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*Paradoxes for Committed Jews
in a Secular World*

There is some basis in fact for the fears of Orthodox Jews that they and their offspring may become alienated from Jewish tradition as a result of their proximity to non-Orthodox Jews and their exposure to alien cultures. The fears are justified. Yet must the response be separatism - detachment from fellow Jews and rejection of advanced secular studies?

Every Jew must consider this question for himself. And his answer will depend upon how he feels about placing himself in danger for a worthy cause which warrants taking risks. Of course, not all of us are endowed with the faculties of heart and mind that the risk may require. But if one has those faculties, perhaps it is one's duty not to play it safe, but rather - as Joseph the son of Jacob did - perform one of God's missions that may be no less worthy than the security of one's soul.

Sometimes the best-made plans to achieve the security of one's soul backfire. I have in mind, for example, a man I met 50 years ago. He was deeply religious and observed the commandments with matchless fervor. He did not want his children to think that Jews could be otherwise. Therefore, he decided to raise them in communities where they would not know non-observant Jews existed. The communities were exclusively Christian. Interestingly enough, the Christians received and respected him. But how long could he hide his children from the facts of life?

If Manhasset, L.I., at that time had no Jews other than his family, how far away was Great Neck or New York? And even in Manhasset how could he have hoped to exclude the media - to stop his loved ones from reading or listening to radio or viewing television? I have followed the career of his son, now one of America's most distinguished actors but a Jew minimally involved in anything

Jewish and certainly not religious. As a matter of fact, I often wonder how positive his feelings are with regard to his Jewish identity.

By contrast, there are Jews who want to raise their families in a mixed Jewish community precisely because they fear that if their children spend the first 20 years of their lives only in Orthodox environments, they will never know how to cope with the world outside when they enter it.

They know how many persons raised in Orthodox families leave the fold even after they marry within the Orthodox community - even when the bride and groom are products of a sheltered upbringing. Therefore, these parents prefer to raise their children by making them aware from their earliest childhood of the differences among Jews and by impressing them with the love of and tolerance for all and with the feeling that those privileged to be loyal to tradition have a sacred mission to win back the others with respect and compassion. This may be a risky course, but it is the only way that is safe if one wants to produce Jews who will not turn out to be the zealots who hate all who are not like them.

Nonetheless, it will be argued with some success that the safest course is to live all one's life in a closed Orthodox community. There are tens of thousands of such people all over the world. Their risks are few. They can save their souls. But how can they live with their consciences when one of the most fundamental mandates of Judaism is that we act with responsibility for each other? Indeed, according to Jewish philosophers, no Jew has properly performed any mitzvah until all Jews have performed it. What will these separatists say to God on Judgment Day? How will they explain their failure to fulfill this major obligation of their religious burden?

I have said enough to justify the conclusion that the problems posed have no simple answers. With regard to secular education, I can understand the reluctance of some Orthodox Jews to expose themselves and their offspring to it. However, I am less tolerant of Orthodox rabbis who fear it and sometimes not only fear it but arrogate to themselves the feeling that they are holier than others because, unlike Joseph, they fear to take a risk for a worthy cause. That is the cause of saving Torah from the insulting suggestion that it cannot cope with challenges from any source. It is as though

they feel that God and Torah need protection against an onslaught that could defeat them.

Recently I heard a charming story about a Hassidic rebbe who opposed secular education for himself and for his followers. One day one of his admirers walked with him from his home in Williamsburg to the Brooklyn Bridge. They stopped to admire the bridge and talked about its importance in linking Brooklyn with Manhattan. The young admirer of the rebbe then tried to convince the rebbe how important secular education is. "Rebbe," he said, "this bridge could not have been built without the knowledge that comes from a secular education." One wonders how that argument could have been refuted. But the rebbe had an answer. "But we already have the bridge," he responded.

Perhaps not all who oppose exposure to secular education are equally naive. But all of them, for their own longevity want natural sciences to be advanced, and with natural sciences come methods of inquiry and intellectual states, which are inseparable from research and which may challenge religious convictions. Is it fair for a rabbi to want the services of a doctor who had to risk his soul to become a doctor in order to cure or save the life of a rabbi who feared to do the same?

Fortunately for the rabbis who were not or are not enthusiastic about Yeshiva or Bar-Ilan universities there are braver souls than they who do act like Joseph. They risk. And many of them must be greater heroes in God's eyes than those who do not risk. They prove that God and His Torah have nothing to fear from the world's cultures. On the other hand, exposure to alien cultures only deepens one's understanding and appreciation of the Jewish heritage.

But alas, in a polarized Jewish world, this is being overlooked. Even the present chief rabbis of Israel - though carefully selected by the religious Zionist leadership - do not have the courage of some of their predecessors to speak up for the point of view of Hirsch and Reines in an earlier period and of other giants in our own day. I am far from being a giant - but I can choose the giants with whom I prefer to be identified.

And when I am asked to name these giants with whom I identify and I name them, I am told that they have disqualified them-

selves automatically from being Torah sages, because they have earned doctorates in a university. With a Ph.D., I am informed, one no longer has the pure *daas Torah* - an unsullied, untainted, Torah point of view.

Alas, these rabbis cannot be their own counsel and champions. At least I can render them that service, even if I incur the wrath of many. It is good to assume risks in a good cause.