

THE ARROGANCE OF MODERNISM

On this pleasant festival, I beg your indulgence for sharing with you a sense of irritation. I am allergic to the word "modern." I am incensed at the smug and complacent am ha-aretz who says to me, "How can you be Orthodox when you are so modern? How can you refrain from smoking or driving on Shabbat, or eating non-kosher food, or fasting on Yom Kippur, in this twentieth century?"

I am similarly upset when I hear people saying, "He is religious -- but modern," in almost exactly the same tone as one would say, "He is slightly insane -- but sincere" -- as if modernity can save the benighted religious soul from the damnation to which the unsophisticated are foredoomed.

I even confess that I am uncomfortable with the title "Modern Orthodox." There is an arrogance about this assertion of modernity which should give offense to any intelligent and sensitive man. There is no better term that I have found, but I flinch when I articulate the words.

Modernity -- what conceit! How vain, how meaningless! As if the accident of being born into the Space Age makes one superior to the past, because "we" know so much more than those of previous generations did. But who is this "we" who know so much? If any of us has advanced knowledge in any one specialized

field, does that give us warrant for feeling better and greater than ancients whose wisdom often ranged far and wide, whose interests were universal? Because we have the ability, through no fault of our own, to turn a knob on the television set and watch a space ship near the moon, does that make us better than Newton or Kepler or any of the other geniuses of the past who discovered and described the laws of the universe which have made our age possible?

I am moved to speak of this theme because Shavuot is the anniversary of the giving of Torah, and an old Torah it is! It is not a modern Torah. It is a holy Torah, a powerful and wise and meaningful and vital and just Torah -- but no, not a modern one. It is not materialistic or hedonistic or youth-oriented or secularistic or "with it."

Judaism maintains that truth does not depend on time. The Maharal of Prague observed that the festival of Shavuot, unlike all the others, is not appointed by the Torah to a special date on the calendar. It is only indirectly fixed as seven weeks after Passover. Why is this so? Because, answers the Maharal, Torah is *אמת* *על* *תמיד*, beyond time. Its truth is not a function of the age in which it was given. Jews, therefore, should not assent to what Jacques Maritain has called "chronolatry," the worship of what is latest in time.

Every age is, of course, modern in its own eyes. But the tendency to consider this modernity as a virtue is fairly recent. I believe that it is largely the result of a misinterpretation of evolutionary theory: since life is supposed to evolve to higher forms, therefore I am greater than my father, and he was greater than his... Thus, one might conclude -- and many often do -- that the religious tradition that comes to us from the remote past is inadequate for us, because the ancients were not modern and we are.

This feeling afflicts even profoundly religious people. About 150 years ago, the Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote a book entitled ON RELIGION: To its Cultured Despisers. How revealing! Those who despise religion are modern, they are cultured. We are benighted, we are behind the times. So it is with most religious folk -- we labor under the heavy burden of an inferiority feeling because we are not modern.

I do not mean to say all that is modern is bad, and that as an observant Jew I am against modernity. That would be as absurd a notion as the supposition that all that is modern is good and true. Over 200 years ago, Lord Chesterfield wrote: "Speak of the moderns without contempt, and of the ancients without idolatry; judge them all by their merits, and not by their age."

I admit that it sometimes seems as though the Rabbis of the Talmud were inclined to ascribe greater virtue to ages past:

אלו ראשונים בני אנשים, אלו ראשונים בני מלאכים, אלו ראשונים בני חיות, אלו ראשונים בני אדם. "If those of the earlier generations were the children of angels, we are merely the children of men; and if they were but the children of men, then we are like mules." But I do not think that this implies a general condemnation of later generations. It is not really anti-modernist. Rather, it represents a specific judgment that they made when comparing their own generation with that of the Prophets -- and I agree, that spiritually we have been in decline for a long time.

But that does not mean that in their view human history always deteriorates. On Shavuot, the farmer who would bring his bikurim, or first fruits, would recite the passage that begins:

אברהם אבינו ארבי ארבי "My father was a wandering Syrian." Abraham had very humble origins. And on Passover we proclaim: נחמנו נחמנו, once upon a time our ancestors were miserable idol-worshippers. The past is not always better than the present. And, by the same token, the present is seen as leading to a much greater future: the coming of the Messiah.

Nevertheless, Judaism does not subscribe to "chronolatry." We must not submit to the arrogance of modernity.

This modern worship of modernity results in a number of patent absurdities. Consider this: if we are bright and intelligent and wise because we are modern, and therefore superior to past generations, how will we be judged by the coming generations? And how will they be judged by the ones following them? And if by their standards we are primitive, how sure are we now that we are right in anything we believe, including our arrogant assumption about modernity?

