

# En Route to a Modern Synthesis

By EMANUEL RACKMAN

*A discussion of Dr. Samuel Belkin's program for integration of science and religion "within the personality of the individual."*

REB Note Hirsch Finkel, one of the greatest teachers of Musar in the last generation, was brilliant point with regard to the Joseph story. He held that it was simply incredible that nine of Jacob's children should conspire to kill a tenth only because they were jealous of their father's exceptional love for him. These were not ordinary men — these were the great-grandchildren of Abraham, the grandchildren of Isaac and the progenitors of the sacred tribes of Israel. How could they be so brutal as to kill Joseph, their own kin, because they coveted his shirt, or even because of his dreams! Nay, said Reb Note Hirsch. It must have been that the brethren really fought over much more significant issues pertaining to Jewish law and Jewish philosophy. Perhaps they even argued the relative merits of democracy over monarchy and wanted to kill Joseph because he favored dictatorship. His views would thus be a threat to the future happiness of all mankind. Undoubtedly the controversy raged over matters that seemed important enough to warrant homicide or tyrannicide. But G-d refused to reveal to us what it was that they debated because the Torah wanted us to realize that no matter what the oral arguments may have appeared to

the real cause of the crime was their jealousy — the simple, unmitigated envy of the brothers. And thus the Torah wanted to teach us that whenever we fight over what may appear to be issues of the greatest consequence, it may not be the significance of the issues that incites us to violent deeds or harsh words but rather a basic disturbance in our own psyches, a base or vile passion, and nothing more.

One may cite this brilliant insight of Reb Note Hirsch in connection with many controversies presently raging in the American Jewish community. Indeed, the zealots among us may be giving expression to their own emotional disturbance under the guise of a holy war. But I cite the insight of Reb Note Hirsch in connection with Dr. Samuel Belkin's warm and edifying "Essays in Traditional Jewish Thought" because I have seldom been so impressed by a book of essays that mirrored the author's psyche as much as this one did. The ideas and the programs suggested in the book reflect the humility of the writer and his great capacity for empathy. Furthermore, and what is even more important, Dr. Belkin makes it abundantly clear that he subscribes to the

\* Philosophical Library, 1957: 191 pp., \$3.50.

view that while we may not know the reasons for all the Mitzvot, there is a purpose to Torah learning — and that purpose is the cultivation of a moral and spiritual personality. His essays thus represent a fulfillment of the philosophy of Musar. Without formally subscribing to the Musar school of thought, Dr. Belkin does hold that the observance of Mitzvot is not an end in itself without relation to another and — the living of a moral and spiritual life in imitation of G-d. It is refreshing and reassuring to have this reminder in an age that is losing sight of it.

W/HAT answer has Dr. Belkin for

W those who assail the traditional point of view and what program do they propose for the ascendancy of Orthodoxy?

As I see it, Dr. Belkin has brought a new meaning to an old slogan of Yeshiva University, and his new meaning is related to his underlying view that the Mitzvot have a goal related to the transformation of human personality. When many of us — who are his contemporaries — first began studying at Yeshiva we were confronted with what was a nineteenth century philosophical problem — the synthesis of science with religion, the synthesis of reason with faith. It was that problem that disturbed us as late as the twenties, and Dr. Bernard Revel, of blessed memory, was wont to talk of an intellectual synthesis of the two bodies of learning — each with its own methods and conclusions. Dr. Belkin — his successor — takes the synthesis for granted. And correctly so, for reasons he does not develop at length but to which he alludes in his essays. The fact is that we have always had numerous persons who were both brilliant scientists and dedi-

cated, committed religionists. The roster of Y. U. Alumni hears eloquent testimony to this fact. Moreover, the two bodies of learning can never really be synthesized or integrated philosophically since they deal with reality from two distinctly different points of view — each of which is valid for its own given purpose. Dr. Belkin assumes all of this but suggests — and here is his great point — our generation suffers because we do not have persons in whose personalities there have been synthesized the practical know-how of the scientist with the moral values of the religionist. I quote Dr. Belkin:

“If we seek the blending of science and religion and the integration of secular knowledge with sacred wisdom, then it is not in the subject matter of these fields but rather within the personality of the individual that we hope to achieve the synthesis. “The primary reason for the establishment of Yeshiva University was to develop a generation here in America which would reflect a harmonious blending of Jewish traditions and the heritage of the great academies of Jewish learning with a liberal education in the arts and sciences.”

