the tradition knows for those who reject the commandments. One does it for spite, the other does it out of weakness.

We are a third group, hopefully rejecting religious authority "for the sake of heaven," which is to say that we are trying to live a life that is at once sacred and free. Our problem is that it is so easy to slip into either of the other two categories of rejecters, either into the convenience of one or the cynicism of the other. How can we ever be

### The Eagle's Treasure

(continued from page 10)

minute, and I will fill my hat as well." The eagle waited almost until the very last moment, and finally it flew off without him.

All of a sudden the rich

brother felt heat rising up from the earth and realized that the danger was close. He ran to look for the eagle, but it was gone, and the rich brother perished in that fire with his pockets full. ■



sure that our lives outside the regimen of halakhah are really for the sake of true spiritual freedom and not for either convenience or spiteful rejection?

This is where we are caught. We want to be religiously serious without being narrow, constricted, or ghettoized, either socially or intellectually. We want our religious lives to apply to the great issues in the shadow of which we live: to nuclear holocaust, to war and peace, to ecological survival. We thus stand with Buber in wanting to blur the distinctions between the holy and the profane; we want to relate to the outside world in *kedushah* (holiness).

We first learn *kedushah* in our lives as Jews, in the way we treat special moments, sacred objects, holy books, holy places. We want to carry it beyond these borders, to expand the borders of the holy. We do believe that we as Jews, along with members of other religious communities, have things to teach the secular world. We believe that a sense of the holy is desperately needed by moderns who are increasingly feeling the emptiness of profane lives.

But we also know that the outside world has tremendous power over us and indeed is a part of us ourselves. We are products of the general civilization, in our case the American, as we are of the Jewish. Are we kidding ourselves? Is it really that we want to bring the holy into the profane? Or are we just dressing up our compromises?

We seek and need the spiritual freedom — including freedom from a stranglehold by the tradition itself — in order to be the sorts of religious persons that we want to be. At the same time, to know when or to what degree we are acting out of this seemingly global need and when we are just “giving in” to convenience or ever encroaching secularization is more than we trust ourselves to determine.

### *Privacy and Demand*

What vehicles have we for dealing with this series of problems? The truth is that we have nothing but ourselves and one another. The communities in which we live, including

ultimately one another, in the presence of the God within us that demands full and profound honesty: Is the tradition working in me, in us, as it should be? Is our use of the tradition bringing us closer to God, realizing us more fully as Jews and as humans, bringing out the divine image in us? Could we — should we — be doing more, or perhaps less, or doing things differently, to live the Jewish religious life that we claim to care so much about?

Perhaps most importantly: Are we *growing* in our lives as Jews? Do we know more than we did a few years ago? Is our Jewish repertoire expanded? The alternative to such growth is living off the past, nourish-

### **A sense of the holy is desperately needed by moderns who are increasingly feeling the emptiness of profane lives.**

both *havurot* and liberal synagogues, have generally accepted a consensus of respect for privacy when it comes to the questions we are here addressing.

There is much to rejoice about in that sense of privacy. We do not look into one another's pots. We do not sneer at those who are less observant than we have chosen to be. We recognize that we are a broad coalition of people with varying degrees of commitment, and we try to be open to one another.

Yet we need each other's help. The community has to help each of us determine what is right for our lives as Jews. We must ask ourselves and

ing ourselves as adults from a Judaism learned and experienced firsthand only in childhood. At that point our devotion is on the path to becoming mere nostalgia.

We do not need to prove to the Orthodox community that our devotion to Judaism or to God is as serious and, in its own way, as demanding of us, as theirs is. We do, however, need to demonstrate this to ourselves. It would be wise of us to take the new pride of Orthodoxy as a goad to our own Jewish commitments and allow it to help us define who we are, where we stand, and in what way we are ultimately serious about our version of Jewish life. ■



# RECONSTRUCTIONIST

VOL. LII/NO. 2

OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 1986/TISHREI-HESHVAN 5747

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The RECONSTRUCTIONIST addresses religious, political, social, and moral issues of contemporary Jewish life; explores modes of spiritual growth for the individual Jew and for Jewish communities; and reviews the significance of Jewish civilization in all of its facets, past and present. It strives to be innovative and, when necessary, controversial. Thus, the RECONSTRUCTIONIST serves as a medium for the continuing development of Reconstructionist ideas, practices, and institutions.

## CONTENTS

Editorials	Contemporary American Issues	Talking Torah
<p><b>5</b> The Golden Door</p> <p><b>6</b> Yarmulke Rights</p> <p>Supreme Court Justice</p> <p><b>7</b> Violence against Arab Americans</p> <p>Basic Principles Abraham N. Winokur</p>	<p><b>11</b> The Real Challenge of Orthodoxy Arthur Green</p> <p><b>16</b> Jewish Souls: A Midrashic Dialogue Seth Watkins Simkha Weintraub</p>	<p><b>21</b> The Rainbow Connection Lise Winer</p>
<b>Voice of Tradition</b>	<b>Spirit in Practice</b>	<b>Books</b>
<p><b>8</b> The Eagle's Treasure Howard Schwartz</p> <p><b>24</b> Whoever Wishes to Be Wise: Jewish Commercial Law Stephen M. Passamaneck</p>	<p><b>18</b> Tashlikh Hershel Jonah Matt</p> <p><b>19</b> Leshem Yihud: Reconstructionist Unification Everett Gendler</p> <p><b>28</b> Passing On Our Inheritance Eugene Sucov</p>	<p><b>30</b> <i>Coat of Many Colors: Pages from Jewish Life</i> by Israel Shenker Stephen J. Whitfield</p> <p><b>31</b> <i>Victory Dances: The Story of Fred Berk</i> by Judith Brin Ingber Judith Kaplan Eisenstein</p> <p><b>32</b> <i>The Periodic Table</i> by Primo Levi Robert Leiter</p>

Unsigned editorials represent the consensus of the Editorial Board.

RECONSTRUCTIONIST (ISSN 0034-1495; USPS 457-140) is published eight (8) times per year (September, October-November, December, January-February, March, April-May, June, July-August) by the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot, 270 West 89th Street, New York, NY 10024. Postmaster: Send change of address to: RECONSTRUCTIONIST, 270 West 89th Street, New York, NY 10024. Office of the Editor: Dr. Jacob J. Staub, c/o Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Church Road and Greenwood Avenue, Wyncote, PA 19095. Subscription \$20 per year; foreign \$3 extra; single copies \$3. Membership in the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation \$50 per year, includes subscription to RECONSTRUCTIONIST. All unsolicited manuscripts should be sent to the Office of the Editor and must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Second class postage paid at New York, NY © 1986 by RECONSTRUCTIONIST. Available in microform from University Microfilms International. Indexed in INDEX TO JEWISH PERIODICALS.