

# Orthodox Judaism: Modern or Otherwise

Rabbi Dr. Daniel J. Wolf

Dr. Stuart Grant's recent article describing his view of Modern Orthodoxy disturbed me. He sought to differentiate Modern Orthodoxy from the leftwing and rightwing varieties. Dr. Grant stated that Modern Orthodoxy maintains the "primacy of *Halachah* (Jewish Law) as the guiding principles of the movement."

There is no doubt that *Halachah* is the essence of Jewish practice and is the stepping stone into Jewish philosophy. It, therefore, must necessarily take a central role in any serious Jewish "movement." Dr. Grant's suggestion that *Halachic* decisions be "more sensitive to the challenge and potential benefits of American society" is disheartening.

Normative *Halachah* is determined by an objective, even scientific, analysis of the Talmud and its commentaries. There are times that such an analysis reveals that certain sociologic realities need to be considered in a particular ruling.

However, the study of *Halachah* with the prejudice that it must conform to current sociologic norms or some agenda is a dishonest inquiry by any standard and not in conformity with any form of Orthodoxy.

An example may be drawn from Dr. Grant's column. Tobacco smoking was never prohibited by the *Halachic* authorities of our time. Dr. Grant questions why there was a "refusal" to prohibit such an obviously life-threatening activity.

Interestingly, even Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, whom Dr. Grant dubs the "guiding light and practical founder" of Modern Orthodox Judaism, had not declared smoking prohibited. The dangers of smoking had been well known for many years.

Apparently, the *Halachic* authorities understood that in order for an activity to fall under the prohibition of a life-threatening activity, there must be immediacy between the action and the tragic result. One cigarette won't kill you; an accumulation of thirty years of-smoking might.

Were *Halachah* to consider the cumulative effects of such activities, perhaps the eating of beef or sitting in the sun might also be prohibited. While American society's concern over tobacco is valid, the *Halachic* implications of tobacco need to be decided on the basis of *Halachic* parameters.

Dr. Grant identifies other issues such as the increasing segregation of men and women beyond the synagogue walls, participation in American society, pursuit of secular studies, equality of education for men and women, commitment to Zionism, the fostering of a sense of the importance of being able to support oneself and ones family, and Jewish service to fellow Jews as well as Gentiles, as defining issues of Modern Orthodoxy.

First we must establish whether these issues are *Halachic* issues or not. If they are not, they should not be the litmus test of a movement that claims the "primacy of *Halachah* as its guiding principles."

On the other hand if they are *Halachic* issues, they still cannot be definitive of Modern Orthodoxy. Clearly, one hallmark of Jewish values is the nobility of the honest argument. If each of two camps pursues a sincere and unbiased *Halachic* analysis and come to different conclusions, should these two camps be deemed fundamentally distinct? Did Beit Hillel practice a different Orthodoxy than did Beit Shammai?

On the other hand, if a stance is taken without an earnest *Halachic* investigation, Orthodoxy itself has been violated. Dr. Grant is correct that a "knee-jerk reaction of *Asur* (prohibited)" is inappropriate, but a compromising *Mutar* (permitted) is just as destructive. Both reflect a break in the tie to the *Halachic* process.

The recognition of Orthodoxy as a spectrum of leftwing to rightwing is itself absurd. There is only one Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is an unswerving dedication to an objective, unbiased *Halachic* process. One's stance on an individual issue is the product of this process.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik described himself as a *Melamed* (a teacher). His primary dedication was to his subject matter. His *Halachic* decisions followed his understanding of Torah.

So let us discard the labels that divide us, and arm ourselves with an unbiased knowledge of Torah and *Halacha*. With this, we may confront the issues of our time and unite. Then we could all pursue not one of several flavors of Orthodoxy but rather authentic Orthodoxy.