

A Plea For Involvement

The Inescapable Challenge Of Four Modern Revolutions

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Involvement or Non-Involvement in Social Issues

WITHIN a span of fewer than forty years, the people of the United States of America have experienced at least three major revolutions—economic, social, and sexual. A fourth may be even more cataclysmic—chemical manipulation of the human personality. Jews and Judaism have been, and will continue to be, affected by the resulting changes whose impact will hardly be avoided even by those of our co-religionists who succeed in completely ghettoizing themselves. For all those, however, who do not seek withdrawal from modern, integrated society, there is no alternative but to reckon with the changes as they occur and to become involved either in resistance to them or their control. Non-involvement is no longer conceivable as a live option for those who are committed to the Hirschian ideal of "*I orab im Derech Eretz*"—of living in two civilizations by either synthesizing them or assigning to each specific areas of one's thought and action.

The economic revolution, which began in the thirties, transformed the United States into a welfare state. Security and abundance for everyone were the goals, and Jews prospered as never before in Jewish history. That prosperity contributed immeasurably to the establishment of the State of Israel. It also made possible the construction of magnificent synagogues, a network of day schools on the elementary and secondary levels, the proliferation of yeshivos, and the fantastic expansion of Yeshiva University—the mother of all yeshivos on American soil. However, with prosperity also came greater social mobility for Jews, more intermarriage and assimilation, weaker ties with one's fellow-Jews, and less interdependence among them. Consequently, the younger heirs of Jewish fortunes feel less inclined even to be philanthropic and support Jewish causes. But the American Jewish community is aware of what it has gained and lost because of the economic revolution and is taking steps to strengthen the gains and mitigate the losses. No one has said, "Let Jews become poor. Let Jews seek only subsistence. Poverty is good for the soul and Jews are more likely to remain loyal to Torah if they

are not subjected to the trial of affluence." Even the Hasidic Jews take the fullest possible advantage of the welfare state and want it to expand to more areas rather than have it cut back. Perhaps it is because they, too, are human. Perhaps also they recognize that it is a mandate of Torah that poverty shall be no more. In the economic revolution, therefore, Jews rejoice and become involved, involved.

They have not come to terms as fully with the social revolution in the sixties which is achieving, on the one hand, equality for all Americans—irrespective of color and ethnic origin, and, on the other hand, so much freedom for the individual that he can, with growing impunity, even defy established authority and refuse to obey laws which he regards as a threat to his equality or which order him to participate in wars waged by the policy-makers of the state. In this revolution, orthodox Jews have been less involved than non-orthodox Jews. This is most unfortunate.

The Salvation of All Jews

Judaism requires that a committed Jew concern himself not only with his own personal salvation, but also with the salvation of all Jews as well as all mankind. One's obligation to one's family may be more numerous than one's obligations to all mankind. However, obligations there are to all, and it is unfortunate that today it is precisely among orthodox Jews that one senses a hesitancy to become involved in the problems of humanity, and even the problems of total Jewish survival. This is an intolerable attitude that must be branded for what it is—a form of self-centeredness under the guise of religiosity and divine approval. Those who espouse it also threaten the future of their own commitment.

The Halacha teaches us that even if a Jew has performed a mitzvah of the Torah—such as blowing the shofar or taking the four species—his performance is incomplete until every living Jew has also performed it. This postulate is not only homiletical; it has important Halachic consequences. Yet, too often I encounter brilliant students of Talmud in our yeshivos who, because they so want to advance in their own studies, resent being bothered to help weaker fellow-students. They do not want to waste their time assisting a less gifted peer in the same room or in the

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same dormitory. Something ugly happened to them in their educational process. Teachers may have communicated to them an obsessive sense of their own elitism so that all they crave is the esteem of their equals or superiors. Frequently, the teachers themselves teach on a level that ignores the standard of achievement of even the average, not to mention the slow, student. And thus a vicious cycle is perpetuated. The drive to excellence, and, ultimately, renown, nurtures a preoccupation with self that is immoral and a violation of Torah mandates, and then there follows the alienation of many of our most learned Jews from the needs and concerns of people, Jewish and non-Jewish. This accounts for the fact that too few yeshiva students and graduates are today articulate and active participants in every phase of social action for Jewish and human survival. This also accounts for the fact that so many of them shun the pulpit rabbinate, and even as laymen in their respective communities are not active leaders in synagogues and day schools. If the most learned among us are self-centered, what may one expect from the less tutored?

Many have written about this unfortunate phenomenon. However, what has not been said often enough is that the excuses offered by the offenders are inadequate, and that, in addition, their preoccupation with their own personal salvation as committed Jews may place in jeopardy the very Judaism they think they are preserving.

The principal excuse offered is that so few Jews presently devote themselves to the study of Torah that those who can do so must deploy their energies exclusively to that area. But does the study of Torah relieve any Jew of the obligation to perform all the other mitzvos? Perhaps the scholarly rabbi cannot be as active as the dedicated pastor in visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, caring for the needy, and counselling the troubled, but is he exempt from "*Maasch*" (practice) because he is engaged in "*Midrash*" (study)? The Torah scholar must even demonstrate how his study of Torah leads to benign performances so that others may crave the light and crown of Torah. Time must be found for every commandment. As the layman must fix times for Torah, so the scholar must find time for involvement with others.

Greater Responsibilities

The orthodox rabbi, too, may have greater responsibilities than his non-orthodox colleagues for *kashruth*, *•mikveh*, and Sabbath observance. But he may not say that, therefore, he will permit the non-orthodox to speak for Judaism on all social issues, thus making it appear either that Halacha has no point of view on such matters, or that orthodox rabbis do not regard these issues as important as rituals or religious observances. We must allocate our

time and our forces judiciously, but unrelenting involvement there must be.

