

Why Not Give New Ideas a Fair Chance?

It is generally said that Judaism must cope with the fact of modern life. But one can cope in several ways. Most people resolve the problem by assuming that everything modern is good and, therefore, Judaism must be trimmed to fit.

Others are bold enough to ask whether all that is modern is truly desirable and reject much of it, preferring to concentrate on the Jewish way of life. There are some, however, who resist everything modern. If it is new they deem it bad, alleging that the Torah forbids it.

I was raised by a father who did not automatically reject every new idea of the modern world. He gave new ideas considerable thought and was willing to experiment with them. The Jewish people were even receptive to the new, especially if it might improve upon the old ways and deepen one's understanding and appreciation of the traditional faith and practice. Sometimes the new is even fulfillment of a cherished Torah objective. Thus the manner in which we relate to that which is new calls for suspended judgment, prolonged experimentation and evaluation, and, in the end, either total acceptance or rejection, or a position in between the two.

I can cite one example. Though my father received his education exclusively in Lithuanian yeshivot, he did not reject a new method in Jewish education which called for the teaching of Hebrew as the mother tongue and a living language.

Most of his colleagues preferred the study of Hebrew as we now study a second language - translating from Hebrew into Yiddish or English. My father did not feel that because a method was new it was not to be tried.

The issue is now of no significance in Israel where Hebrew is the mother tongue for all Jews except a tiny minority who reject the new only because it is new. But in the Diaspora it is still a problem and it would be folly for a rabbi or group of rabbis to pontiff-

cate whether one method is more proper halachically than another. In such matters one should retain an open mind and certainly not pronounce bans. The late president of Yeshiva University, Dr. Samuel Belkin, was often critical of the frequent resort to bans and would call it "government by *issurim* (taboos)."

Many years ago, when I served the Far Rockaway Jewish community, the board of education of its major day school debated the issue whether girls were to be taught the same curriculum as boys. It was then well-known that two opposing views were entertained - one by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik and the other by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein.

The board, by a vote of 9 to 6, simply decided to send the issue to Soloveitchik, whose answer was known to be in the affirmative and it was really unnecessary to submit the issue to him. But the principal of the school thought it was forbidden to teach the girls Talmud and he invalidated the board's decision.

The controversy continues today. The study of Talmud appears to be for men only. Rare is the school that makes the same opportunity available to girls as it does to boys and rare is the woman who can today become a great Talmudic scholar.

I know this will change. It happened in Israel with regard to women's suffrage. In his lifetime, Chief Rabbi Uziel did not have the courage to lift the ban against women's suffrage. His view in favor was published after his death. And the same will happen with the study of Talmud. The day will come when there will be many women who will be experts in Talmud just as there once were only isolated instances.

Now there is a new controversy - or rather an old one which has reared its head again. It is the problem of coeducation. May boys and girls be taught in the same high schools? And is the issue one which calls for the pronouncement of a ban or a taboo?

Coeducation is an issue that has concerned educators of all denominations, and even secularists. The very existence in public education of boys' and girls' high schools proves there is no consensus on what is the better way. Does the presence of girls distract the boys and give them impure thoughts? Or does the presence of girls refine the boys and give them a healthier approach to sexuality than, for example, one is apt to find in the yeshiva high schools of our day? Frankly, I do not have the answer.

There are some heads of yeshivot who are certain they know what is best and they add to the prohibitions contained in the Torah - the kind of "government by issurim" of which Belkin spoke. Would it not have been sufficient if they expressed their conviction as to what they feel is better, and not disregard the possibility that there is another view, perhaps one as legitimate, worthy of at least suspended judgment and continuing observation and study?

Do they really think yeshivot have succeeded in the context of modern society to transmit better attitudes and more wholesome approaches to sexuality than schools where boys learn early to relate with respect to girls in the same class, even as the girls avoid the seductive attire that distracts? I am not so sure, and I wish more of my colleagues would be similarly open-minded and ambivalent. A little skepticism about their own omniscience will at least yield a modicum of humility.

I repeat - I do not know which is the better way. However, to give sanction to only one way, and to prohibit the other, is to add another divisive factor to Jewish life. And will there be no end to the issues that divide us? Or do the rabbis creating the issurim really crave divisiveness so that there will be no doubt in anyone's mind as to who are the real guardians of the tradition? I prefer my father's way - to give a new idea that is clearly not prohibited a chance to prove itself before it is rejected.