

# CONFRONTATION AND LIBERTY

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*The Jewish encounter with modernism has resulted in a permanent splintering of the sacred order known as rabbinic Judaism. The result is the divisiveness now pervading Jewish life. It is only in neutral secular institutions, such as the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, that Jews come together. Jewish communal service professionals stand in the core of North American Jewry; their task is to facilitate the possibilities of secular core-to-Jewish cultural core confrontations.*

In this article, I share some personal thoughts about our common condition as an ancient people in these closing years of this era's second millennium. I am aware that brevity and truth are all too often incompatible, that truth resides in details, in nuances. Yet, I will try anyway to walk this brevity-and-truth tightrope, trusting that the reader will extend for me a net of patience and understanding.

It is, I think, a truth that the Conference of Jewish Communal Service (CJCS) stands squarely in the core of North American Jewry—its members help provide the educational and social service needs of the Jewish community. It is, I think, a further truth that CJCS—in its umbrella structure, philosophy, and pluralistic nature—is essentially a secular institution. In those two truths—that CJCS and its members, Jewish communal professionals, are both core and secular—resides much of the modern history of our people.

## WHAT IS MEANT BY "CORE"

Let me present my understanding of the term "core."

My father was a very religious man, a Belzer Hasid, a dweller in the sacred order of things where life is arranged vertically,

with God and the Law on top, Hell's punishment below, and errant men and women moving up and down the ladder depending upon how much they obey or transgress the Law. All value is given, fixed; authority is rooted in Revelation; there is little sense of self; all belong to a community, a shared destiny. The goal of that sacred order is to live the life ordered by the Commandments and thereby to redeem this imperfect world as best we can; to be transformed somehow after the death of the body and granted life everlasting in a celestial realm that is free of the suffering that befouls our transitory flesh-and-blood existence. That was the world of my father.

My mother was also a very religious person. Yet, she had attended a *gymnasium* in Vienna during the First World War, and although she was a direct descendant of a son of the Rhyziner Rebbe, the founder of one of the greatest of the Hasidic dynasties, she knew enough about the secular world to realize that not all of it was poisonous to the religious soul. She was in that transitional stage between the sacred order of the past and the secular world in which we live today. Born into the sacred order, she had come to appreciate some of the elements of secularism. She never participated fully in the institutions of secular life—hers was not a life of the theatre or the movies or modern literature—but she understood that there resided in those institutions at least the possibilities of other readings of the human experience.

And I? Where was I?

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Born into a sacred order, raised in yeshivas, I read when I was about 16 years old my first serious contemporary adult novel—*Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh—and understood for the first time the godlike power possessed by an imagination spinning itself into pulsing life through the textures, rhythms, and arabesques of language.

When I told my father that I wanted to be a serious writer of stories, he reacted with anger. His dream was for me to become a *rosh yeshiva*, a teacher of Talmud in an Orthodox academy of Jewish learning.

And when I told my mother that I wanted to be a serious writer, she gave me a gentle, sober look, and said, "You want to write stories, darling? That's very nice. You'll be a brain surgeon; on the side you'll write stories."

My father wanted me to be a Jew working for Jews. My mother wanted me to be a Jew working for the world.

I left the sacred world of my father and my mother for another reading of the Jewish tradition—and became a writer of stories, which is, as you are no doubt aware, entirely a modern secular enterprise.

From the core of my small and particular sacred order, I encountered contemporary literature, an element from the core of the general civilization in which we all live today and to which we all give our best creative energies—the civilization we call variously humanism, secularism, Western secular humanism, modernism, postmodernism.

We, all of us, are that civilization. We are its lawyers, doctors, dentists, social workers, entrepreneurs, artists, students, teachers, and research scientists. We give it our best creative energies. Even if we are members of the clergy, we service those who offer up their energies to this civilization.