I am not arguing for or against any particular program—whether it be "black power," civil disobedience, or peace in Vietnam. If rabbis cannot agree as to whether the territories recently annexed should be retained by Israel, they may not agree as to whether they should support C.O.R.E. or the Birch Society. It is against non-involvement that I argue. Jews cannot be neutral in these issues. Whether or not we want it, the social revolution is affecting fellow Jews and fellow humans, and to remain aloof is to be oblivious to the needs of both. Nor is it proper for Jews to resolve the issues exclusively in terms of their effect on Jewish interests; the welfare of all mankind is also a Jewish interest.

Recently, I presided over a debate as to whether Jews should become involved in social issues. After the affirmative and negative sides had been presented, my revered and learned father rose to cite the examples of Abraham, our first patriarch. At the threshold of our history, he became involved in a war, and not a defensive one. (Gen. 14:14) Our prophets also addressed other nations in the name of G-d and the righteousness He expects from all His children (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah and others).

In a world that has so shrunk that war or unrest in any area affects all mankind, how can any Jew say that the social revolution in the United States is not his affair? As a matter of fact, when I first uttered these words at a Yeshiva University Rabbinic Alumni convention a year ago, it may have been thought that Jews had an alternative not to become involved. The revolution has moved so rapidly that in some areas Jews are the principal targets of the revolutionaries' attacks. It is to be hoped that Jews will not, therefore, misunderstand the revolution. Safeguard themselves and their interests they must, but they must also seek to accommodate their interests to the just demands of the heretofore oppressed. There are no black and white answers—only greys. However, involvement there must be, with a point of view and a program and a continuing readiness to revise positions and redeploy energies and resources for the greater welfare of both Jews and all mankind. We cannot accept the blessings of the economic revolution and ignore the claims of the social revolution which is its direct consequence. As eighty percent of the population were cared for by the economic revolution, the economic and social depression of the remaining twenty percent became more apparent and intolerable. And, as the "Establishment" became more and more acceptable to a majority, the discontented minority had to threaten, with every conceivable weapon, the existing power structure. I am only explaining the phenomenon and urging that no sane person can ignore it. Resist it, if you will,

or control it, but how can anyone but an ostrich avoid involvement?

However, the danger inherent in the stance of non-involvement is greatest in connection with the sexual revolution, and a fourth revolution yet to come—the use of chemicals to dominate or liberate the will of man, thus creating a threat to the very nature of man as conceived by our religious heritage. Those who refuse to reckon with these challenges in order to find solutions to what they spell, may be able, by their inaction, to help "kill G-d" more than any atheist philosopher of the past.

The New Morality

While orthodox rabbis may still debate whether the pill method for planned parenthood is permissible for Jews committed to the Halacha, we are overlooking the fact that within a few years there will have been removed the one great deterrent to sexual promiscuity by married and unmarried alike—the fear of pregnancy. The "new" morality is here. It may be as ancient as paganism, but youth—Jewish youth no less than other youth—are enamored of it. The dread of bastardy is no more. Children will not pay for the sin of their parents—they simply won't come into existence, or, if conceived, will be aborted—in most cases, lawfully. What are the educational as well as legal steps that we can take to preserve what we hold to be not only Halachic norms, but norms necessary for man to fulfill his divine image? Can a minority of traditionalists feel safe only because they train their daughters in their own schools? Can they shut off the ether about them and prevent contamination by television, movies, or the sensuous attire of others not only on beaches but on the streets as well? Some Americans have accomplished it, but only by isolation in rural areas. Urban areas permit no such quarantine.

It is a pity that even the leadership of the yeshivos refuses to reckon with facts known to them. They prefer to assume that a yeshiva education makes one a saint and that yeshiva boys and girls are immune to the sexual revolution which has overtaken us. Panaceas I do not have, but I cannot close my mind to reality either. Perhaps a meeting of all those who care to become involved with the issue will yield a harvest of experience which will help to formulate approaches that will more effectively fulfill Halachic values and norms. But non-involvement—and a stance which says that we are simply against the new morality because it violates the mandates of Torah—is not adequate. If that is to be our stance, then we must recognize that the sanctions, provided by the Torah no longer deter. Then new sanctions should be found or perhaps there are non-punitive techniques. Again, I am only urging involvement in a major revolution—recogniz-

ing it for what it is and either doing something about it or declaring our helplessness in the face of it.

However, the fourth revolution threatens even more than our morality. It threatens our self-image. What could be more devastating!

Intellectual and moral excellence are the goals which Jews are to achieve. The highest excellence is the knowledge of G-d and complete submission to His will. However, our youth argue that they, too, want the vision of G-d which psychedelic drugs can induce. If computers can now do the work of the brain in so many areas which heretofore required the exercise of mind, why not, in this modern age, resort to artificial means of attaining mental states which Maimonides once deemed reserved for those who labor long and hard to become "prophets"? And if by the use of drugs men can be made even-tempered, generous, non-aggressive—even sexually, what is the need of so much indoctrination, and even ritual, to subdue man's will, when it can all be accomplished by chemistry?

What happens to freedom of will in Jewish theology? What happens to virtue itself when freedom of will is no more, and men are manipulated by pills?

What Jew, with an awareness of the four revolutions we are experiencing, can avoid involvement! Our house is on fire and those who would avoid involvement cannot hope that they will not burn simply because they decline to look at the flames.

But rabbis, especially, must look at and ponder the threats. The general literature on the subject is growing. It must be read and analyzed. And whether we decide to resist or control what impends, involvement there must be. We cannot assure the future of Jews or Judaism simply by looking backward. We must fathom our present situation and act with respect to three revolutions that already impinge upon us.

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