These, however, are not mere quotes. They reverberate the most recurrent theme in the entire book, for the great purpose of Jewish learning is “to implant ... a spiritual and moral concept of life based upon the Torah, the Prophets, and the eternal traditions of Israel” . Even “the unification of knowledge” will come by the re-integration of “our lives with the ideals of the Torah and with our search after G-d’s knowledge” .

so guide us. He wrote some of these essays during World War II; others after we discovered the gruesome facts of the greatest Jewish tragedy in our

already bloody history; and still others Law, they make a sham of moral com- during the Cold War. And one can readily appreciate how strongly he feels that humanity is doomed unless human personality is transformed. Yet, how can it be better transformed than in the light of the Jewish heritage!

"It is in the continuous process of main- taining and further developing a moral and spiritual heritage that we develop a deeper sense of honor for our antecedents and ascertain the moral way of life for our future generations. We believe that by reintegrating our lives with the ideals of the Torah we can further human knowledge and enoble man, for only godly knowledge can quicken secular learning with a higher purpose, and give to the human personality spiritual direction.

"This endless search after G-d's knowledge and after man's discoveries, when it becomes central in one's life, creates a harmonious perfection in one's per- sonality.

"It is our duty to seek whatever is worthy in all that has been discovered by the human mind. It is, however, the greater obligation to search after G-d knowledge which serves as an end for human knowledge.

Assuming, however, with Dr. Belkin, that what the world needs is more persons with commitment to moral and spiritual values, one asks, how does Judaism accomplish this? Dr. Belkin replies: A Torah life does at least two things for the human personality — one in depth, and the other in extension. By studying Torah one becomes a master of the eternal moral insights of the tradition, and living Torah, by observing the com- mandments, one extends those insights to every area of life, personal, familial, social, economic, political. Those who have shed their loyalty to Orthodoxy deny themselves both goals. By flouting the Mitzvoth they make Judaism only a phase of their lives — they deny themselves Jewish extension — and by denying the authority of the

Law, they make a sham of moral com- mitment for everything good becomes merely relative and man-made. "One of the main principles of tradi- tional Judaism is to emphasize the Di- vine authority of the Law rather than the arbitrary authority of man."

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means of getting morality and spiri- tuality into all of life, is not only an ethical goal, but a practical necessity and a metaphysical desideratum. As a practical necessity, the problem of our day is "how to fuse a spiritual re- birth with our material world".

"An abstract spiritual rebirth may be- come merely an expression of 'immor- tality', a disembodied soul. What the world needs today is a resurrection of the body, an infusion of spirit into material substance. It may, indeed, become fashionable to speak of G-d, of spiritual values, of theology and religion. But as long as these remain mere utterances separated from the sword of creation, from the world of practice, then no matter how beautiful and inspiring they may be, they will, in the long run, have but little significance in the improvement of our daily con- duct, in the creation of unity between the material world and spiritual purpose, between body and soul.

However, the creation of unity be- tween the material world and spiritual purpose is also a metaphysical desider- atum. Judaism's uniqueness and great- ness, metaphysically speaking, has been its insistence on the fusing of soul into matter, instead of demeaning matter, or creating a dualism between matter and spirit.

"In the Jewish concept, holiness is in a great measure the sanctification of the material and physical. In most of the mitzvoth which we observe, we achieve obedience to the word of G-d by infusing active matter with a soul. Our laws of Kashruth, of family pu- rity, of holiness, signify, above all, the infusion of our physical, material deeds with a divine soul, a G-d-ordained dis-

discipline, which, in effect and in essence is the unification of soul and matter. Physical exaltation and joy as a means of achieving a religious experience are, in a sense, witnesses to the unity of body and soul. The duties of man toward his fellow man deal primarily with material things, but concern for the material welfare of others symbolizes the completeness of man, the unity of body and soul, the synthesis of the material and the spiritual.