For the first time in our history as a people, we stand at the very center of a civilization that is not originally our own. We could never affect the destinies of Islam or Christendom no matter how close we may have been to the centers of those civilizations—and there were times when

we were very close indeed. Yet, it can, I think, be argued convincingly that Jews helped in the very creation of the modern mind and mood: Pissarro, Kafka, Freud, Chagall, Scholem, Einstein, and so many, many others. Jews all. Secularists all. Modernists all.

About 200 years ago, the Enlightenment and its ensuing modernism, born in Western and Central Europe, met the sacred orders of Christendom and Judaism, born in Sinai and Jerusalem. The result was and continues to be—despite bastions fighting holding actions here and there or temporary swings and turns backward—a routing of the religious way of thinking about the human experience. Nothing will ever again be what it was before the birth of modernism, because modernism has changed the way we see the world and is now permanently layered into the strata of human culture. We know too much about ourselves, about how we construct the world; that knowledge will simply not disappear. For the overwhelming majority of people on the Western side of our planet and its culture colonies—Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Israel, among others—the vertical sacred order of the past is forever gone.

#### JEWISH ENCOUNTER WITH MODERNISM

The Jewish encounter with modernism resulted in a permanent splintering of the sacred order known as rabbinic Judaism. That Jewish core held a number of contradictory and conflicting elements in delicate tension and balance: God's justice and God's mercy; blind obedience to the Law and the need to understand the reasons for the Law; God's love for His people and God's love for all people; insular Judaism and prophetic Judaism; the all-powerful unity of the biblical God and the dialectical stress-filled tumultuous God of the Kabbalists. All of this and more constituted rabbinic Judaism. In the decades after the

French Revolution it all began to break apart as a result of the confrontation with powerful seminal elements of modernism.

In the modern period many of these ancient elements of Judaism became the core of a new vision of the Jewish experience.

Prophetic Judaism—universalism and the importance of social action—became the core of Reform Judaism. Rabbinic insistence upon adherence to the revealed Law became the core of Orthodoxy. The meticulous attention paid by the rabbis of the Talmud to the care and study of Jewish texts, together with the general freedom of debate and thought that most frequently characterizes rabbinic Judaism, became the core of Conservative Judaism. Rabbinic humanism, with its emphasis on the intrinsic value of humankind, became the core of Jewish socialism and secularism. The rabbinic attitude toward the centrality of the Land of Israel in Judaism became the core of modern Zionism. And that is where we stand today.

It might have all come together in a new fusion of Jewish creativity had European Jewry been given another two or three generations to work out its responses to the confrontation with modernism. But European Jewry was murdered. All that is left is us and the embattled State of Israel. Yet, the State of Israel is giving so much of its energies to staying alive that it cannot cope fully with the culture confrontation in which we all live today. And so all that is left to face this confrontation fully and creatively is the English-speaking Jewry now living in North America, England, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.

What sort of confrontation is it? What shape does it have? Can we describe its choreography?

I want to offer for your consideration a model, in outline form, of what we are all going through today—and then apply it to the 92nd Annual Meeting, the theme of which is “Liberty.”

I noted earlier that I read *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh when I was 16 years old. I have never forgotten the tex-

ture of that experience. For the first time in my life I sensed the power of the human imagination and the exquisite use of language in the fashioning of a story. Very soon after I finished that novel I began to write stories.

Few in my world encouraged me. Reactions ranged from icy indifference to sneering contempt to angry overt attempts at discouragement. My Talmud teacher, a devout and learned man, warned me about the dangers of a love affair with the goddess called Literature and made repeated efforts to separate me from her alluring embrace. He failed.

My Talmud teacher, of course, was right. Literature *is* dangerous. It is, in the modern period, along with painting and sculpture, a form of expression used by the rebel, the iconoclast, the breaker of images—by angry individuals who, for whatever reason, find themselves lined up against the dull and complacent ranks of the bourgeois world. Nothing is sacred in modern literature; nothing is so intrinsically sacrosanct an inheritance from the past that it cannot be poked into and opened up by the pen of the writer.

