

## Avoiding the Slide into Extremism

By Harvey Belovski



Years ago, a prominent London rabbi visited the town where I was learning. I called upon him at the home of his mother, the widow of a world-renowned *rosh yeshivah*. During the conversation, the *rebbetzin* asked her son if I was “normal.” When she seemed satisfied with her son’s response (apparently I qualified, but only just!), she leaned back and continued the conversation as though nothing had happened. While at the time I wasn’t quite sure what she had intended by “normal,” I now believe she meant balanced, moderate in behavior, sensitive to the needs of others yet deeply committed to a life filled with Torah study and punctilious mitzvah observance. It has become clear to me that for many, this is not an easy or even a desirable path to adopt.

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Much has been written about the “slide to the right” in the Orthodox community. Professor Samuel Heilman devoted his most recent work to the American manifestation of this phenomenon;<sup>1</sup> blogs and social commentators refer to the topic increasingly frequently. This “slide” has a number of expressions, including a creeping tendency towards stringency in halachah, growing uniformity of practice and garb and the increased role of rabbinical regulation in all aspects of life, including those previously considered outside of its purview. In some places, such changes have been accompanied by the proliferation of restrictions on personal autonomy, the preaching of a narrow and homogeneous version of Judaism, growing rejection of the secular world and its aspirations and the promulgation of bans against those who express dissenting opinions. Examples from early 2007 include the attempt to introduce segregated buses in religious dis-

tricts in Israel, the restrictions imposed on women’s higher education in *Chareidi* schools there and the decision of a school in the United Kingdom to refuse admission to children whose mothers drive.

The purpose of this article is to investigate some of the causes of this trend, and to offer a model of how to live a fully-evolved religious life in the current climate, yet avoid extremism.

### “Raising the Wall”

In his now-famous essay “Rupture and Reconstruction,”<sup>2</sup> Haym Soloveitchik identified certain changes in the Jewish world that have led to greater stringency in observance. He contends that there has been a loss of “the dual tradition of the intellectual and mimetic,” a means of absorbing halachic norms through a type of natural spiritual osmosis. By living alongside and observing the practices of parents, siblings and teachers, previous generations absorbed a complete mode of Jewish life with scant recourse to the guidance of halachic texts. The breakdown of this mode of acquiring halachic

norms began in the late nineteenth century due to factors such as war, demographic movement and the replacement of the home with the yeshivah as the primary source of halachic knowledge. This last factor meant that reference to legal works as the last word in practice became more common; this has resulted in a swing towards stringency. While this may explain some of the technicalities behind the adoption of stringency, there are also simpler factors at work.

While the advance of modernity has been a challenge to all religious societies for at least the last 200 years, it is argued that the pace of secularization and the pernicious influence of contemporary culture have greatly increased. It is common for rabbinical leaders to refer to this as a motivation for “raising the wall” around the Torah community by restricting access to those experiences beyond it and heightening the standards of observance and conformity they demand. This has inevitably contributed to an “ivory-tower” mentality in some parts of the community.

The Torah community is still recovering from the devastating losses of the European Holocaust, during which the bulk of its leadership, infrastructure and adherents were annihilated. The religious world has risen with astonishing success to the apparently insurmountable challenge of rebuilding what the Nazis destroyed. Yet this has not been without cost. It is obvious that the urgency to reconstruct the religious world demanded an extraordinary degree of commitment and a desire to focus completely on the holy task at hand—at the expense of any involvement with the outside world. The success of this enterprise was articulated by the Slonimer Rebbe who remarked that “we are seeing with our own eyes the most amazing phenomenon of our generation: suddenly, a generation has risen and prospered, a generation of Torah and meticulous attention to the commandments. The houses of learning blossom again and the halls of the *Chassidim* thrive in all their glory.”<sup>3</sup> Despite this astounding achievement (which the Slonimer Rebbe attributed to Divine intervention), it has been argued that the process now needs to change direction. Coupled with an understandable acute mistrust of the Gentile world that gave rise to Nazism, this focus on rebuilding in the aftermath of the Holocaust has fostered an insular society so exceedingly protective of its position that it sometimes exhibits symptoms of extremism. The historian Rabbi Berel Wein has suggested that some parts of the Orthodox world behave as though the destruction of European Judaism took place just a few years ago, rather than two generations ago.<sup>4</sup>