"The supreme aim of Kedushah is the sanctification of the commonplace by hallowing the licit and by giving earthly virtue a heavenly ideal. Judaism as a way of life finds no antagonism between the spiritual and material domains and does not consider religion as something that deals only with the world to come.

Dr. Belkin is thus strengthening his basic conception that the goal of Yeshiva University is a synthesized personality. He is maintaining that Judaism itself has unity or integration at its very heart. G-d is One, Nature is One, Humanity is One, and therefore the human being cannot afford to be schizoid. "Just as the scientist proceeds on the definite assumption that there exists a unity and continuity in nature, so must the moralist work on the similar assumption that there exists a unity and continuity in the human race and in the moral law".

And when one reads Dr. Belkin's book, and considers his own personality at the same time, one realizes that a Torah-personality is not simply one who learned in Torah, nor even one who is ready to martyr himself for Torah, but one whose attitudes toward G-d, nature, and his fellow-man, reflect a moral and spiritual point of view. And as Dr. Belkin insists, in another book, that the theological uniqueness of Judaism is that it tolerates no worship of created things — which perspective underpins the virtue of humility, for man does not worship any creature including himself — so Dr.

Belkin insists that man must be integrated, rather than bifurcated. This insistence permits no such anomaly as Jews who are pious but mean; observant but anti-social.

"In fact, if I were asked to state the essential philosophy of traditional Judaism I would say that it is the refusal to accept one part of the Torah at the sacrifice of another part. The totality of Torah observance, the relationship of man to G-d which reflects itself through worship and the observance of certain commandments, and the relationship of man to his fellow man which is based upon ethical and moral conduct, are indivisible and constitute an integral and inseparable part of Jewish living.

iversity' s own alumni are discerning enough to embrace. He urges a transplanted Judaism for America — not a translated one nor one transferred from other milieus. This is consistent with his recurring emphasis on integration. Those who want only to transfer Torah here from eastern Europe are afraid to expose Torah to new situations and thus unwittingly create in the world areas in which Torah must forever remain alien. These are not only impractical men but also men who deny the Torah the universality which we believe to be its essence — its reflection of its divine, universal, origin. And those who would only translate Judaism deny Jews in America the chance to become Torah personalities that are nurtured and sustained by the vibrancy of the original sources.

Furthermore one must be patient with a transplanted Judaism. Therefore one does not make policy decisions in haste. And Dr. Belkin would give the Jewish layman, and not only the Rabbi, a voice in policy matters.

In addition, excessive institutionalization will only adversely affect a transplanted Judaism. The synagogue must not dwarf the school in importance. The synagogue can make a contribution but its needs must be secondary to those of Jewish education. What is primary is the spreading of Torah — the sowing of Torah seeds in the hearts and minds of many. Thus are explained Dr. Belkin' s personal aversion for the many institutions of American Jewish communal organization, combined with his overwhelming drive to establish more and more schools within Yeshiva University, and independent of it. He wants more anti more schools, and fewer and fewer organizations, boards, committees, congresses or federations. He does not deny that these groupings may serve useful purposes but they must never become the ends of Jewish life. The only end is a Torah life — a life transformed by Torah learning. Altogether too often, however, the means have become a substitute for the end.

#### THE JUDGE

When a case came before Rabbi Akiva, he would say to the plaintiff and defendant: You are not standing in judgment before Akiva ben Joseph, but before the Almighty. When two litigants stood before Rabbi Yose ben Chalافتا, asking him to decide their dispute according to the Torah, he said: I do not know how to decide according to the Torah, for the Torah is Truth. And I can only decide on the basis of the facts I hear from you. Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai used to thank the Almighty for not having made him a judge.

Talmud Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin I, 1