Raised in the heart of one small and particular world—in my instance, the world of Jewish Orthodoxy, but it can be any world—I encountered an element from the heart of the general secular civilization in which we all live: its literature. I discovered by the time I was 18 or 19 that I had become a battleground for a confrontation of cultures of a certain kind.

I have been calling that sort of confrontation a *core-to-core culture confrontation*. And that is what I try to explore in my work: various kinds of core-to-core culture confrontations—with Freudian thought (*The Chosen*), scientific text criticism (*The Promise, In the Beginning*), Western art (*My Name Is Asher Lev*), Eastern pagan thought and practices (*The Book of Lights*), Marxism (*Davita's Harp*)—and their possible resolutions.

James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man* is an extraordinary explora-

tion of the highways and alleys of that kind of confrontation — Stephen Dedalus, at the heart of Irish Catholicism, in a passionate colloquy with an element from the heart of modernism, its literature.

Clearly that is not the only kind of confrontation we are experiencing today. Let me briefly present three others.

One type occurs when one grows up in the core of a small and particular world and along the periphery of the general world. That is a *core-to-periphery culture confrontation*.

An Orthodox Jewish boy watching *Star Trek* is experiencing that kind of confrontation. The first chapter of *The Chosen* is another example of such a confrontation. Reuven Malter, from the heart of his Judaism, encounters in a baseball game an individual from an alien culture, Hasidism, about which he knows little. It is in the nature of such a confrontation that someone located in the core of one culture can, if he or she so desires, absorb entire elements from the periphery of another culture and yet not be altered culturally in any significant and permanent way. The French, as an example, will watch all the episodes of *Dallas* we send them; their experience with that peripheral element of American culture will not alter the essential nature of French civilization.

There is a third kind of confrontation. In the world of Saul Bellow's *Herzog* an individual is caught up in a *periphery-to-core culture confrontation*: Herzog marginally attached to his Jewish world and deep in academe. It is very often the case that someone from a peripheral religious or secular world will be deeply affected by a core experience with another culture, religious or secular.

The early stories of Philip Roth offer us a picture of yet another kind of confrontation: *periphery-to-periphery culture confrontation*. This sort of confrontation of ignorances more often than not yields up cultural shallowness, aberrations, monstrosities.

Precisely how to calibrate the diverse

elements of our culture and where to position them along the culture spectrum are subjects that lie outside the boundaries of this article.

Ongoing culture confrontation. The world as a marketplace of ideas. That is the face of contemporary life. And it will not go away.

#### AN ADDED DIMENSION OF SECULARISM

Modernism has added the dimension of secularism to Judaism.

There are those who regard secularism as incompatible with Judaism, a contradiction in terms. Yet, Judaism has fused with contradictions before. The fusion with Canaanite culture yielded entire books of the Bible, not the least of them being the Book of Psalms, a fusion of Canaanite poetic forms and Israelite content.

Alexandrian Jewry absorbed Hellenistic culture and gave us the *Septuagint* and Philo. It is wrong to say that the disappearance of Alexandrian Jewry was due entirely to its assimilation into the Hellenistic world. We know now that it was destroyed largely because it was 2000 years ahead of its time: the Jews of Alexandria sought to be religiously separate from *and* full-fledged citizens of the Roman empire at one and the same time, and that enraged their pagan neighbors and led to riots, rebellion, and slaughter.

Palestinian Jewry learned much from Roman and Greek law and customs and gave us the Mishnah. Babylonian Jewry interacted with its cultural surroundings in ways that are still not entirely clear to us and gave us the Babylonian Talmud. Spanish Jewry interacted profoundly with the Muslim and Christian worlds and gave us religious and secular poetry, science, grammar, philosophy, and talmudic commentaries. Franco-German and Polish Jewry, which had little opportunity for lengthy cultural exchange with the murderous Christian world around them, produced centuries of intense and closed Jewish learn-

ing. Russian Jews entered deeply into their anti-Czarist, socialist revolutionary surroundings and gave us profound Jewish versions of socialism and the State of Israel.