### The Search for Meaning

A further cause of the “slide to the right” may be the search for meaning and inspiration that has characterized the lives of many young Jews for the past forty years. Factors considered influential in generating this phenomenon include the mortal threat presented by the Cold War, the “Sexual Revolution,” the Six-Day War, regnant “insipid establishment



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Judaism,” the reduction in anti-Semitism and the concomitant increase in out-marriage, the explosion of university education among young Jews, and the increased affluence that has afforded seekers the luxury to think about the purpose of life. These trends have undoubtedly affected even the most insular parts of the Jewish world.

Many people became *ba'alei teshuvah* during this period and countless others greatly strengthened their commitment to lives of Torah observance. This desire for passionate and inspirational Judaism may prompt one to seek guidance from holy men in the tiniest details of life and to withdraw from any experience that detracts from one's objectives. In some parts of the non-Chassidic community there is an observable swing towards Chassidic styles of leadership: the *rosh yeshivah* (and, to a lesser extent, the *rav*) is revered as much as the Chassidic *rebbe*, his advice treated as almost infallible. While the *rebbe* model has been successful in many communities, and the influence of Chassidic thought, music and inspiration has vastly enriched the Jewish world, this trend also has its drawbacks. It makes the majority dependent on a small number of key people, and when misapplied, fosters a monochromatic vision of Jewish life and stifles individual thought.

The search for meaning and inspiration is, of course, fundamental to any mature religious life. This may be detected today in the increasing number of youths from Modern Orthodox homes who still largely identify with their upbringing yet wear large yarmulkes, grow *peyot* and study Chassidic and other esoteric literature.

Last winter, I visited a young woman from my community who was studying in a modern-style seminary in Israel. While there, I had a fascinating conversation with the head of the institution, who told me that the youth of the Mizrahi world are constantly seeking spirituality and finding it in curious places. He mentioned the word “*Chabbakuk*” in this context—not in

reference to the Biblical prophet, but alluding to the inspiration that these youth draw from the worlds of Chabad, Breslov and Rav Kook. Of course, broadening one's religious horizons by sampling a range of Jewish experiences is a positive thing: despite the nervousness that it engenders in some parents, it is not to be confused with extremism. Yet some of the systems of thought and practice so attractive to young people contain radical elements, which, when applied without careful guidance and support, often manifest themselves in

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extreme and sometimes bizarre behavior. It is easy to see how these factors have led to a tendency to extremism in the modern Jewish world.

Some observers of today's Jewish world consider the drift towards extremism inevitable. They argue that in a world whose values are often antithetical to those of Judaism, it is impossible to cultivate vibrant, inspired Jews without the possibility of narrowness. I disagree and firmly believe that religious fervor can be uncoupled from extremism and that it is possible to live a passionate Jewish life without descending into radicalism. The solutions are not immensely complicated, but they require bravery, skill and time to implement: in short, *chinuch* and *rabbanut*.

I am no expert in the field of *chinuch*, education, yet I perceive that emphasizing three specific areas could be beneficial. First, I believe there is a need to adopt the educational theory of the Piaceszna Rebbe, as articulated in his work *Chovat HaTalmidim*. A polemic against the Orthodox education

system in early twentieth-century Poland, the author's introduction is dedicated to describing *chinuch*.<sup>5</sup> He defines it as a method “to increase and unlock the nature and capability of a child, which are present within him in small measure or remain latent and concealed, and to discover them ... and he will not depart from his path even when he becomes elderly.” In contrast, he notes that “one who instructs or even teaches by rote is not assured that the child or student ... will also do as he has been told when he grows up and is responsible for himself.” The Piaceszna Rebbe also notes that “one who instructs or teaches by rote alone does not need to focus on the child or student to know his nature and intellectual capabilities.” In short, a principal Jewish educational objective is to develop the student by identifying his or her innate abilities and awakening them. This form of pedagogy requires immense skill, demands the formation of a deep bond between teacher and student and is, perforce, time-consuming. Yet it assumes that the development of individuality in the student lies at the very core of proper *chinuch*. In turn, this presupposes that Judaism values individual expression and accords respect to those who live their Jewish lives in ways different from one's own.

