

Tradishaaaan? TRADITION!

(Baruch Cohon)

As I hope everyone knows, Jewish tradition is more than a song in “Fiddler”. It is a total heritage, developed and expounded over some 3000 years. Tradition in Jewish life includes subjects like theology, morality, the calendar, the arts, diet, family values and sexual behavior. To a greater or less extent, it affects the way we live our lives. How we relate to that tradition unites us, and divides us.

Viewed critically, current major Jewish movements can be seen to damage our tradition in various ways. Reform amputates it. Conservative distorts it. Modern Orthodox honors it timidly. Haredi exaggerates it. Hasidi reinterprets it. Secular Humanism rejects it.

Smaller movements also take a crack at it. Reconstructionism replaces it with the opinions of one man. Renewal meditates on it. Etc., etc.

Each movement stresses its own reasons. Take just two examples in Reform: calendar, and family. Ever since the first exile from the Land of Israel, tradition added a day to holidays in order to make sure that all Jews both in and outside the Land observed those holidays at the same time. In the early days, the exiles were taken east to places like Babylonia and Persia, so their holidays started earlier than in Jerusalem. It therefore made sense to add the day, so they would not finish before their people in Israel. Now with Jews living all over the globe, and with scientific additions like the International Date Line, that condition is changed. So the early Reform leaders, who felt less attached to the Land anyway, decided to drop the second day, the *yomtov sheyni shel galuyot* – “the second holiday of the exiles.” Today’s Reform leaders like to point out that they observe the same length of holidays as do Israelis. Actually, that is true of the festivals – Passover, Shavuot and Succoth – but not of Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, which most Israelis observe for two days. Talmudic law calls these days *yoma arikhta* – “one long day.”

Recent policies of many Reform leaders have them dropping Biblical family and sexual prohibitions that they find to be politically incorrect. Intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles is one of these laws. Same-sex “weddings” are another.

In both cases, the Reform movement is honest. It says, in effect, “we know this is against Jewish tradition but we decided to do it anyway.”

Conservative Judaism takes a different approach. It maintains a rabbinic law committee to produce convoluted legal support for non-traditional decisions. One familiar example concerns the Sabbath laws. If Sabbath is a day of rest, then we should avoid doing work that day. The Torah sets a standard: “do not kindle a fire on the Sabbath day,” which tradition defines as applying to lighting a candle (we light ceremonial candles ushering in the Sabbath on Friday night to give us illumination, but no others), also to completing an electric circuit by throwing a switch or plugging in a wire, and also to driving a car. However, in the interest of building up attendance at Sabbath services the Conservative movement long ago authorized driving to synagogues on Sabbaths and holidays, and built parking lots to encourage that. Officially, of course, they say not to drive anywhere else. Good luck.

Lighting Sabbath candles, of course, is the traditional responsibility of women. It is an exception to the rule that women are exempt from time-bound responsibilities – *mitzvos sheha-z’man grama*. Therefore, daily *minyanim* and the sacred objects that go with them, like the *talis* and *t’filin*, traditionally include men and boys. Increasingly, however, Conservative congregations, which always have both sexes sitting together, encourage women and girls to take part in all rituals, time-bound or not. And as female clergy multiply in Reform communities, so do they in Conservative, with all the accompanying twists of the law to justify it.

Over the past half century or so, the Baal T’suvah movement is building up the Orthodox population. Frequently these returnees come from Conservative or secular families, and find their parents’ life style does not fulfill their religious needs. Sometimes their first stop is Modern Orthodoxy. They find some traditional warmth, and some consistency that they missed at home. Here are Jews who keep kosher at home, not just in Shul. Here people walk to and from Sabbath services, and even move to a location closer to the synagogue. Here women have an important role to play, but it is a separate role, just as seating at services is separate. And here are rabbis who extend themselves to prove that tradition is not altogether a thing of the past. Also attracted to this movement we find the children of strictly Orthodox families who crave some relaxation of the rules. Modern Orthodox leaders seem eager to fill the centrist role that the

Conservative movement once occupied. The coming years will measure their success.

Haredim are in the news both in the U.S. and Israel for their passionate separatism. They agitate against compulsory service in the Israeli armed forces. They insist on their right to decide how circumcisions should be done. And they take the position of guarding Jewish tradition against all comers. The name of their movement is symbolic. The Hebrew word *Haredi* literally means a “trembler,” one whose awe of the Divine and whose devotion to righteous action causes him to tremble. They tend to condemn any more liberal movements as sinful and dangerous. True, they preserve our tradition nearly intact as it was expounded two centuries ago in Eastern Europe, though not the same way in Sephardic communities. They also alienate a large number of their fellow Jews, and present a strange and mysterious image to their neighbors. Critics declare that the Haredi movement at best does limited service to the tradition. Given the high birth rate among Haredim, this movement figures to be with us for some time, exerting influence that other movements – that the Jewish people of the world – must consider.