Even our vocabulary suffers and reveals the foolishness of making a fetish of modernity. The very word "modern" has become shopworn. Many people have begun to use "contemporary" instead. More recently, learned journals have featured a spate of articles on the "post-modern." What is to come next? -- post-contemporary? post-post-modern?

It is true, generally, that technological knowledge and ability is cumulative, and that every generation ^{in this sense} is greater than the one preceding it. But it is not necessarily true in ethics and morality, in religion and in the life of the spirit. And even technologically, the idea of constant and uninterrupted progress is true only provided that there is no devastating war that results from technology itself, so that man is reduced -- as Albert Einstein put it -- to fighting the next one with bow and arrow; and provided that the flow of technical knowledge does not become so vast, so enormous, so stifling, that mankind strangles on it,

unable to digest and use it.

But to repeat, whatever may be true of technology and science is not necessarily true for religion. Love and hate, fear and reverence, the sense of mystery and worship -- all these are independent of artifacts and gadgets and mathematics. Science and technology make us more effective -- but to what end? Modern scholarship is more critical -- but are we wiser? We have great communications -- but do we say more that is worth saying? We can have more fun -- but are we happier?

Torah is not anchored to the "modernity" of any age. For Shavuot is not given a date in the Torah. The Torah given on Shavuot -- is beyond time. It applies to then and now and to tomorrow. It is always "modern" and yet never merely "modern."

I recently read with amused contempt a report of the JTA on May 8th which is pertinent to the idea we are discussing. It tells of a statement by a Reconstructionist leader who urged that Jewish Community Centers remain open on the Sabbath to serve "the needs of those who do not hold to Orthodoxy." He also declared that the Sabbath "must be re-established not as a restrictive day of fourth-century worship and rest, but rather as a twentieth-century turn-on to relevance."

What colossal am ha'aratzut for a "Rabbi" to speak so disparagingly and unknowingly of fourth-century Judaism -- the very high point of the creation of the Talmud! It is difficult to find a more apt illustration of the "arrogance of modernity" --

arrogance and hutzpah and immaturity! Not even a supposedly religious teacher, but any cultured individual, would refrain from such obvious vulgarity in preaching "relevance." So the Shabbat should not be a day of worship and rest, but a "turn-on to relevance!" What does that mean? Are we to abandon the synagogue and repair to the gymnasium? To quit our services and head for swimming pool? To spend all Shabbat on election campaigns? On breaking windows on the campus? In demonstrations?

"Turn-on!" I would recommend instead a simple "turn," or as it is known in Hebrew, teshuvah, or repentance. That may be less "exciting" and less "modern," but it would lead to more humility and respect and responsibility.

No, Torah is not geared to the calendar, it does not tell us that we have to be modern and always accord with the zeitgeist, with the spirit of the time. The late Dr. Raphael Gold once made this comment: Adam and Eve, after they sinned and corrupted their lives, heard the voice of the Lord: "And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden קִיּוֹם הַיּוֹם" (Gen. 3:8), which is usually translated as "toward the cool of the day," but which may just as well be translated, "according to the spirit of the day." Once they had sinned, they approached God only according to the zeitgeist, according to the canons of modernity. It is the way and the wages of sin: man attempts to reduce the infinity of God to his own pitifully puny dimensions. He turns away from God,

and "turns-on to relevance." He breathes deeply of the *שׁוֹדוֹת הַיָּמִים*, and, intoxicated, becomes arrogantly and vulgarly "modern."

So let us not be frightened by the word "modern." Let us not be awed by the self-satisfied ignoramuses who feel superior because of the accident of their birth in this generation. The Jewish Chronicle may criticize us, and Commentary may not like us. The rich and the powerful may consider us antiquated. But that is no tragedy, it is not fatal. We shall survive -- long enough to have to put up with yet another generation which will consider the present moderns as outdated as we are supposed to be!

Modern science and technology and culture have contributed much that is of abiding value for mankind, just as they have failed miserably in so many other areas.

What we hold to be true, we hold to be timeless, unaffected by the years, and uncorroded by the ages. We hold our Torah to be true; it is a Torat emet. And Torah and truth are both timeless, even as God, the noten ha-Torah, is beyond the ravages of time.

What is true is valuable, even if ancient; and what is false remains contemptible, even if modern and up-to-date.

In the closing word of the Akdmut prayer, which we read this morning, we recited the following words:

מְגֻלָּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֵרֵאשִׁית
זְמַן לְעוֹלָם וְעוֹלָם וְעוֹלָם
וְעוֹלָם וְעוֹלָם וְעוֹלָם וְעוֹלָם
וְעוֹלָם וְעוֹלָם וְעוֹלָם וְעוֹלָם

Exalted is the Lord from the beginning of time to the end, Who loved us and was pleased with us, and gave us His Torah.