

*August 30, 1991*

*Value of Non-Orthodoxy:*  
New ideas, once condemned,  
sustain or advance Judaism

**F**or me, the oneness of the Jewish people is a basic value that dominates much of my thought and action. From my father, of blessed memory, I learned that one must never “give up” on a fellow Jew.

Therefore, it pains me that presently this value is being challenged, and by none other than some Orthodox Jewish academicians — not necessarily the most learned or pious, but Orthodox nonetheless. Their argument is that a loyal Jew cannot “unite” with one who does not believe that the Torah is from God.

If these separatists mean that on projects involving the propagation of the faith, Orthodox Jews can work only with those who share the same beliefs, they may have a point — but not necessarily. They could still work together on those elements of the faith that all share.

However, apart from the faith there is much activity — many problems and many programs — in which there can be joint effort with all who are Jewish. That is why I have always supported cooperation between all groups of Jews that have some shared goals.

This for me is basic Judaism while the separatists are truly rebels, seeking to revise what was always basic. In the past, when Jews had to fight for survival, they did not examine the religiosity of those who fought with them; no one was cross-examined about his beliefs or practice.

In Orthodox circles I have often been subjected to harassment by these rebels. But that does not matter. What does matter is that the rebels fail to see that virtually every approach to Judaism which deviated at one time or another from the then-prevailing

majority view, usually made some contribution to the survival of our people and our religious heritage.

When the Reform movement celebrated the 100th anniversary of its founding in the United States I was asked to write an essay for a Jewish scholarly periodical on the contributions of Reform Judaism even to Orthodoxy. I wrote the essay, listing several such contributions. However, because I was then very much under siege in Orthodox circles for my commitment to the unity of the Jewish people, my close friends pleaded with me not to exacerbate the hostility of my opponents. Now I am ashamed of myself that I yielded to their importuning.

Yet, it is a fact that almost every new movement of the last few centuries is to be credited with some good, though in its inception it was resisted by the establishment.

The Chasidic movement is the most eloquent example. Its role in the survival of Judaism is simply overwhelming.

By contrast, even the secular Yiddishist movement was remarkably successful: The alumni of its educational system display Jewish identity and loyalty at least as intense as that which one finds in most graduates of Orthodox afternoon schools or day schools.

The Zionist movement, in turn, was the faith of millions of Jews who refused to assimilate and it gave us the most important instrument for Jewish survival that we have had in two millennia.

This is also true of the non-Orthodox movements. At least they slowed up the process of acculturation and assimilation. Now, from among those who did not assimilate, Jews have a greater reservoir of young people who are being reached to retrieve much of the Judaism that their parents and grandparents abandoned.

The "revisionists" against Jewish unity argue that if there were no non-Orthodoxy all Jews would now be Orthodox. How naive can they be! Is not the situation in Israel proof enough that in a free world, in the absence of Zionism or non-Orthodoxy, most Jews would opt for secularism or assimilation?

The situation in Latin America provides additional proof. In the absence of non-Orthodoxy there, assimilation and intermarriage proceeded at a faster rate than in countries which had non-Orthodox movements.

However, it cannot be denied that there are also positive contributions by non-Orthodox movements beyond what they did to provide an alternative to Orthodoxy and the retention of Jewish identity for one or two generations beyond the immigrant generation.

Who can deny that they made all Jews aware of the need to further emancipate the Jewish woman, to give her birth and her maturation some recognition, and to enable her to receive a good education in both the Oral and Written Law! They also helped to make a significant Jewish contribution to the battle for human rights and economic as well as political democracy for the greater happiness of all Jews and all mankind.

There is one area in particular in which they rendered a great service to Orthodox Jews: Their challenge to Orthodoxy made Orthodox rabbis deepen their understanding of Judaism in order to cope with the challenges. This was no mean contribution. And Orthodoxy is coping as never before with virtually all the intellectual, emotional, institutional, and administrative challenges that helped Orthodoxy to experience a remarkable revival.

Non-Orthodoxy helped to restore to all Jews their historic sense of history. Orthodox Jews were forgetting that history is not only very much a part of the faith and practice but also an aid to our understanding and appreciation of Jewish law.

Of this I will yet write at greater length. I will do so not only because of the theme's importance, but also because I detect a tendency in some Jewish circles to falsify our history in order to sustain a position. And this is palpably unconscionable.