And what about us, today, in this land that proclaims liberty, this postmodern world that is witnessing an end to the Cold War and a Jewish event of monumental proportions, the third such event in our century—the tidal wave of Soviet emigres that is changing the face of Jewry? Where do we stand now in these closing years of the millennium?

The ghetto years are forever gone. The Jewish people has once more entered the arena of history with all that entails: the ugliness of geopolitics, the dignity of being able to come face-to-face with our own history, the joy of seeing at will the landscape of our earliest dreams, and the grim satisfaction of knowing that we will never again be the passive victims of another culture's rages.

We know, too, if we are really honest with ourselves, that we have paid and will continue to pay a high price for our entrance into history's arena: the divisiveness now prevalent in Jewish life will in all likelihood intensify during the coming decades. Sometime in the near future when the dust finally settles, there will be three clearly recognizable Jewries in the English-speaking world: fundamentalist religious Jews; nonfundamentalist religious Jews; and secularist Jews.

How are they going to talk to each other?

The synagogue—a word borrowed from the Greek, just as is the word "Sanhedrin," the name of the highest of the ancient Jewish courts of law—once served three purposes for *all* the people of a Jewish community: it was a House of Prayer, a House of Study, and a House of Assembly. Very few synagogues in the Western world now serve all the segments of an entire Jewish religious community. There are among us those who will not enter a synagogue radically different from their own—

neither to pray, nor to study, nor to socialize.

Ironically, it is precisely in neutral secular institutions that we all come together as one people: in General Assemblies of the federations and in conventions such as the CJCS Annual Meeting. These are gatherings of the clans and tribes of Israel—under a secular umbrella.

We say to ourselves that religious unity is now truly impossible—if, indeed, it ever was a reality in Jewish life. Yet, things have to be done, there is earth to plow, there are seeds to plant, Jews to save, a land to build, children to educate, a future to carve out for ourselves. And so we learn from the world outside us how to come together in mutual respect beneath a pluralist secular umbrella. Remember that the next time someone tells you how destructive secularism is.

It is not secularism that is destructive; it is ignorance. Periphery-to-periphery culture confrontations are destructive. Read Roth. Read John Updike's *Rabbit Angstrom* novels. Read Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

Ignorance and nonbelief are two very distinct conditions in the Jewish tradition. In Judaism one must be quite learned in order to be a true nonbeliever. The European *apikoros*, the nonbeliever, was invariably a highly educated core Jew who came to have doubts about God.

You Jewish communal professionals are core in Judaism now, those of you who are deeply and knowledgeably committed to your secular vision of the world. The richest kinds of confrontations that we have had in the past and can possibly have now and in the future are core-to-core confrontations. Bear that in mind as you program for the closing years of this millennium.

*Ukeratem dror ba'aretz* (Leviticus 25:10) —“You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land.” The Hebrew word *dror*, which is translated as “liberty,” comes from an ancient Akkadian word that means “manumission (release) of slaves.” *Ukeratem dror*

in the Bible means, literally, "proclaim the release of slaves," those individuals who became slaves because they could not repay the debts they had incurred.

The word "liberty" adds an altogether new dimension to the word *dror*—indeed, one might argue, a secular dimension, one drawn from the age in which we live, from the very core of modernism. But liberty for what? For the hedonism that surrounds

us? For the shallowness we see in our people? For the periphery of Western civilization, its vulgar fads? Or for the best of Western civilization and for the rebuilding of our core? Indeed, for the intensification of our *various cores*, for no one core exists in Judaism today. That, it seems to me, is your main task as communal teachers and practitioners: to facilitate the possibilities of core-to-core culture confrontations.