

Omissions in the Centennial Symposium

■ Especially because the questions framing the Centennial Symposium [Fall, '98] were so wide-ranging, we were disappointed by the omission of a major issue facing the American community: its continued presence in America following the establishment of the State of Israel. How can we account for the dismal rate of *aliyah* from America in the past 50 years, and what can be done to increase it?

Perhaps because living in the land of Israel was not a realistic option for so many centuries, this great *mitzvah* had faded from the consciousness of the Diaspora Jew. But, while addressing the ongoing challenges of *aliyah*, we must recognize the historic opportunity that is now before us, thank God, and adjust our priorities accordingly. Today, each and every American Jew must seriously evaluate his or her ability to reside in Israel. One who is honestly committed to the Torah's ideals surely appreciates the land of Israel's inherent sanctity, its centrality in Jewish thought, and the singular opportunity it affords to observe *mitzvot* more fully. Therefore, whether the *mitzvah* of living in Israel today is an affirmative obligation or "merely" the fulfillment of a religious ideal (a debate among halachic authorities), the Orthodox leadership must work to raise the community's consciousness of *aliyah*. While particular individuals may conclude that there are legitimate reasons for them to remain in the Diaspora for a given time, the failure even to place the issue on the agenda, both personal and communal, is inexcusable.

Hadassa and Adam Klein
Elizabeth, New Jersey

■ I greatly enjoy reading your magazine and I look forward to its arrival. The articles written for the Orthodox Union's Centennial

Symposium about the future of American Orthodoxy were enlightening and I appreciate the views expressed by both rabbis and lay leaders. However, if we are going to address the future of Orthodoxy in America I would have liked to see an article written by or devoted to the few and the proud Orthodox Jews who have chosen to dedicate their lives to *Klal Yisrael* and are on the front lines of the battle against assimilation in many small towns and cities scattered across the United States. I am not referring to established religious outposts such as Miami, Los Angeles, Cleveland and Denver but rather cities such as Charleston, S.C., Birmingham, Ala., Norfolk, Va., San Diego, Calif. and the like. For the many Jews in this type of community, the synagogue is an essential source and connective link to Judaism. The once-a-week sermon by the rabbi may be the only Torah congregants hear all week, for they may not feel an urge to attend classes on weeknights. While the laity may be very learned and educated secularly in an "out of town" community, they are by no means steeped in Torah learning, as Rabbi Weinberger seems to suggest in his essay. It is crucial for the rabbi to try and impart both knowledge and inspiration as well as entertainment in his weekly sermon, in hopes that it will encourage people to return the following week.

The greatest weapon we have in this battle is the Shabbos table. If you want to [attract]...someone...to Orthodox Judaism, it is essential to open one's home and heart... We know that words that leave the heart will enter the heart, so too with feelings, expressions and emotions.

Our rabbis, *rebbeim* and their wives in small communities across the U.S. are entrenched in *kiruv* sometimes at the expense of their personal space, strength and well-being. They don't acknowledge the word "no" when it comes to building

a community and the lines between day and night may often blur. Living under such circumstances is not for everyone, but it is important to affirm and appreciate the tremendous effort extended and the *mesiras nefesh* it entails.

Mrs. Leah Bogopulsky
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Dangerous Confusion

■ In the post on <http://www.ou.org/publications/ja/pluralismbleich.html> [*Jewish Action* on the Orthodox Union web site], Rabbi Bleich writes, "The Reform and Conservative movements, if such is their desire, are entitled to no less. The late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is quoted as stating the obvious truism that the chasm separating traditional Judaism from those movements is greater than that separating the Rabbanite and Karaite communities."

I am sad to see that the OU is displaying a letter that displays both historical revisionism as well as great disrespect towards Rabbi Soloveitchik. As is well known, Rabbi Soloveitchik did *not* say what is implied in the above. Rather, his comments were only aimed at the (American) Reform movement, they were deliberately not aimed at the Conservative movement. In fact, Rabbi Soloveitchik viewed Conservative Judaism as so similar to Orthodoxy that he worked at creating a joint Bet Din between the RCA and the Rabbinical Assembly (Conservative). This project eventually failed due to the actions of Orthodoxy's right-wing.

For someone to twist his words and actions around to imply the very opposite is both academically dishonest as well as unethical. Shame on Rabbi Bleich for twisting a great rabbi's words and actions to suit his own agenda.

Robert Kaiser
received via email

Rabbi Bleich Replies:

Both I and the readers of *Jewish Action* owe Mr. Kaiser a debt of gratitude – but not for the reason he might anticipate. Unfortunately, there are many who

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suffer from a misapprehension that our communal spokesmen are all too loath to dispel. Mr. Kaiser has accorded us the opportunity to clarify the matter.

Rabbi Soloveitchik certainly recognized and asserted that Conservative Judaism has long abandoned fidelity to the Torah revealed at Sinai.