Next on our list come the Hasidim. Of all the branches of the Hasidi movement – Satmar, Kotzker, Belzer, you name it – clearly the most influential worldwide group is the Lubavitcher, better known as Chabad. The name Chabad comes from the initials of 3 Hebrew words: *chochma* (wisdom), *bina* (understanding) and *daas* (knowledge). Great names in Chabad tradition supplemented Biblical and Talmudic teachings with the medieval mystic insights of the Sephardic sage Isaac Luria and his take on Kabbalah, the 18th century Baal Shem Tov’s emphasis on serving G-d with joy, and the Tanya – the long and detailed work of the “Alter Rebbe,” the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, whose magnetic personality set the pattern for Chabad Hasidism in late 18th and early 19th century Russia. His successors brought the movement to America and to Israel, and now spread it worldwide. The most recent Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Shneyerson, led his followers to learn and teach and serve their people by setting an example of devotion, scholarship and action. Since his death, no successor was named. Today Chabad has no living Rebbe, but its members still refer to Shneyerson as “the Rebbe.” They still follow the standards he taught. Among those is the concept that each human being has two souls: a divine soul and an animal soul; they compete with each other to dominate our lives.

Unlike some other Orthodox groups, Chabad welcomes all Jews regardless of their current level of observance. While never diluting their own practice, Chabad Hasidim use friendly encouragement to share their life style with any and all who care to join them.

Critics find some Chabad practices embarrassing. “Why do they have to walk around with the fringes on their tallis hanging out?” And the fact that the Rebbe has no living successor raises questions. In fact, some Chabad extremists state that the Rebbe **was** the *Moshiach* – the Messiah – and it’s the fault of all of us that he could not complete his work. However these “*Meshichisten*” are a small minority. In distant parts of the world, Chabad emissaries are bringing Jewish hope and sacred joy to those of our people who frequently have no other contact with our tradition. Will Chabad’s *farbrengen* – a kind of Torah-plus-social gathering with food – replace typical social-plus-political-fundraising Federation events? For some of our people, it already has.

According to some polls, the largest segment of the Jewish population occupies a position far to the left of any of the aforementioned movements. Known as Secular Humanists, or just plain secular people, they limit their contact with their Jewish origin to an occasional visit to a kosher-style deli, or perhaps a vote for a local Jewish candidate. Tradition, with its stress on loyalty to historic Judaism and identity with the Jewish people, is something they reject. Whether that rejection expresses itself through open animosity, committed atheism or simple indifference, their presence in the Jewish community is somewhat questionable. Of course, Jewish secularism is not new. For at least the last century, Socialists in Europe and assimilationists in America moved in that direction, and some of them adopted a set of social and political doctrines to support their views. Organizations like the Workmen’s Circle and the Bund grew in Eastern Europe and brought their secular lifestyle to America. Some of their members were well educated in traditional Judaism, so they knew exactly what they were rejecting. On the other hand, American secularists frequently were conscious only of deciding to live like their non-Jewish neighbors. Economic pressure combined with social attitudes to separate these Jews from their ancestral tradition. The pattern is familiar. Either work on Saturday or lose your job. Keeping kosher costs too much, and why is it important anyway? Sending kids to Hebrew school is inconvenient and expensive, and they’d rather be out playing ball anyway. Or, as Monty Hall quotes his father, “I am a good father to my children, a good husband to my wife, a good friend

to my neighbors, and that's my religion." Maybe his own father was president of a synagogue, but he does not care.

Of all the various Jewish groups, easily the biggest divide separates the Secular from the Orthodox. As we said, polls show the Secular to be the most numerous. Secular and Reform co-exist quite easily. At this point in time, Reform is still the most numerous religious movement, at least in the U.S. But its growth is slow and slowing. Orthodox Jewry, including Hasidi, Modern and Haredi members, shows a more rapid growth. In the U.S., in Israel and in other countries with substantial Jewish populations, the dominant leaders – presidents of Federations, directors of major organizations, political leaders in Israel, those who represent the Jewish community – are mostly secular Jews. Here and there, Orthodox leaders compete to represent us. Will they bring Tradition to a prominent position that it lost in the last generation?

The future is not ours to see. But one consideration looms large. Either we hang together, and surmount our differences of opinion for our common good, or we face serious trouble. Our tradition, interpret it how you will, has some important messages for us. Some of those messages are spiritual, some are intellectual, some are moral. And none is more vital than the line from an old Yiddish folk song: *Vos mir zynen, zynen mir, ober Yidn zynen mir* – “Whatever we are, we are, but we are all Jews.”

Understanding our differences requires understanding our tradition. “Limmud” and other educational programs should help us to share in that process. Can we agree on all features of that tradition? Not likely. But can we work together for our Jewish future? Yes we can, if we will only try.