Second, we need not fear teaching a range of views on Jewish philosophical and theological issues to older children, nor reject serious study thereof as part of yeshivah curricula. It is a matter of regret that these key areas of Jewish thought are often taught in a monolithic manner, as if there were only one opinion on every fundamental issue of doctrine and belief. Jewish thinkers have produced an unparalleled body of literature that tackles every existential and theological issue; there are many disagreements between these writers, sometimes of the most profound nature. Even a rudimentary awareness of the breadth of traditional Jewish outlooks combats narrow, small-minded religious thinking. If inculcated from childhood, these messages will produce members of

the community for whom respect for a range of Jewish lifestyles, difference of opinions in halachah, modes of dress and outlook come quite naturally.

Third, we should educate our children to confront, rather than fear, the outside world. Even the most isolated enclave is influenced somewhat by the Zeitgeist and must, therefore, deal with its manifold expressions. Banning certain types of literature, non-business access to the Internet and other manifestations of the world-beyond-the-walls is unlikely to be effective. Apart from investing them with an aura of *ta'ama d'issura* (taste of the forbidden), such insularity risks producing adults who are unable to use the essential tools of the modern world constructively and safely. Of course, there are nauseating aspects of many modern cultural manifestations which must be rejected at all costs, but to proscribe access to them altogether is to breed a culturally myopic and isolationist Jewry.

### The Rav-Talmid Relationship

Aside from *chinuch*, another solution is to strengthen what one might loosely refer to as “old-fashioned *rabbanut*.” By this, I mean the development of a meaningful relationship between a rabbi and an “advisee” in the spirit of the rabbinical dictum “*aseh lecha rav*.”<sup>6</sup>

While in recent decades there has been unprecedented focus on the pronouncements and demands of the rabbinical elite, very few people actually have a personal relationship with an experienced spiritual guide. While a *rosh yeshiva's* speech to a mass gathering may be inspiring or a Chassidic *rebbe's tisch* may motivate his *Chassidim* to live richer religious lives, neither of these can replace the personal touch of a real *rav-talmid* relationship. Public discourse and published writings (the main connection between the major rabbinical leadership and the public) are an essential feature of a vibrant Torah society, yet are, unavoidably, universal in nature and cannot cater to nuanced individual needs. Even one who has direct access to a great Torah figure is unlikely to be able to build a meaningful discourse with him because of the sheer number of people seeking his guidance. Consequently, general statements are understood to refer to everyone, irrespective of their circumstances. The results are patent.

Real *rabbanut* enables one to profit from this system without encountering its pitfalls. An experienced *rav* will have a firm grasp of the range of outlooks, halachic positions and lifestyle choices that exist within the Torah system. When he knows the background, life-challenges, strengths and weaknesses of the person he is advising, the *rav* will apply his knowledge in a light-handed, specific and individually focused way, designing an approach to Jewish life that is tailor-made for the *talmid*. This “old-fashioned” mode of rabbinics is emotionally demanding, time-hungry and requires highly-trained rabbis, yet it enables its practitioners to become inspired yet balanced Jews.

I often think about the moment when the *rebbe'tzin*

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asked her son, who is my *rav* and advisor, if I was “normal.” That experience taught me that it is possible to live an inspired, Torah-true life without sliding into extremism. What I hope I have conveyed here is that in today’s religious climate it is easy to follow the crowd in its march to the right. In contrast, it demands courage, sensitivity and a great deal of effort to devise and live an inspirational Torah life while still maintaining one’s equilibrium. **JA**

### Notes

1. *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy* (California, 2006).
2. “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Tradition* (summer 1994).
3. Speech delivered in memory of Rabbi Avraham Weinberg by Shalom Noah Brozofsky. Quoted in Rose, Aharon, “The Haredim: A Defense,” *Azure* 25 (summer 2006).
4. Speech delivered at the “Encounter” Conference, J.F.S. (London, 11 December 2005).
5. Shapira, Kelonimos Kalmish, “*Chat with Teachers and Boys’ Fathers*,” *Chovat HaTalmidim*, Va’ad Hasidey Piaceszna, n.d., first printed Warsaw, 1930.
6. *Mishnah Avot* 1:6.