In an article that appeared in *Yiddish* in the November 19, 1954 issue of the *Tog-Morgen Journal*, Rabbi Soloveitchik declared:

When the Conservative movement...speaks of the Halakhah, we are unable to perceive what kind of a Halakhah it means. The Halakhah of Rabbi Akiva, Rav Ashi, Reb Yosef Karo, the Rema, or a new kind of "Halakhah" which was invented at the conferences of the Rabbinical Assembly where a Halakhah is, by the way, very convenient and very modest in its demands? Against this kind of confusion Orthodoxy wages a battle, for it sees in it a very great danger.

It is indeed the case that in the first section of that article Rabbi Soloveitchik refers only to Reform Judaism explicitly in stating that, "We find the difference between Orthodoxy and Reform Judaism much greater than that which separated the Pharisees from the Sadducees in the days of the Second Commonwealth and between the Karaites and traditionalists in the Geonic era." However, the entire thrust of the balance of that article is to show that the Conservative movement is no more

"Halakhic" in nature than Reform. The sole difference, writes Rabbi Soloveitchik, is that the Reform movement candidly rejects halakhah and mitzvot while the Conservative movement has adopted the terminology of "Halakhah" and "halakhic Judaism" but not its substance. A wolf in sheep's clothing is yet a wolf.

In countless public statements, Rabbi Soloveitchik drew attention to the Rambam's classification of those who are *makhsh maggideha*, i.e., those who deny the authority of the Oral Law in whole or in part, as heretics.

What Rabbi Soloveitchik declared philosophically and ideologically, Rabbi Feinstein applied in concrete halachic decisions. In numerous responsa Rabbi Feinstein categorizes both Reform and Conservative clergymen as heretics. See, among others, *Iggerot Mosheh*, *Even ha-Ezer*, I, nos. 7 and 135; *Even ha-Ezer*, II, no. 17; *Even Ha-Ezer*, III, no. 3; *Even ha-Ezer*, IV, no. 13, sec. 3; *Even ha-Ezer*, IV, no. 78; *Yoreh De'ah*, I, no. 160; *Yoreh De'ah*, II, nos. 125 and 128; and *Yoreh De'ah*, III, no. 77.

In *Iggerot Mosheh*, *Yoreh De'ah*, I, no. 160, Rabbi Feinstein stated with regard to Conservative clergy, "Whosoever carries the disdainful appellation 'Conservative' is presumptively a heretic and disqualified from serving as a witness. Accordingly, in *Iggerot Mosheh*, *Even ha-Ezer*, IV, no. 13, sec. 4, he ruled that a woman whose marriage was witnessed by a Conservative clergyman does not require a get.

Indeed, how could there be any disagreement regarding the status of Conservative Judaism? One cannot be just a little bit pregnant. One is either a heretic, or one is not. Denial of the *mesorah*, whether in whole or in part, constitutes heresy. As Rabbi Soloveitchik himself writes in the same article:

One must unconditionally accept the sacredness of the Halakhah in its eternal and absolute character. One must confess that it obligates everyone to realize its demands at all times and under all conditions, social, political or cultural. One cannot be selective with regard to Halakhah and say: This part pleases me, and the other does not; lighting can-

dles I will accept, but not the laws of family purity. Either one believes in the divine origin of the Torah and one accepts the Halakhah in its totality, or one does not believe in the basic principle and rejects it entirely. Halakhah to be accepted only in part is impossible.

Without enumerating other examples, the position of the Rabbinical Assembly maintaining that the prohibition against the marriage of a kohain and a divorcee is no longer operative serves in and of itself to establish the salient point. Other examples from both the Conservative writings and practices could be given almost ad infinitum. Moreover, in an official publication, "Emet v'Emuna [sic]: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism," the Conservative movement candidly accepts ideological positions that contradict virtually all of the basic principles of Jewish faith.

I have no personal knowledge of the discussions in which Rabbi Soloveitchik participated regarding establishment of a joint bet din or of why the discussions were terminated. It is entirely possible that Rabbi Soloveitchik drew a distinction between ideologically committed Conservative clergy and persons who merely served the Conservative movement in an academic capacity while remaining Orthodox in both belief and practice and hence did not regard persons belonging to the latter category as disqualified from serving as members of a bet din. Alternatively, he may have envisioned an arrangement in which the active participants in the bet din would be Orthodox. Has not the latter proposal been advanced repeatedly in other contexts over the years, most recently by the Neeman Commission?

Rabbi Soloveitchik has been quoted as stating in his later years that he was relieved that the earlier discussions were aborted. Mr. Kaiser's letter makes the danger of such proposals abundantly clear.

I believe that Mr. Kaiser is sincerely confused and that his confusion is the direct result of phenomena such as the discussions to which he refers. Of such confusion Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote: "Against this kind of confusion Orthodoxy wages a battle, for it sees in it a very great danger." JA

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