

A Tumultuous Love Affair - YU, Me and the Last Three Decades
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It was in early February of 1980 that I first entered the Byzantine fortress on Amsterdam and 186th. Coincidentally, my arrival was through a side door (capable of opening from the outside in those days) so I skipped the first floor lobby altogether. Led down a confusing network of stairs and hallways, the path through the catacombs eventually placed me in a dimly lit, low ceiling, padded room with a rotting wood floor -- the gym. My escorts were the members of the 1979/80 Ramaz hockey team. I was their coach and the occasion was the first ever game of the yeshiva hockey league with the visiting Rams facing off against the MTA Lions.

Despite the laboriously achieved results of that Sunday afternoon -- Ramaz managing to tie MTA at 4, with an extra attacker on and eleven seconds remaining -- I emerged with my affection for Dr. Revel's "school on a hill" further validated.

I say "further validated" because long before I entered the Constantinopolitan edifice, I had been sweetly immersed in Yeshiva University via the writings and ideas of many of its thinkers.

Journeys and Yearnings

As a fairly typical child of the New York, non-Orthodox "baby boomer" generation, I was of those that had not yet experienced their Jewish identity via the Holocaust and Israel. Neither of these figured prominently in the Hebrew school education I acquired at Congregation Habonim (Reform) in Queens. Indeed, the tragedy and commemorations of Tisha b'Av were unknown in our family. Rather, in some vague sense, (being, as I was, a child of firm Brooklyn Dodger stock) it was Ralph Branca's surrendering of that home run to Bobby Thompson in the crucial playoff game against the Giants in 1951 which struck me as the worst thing that had ever occurred to "my people" who were all Jewish, from Brooklyn and forever mourning Dressen's removal of Newcombe in the ninth.

For reasons that need not detain us here, I opted, at age 12, for Orthodoxy and began my yeshiva years soon thereafter as a ninth grader in Mesivta Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in September of 1965. Unsatisfied with (what struck me then, although no longer) as the compromises of Hirschianism, I soon wound up in Monsey at Mesivta Beth Shraga (a fairly standard yeshivish place, somewhat flavored with Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz' Torah Vodaath eclecticism). Within a few years, I was married, learning in the Skvera Kollel, and living in the Hasidic village of New Square. This interesting odyssey ironically left me simultaneously satisfied and empty. Yes, I was in the traditional bosom of my people and the life of Torah and avodah of Skver (particularly in those heady days after the village's founding) was indeed what I had aspired to and struggled to attain. Yet, I was still attracted to the rest of natural existence, human experience and creativity that is quite consciously excluded from the chareidi and, certainly, the New Square worldview.

To supplement the kollel diet, I continued and intensified my readings in many fields. And, when a particular contemporary author captured my fancy, I'd call him and discuss his work. One such author was Dr. Norman Lamm, who spent many hours over several conversations dealing with any topics I raised.

The relationship with Dr. Lamm deepened to the point where he invited me to speak to a class in Jewish philosophy that he was giving at the time. Thus, it was in 1975 that I spoke to his class in Furst Hall, marking my first visit to the YU campus, albeit not to Zysman Hall.

Fancying the Dream

Yet, it was not these physical trips to YU that were of the most significance. It was the reflective balm that YU thinkers and their worldview offered my soul. Essentially what YU theorists (and, in a different but essentially similar vein the Breuer community of that era, alas, no longer, but that is surely for another day) told me, was that there is knowledge, beauty and experience outside the walls of the beis midrash and that all of it, if pursued for His Glory, could yield spiritual dividends for the mevakesh Hashem.

Buoyed by my own attempts at the fusion of chasidus and Torah u-Madda or Torah im Derech Eretz, I arrived in the long since departed Yeshiva High School of Queens (d. 1981) as a rebbi in September of 1977. Naive would be a kind term for the view of Modern Orthodoxy that I took with me as I rode the Hasidic bus to Manhattan, took the E train to its last stop (179th), then continuing on the Q43 till 191st Street and the walk up the hill to Palo Alto. I knew the movement from the pages of Tradition and Kol Yavneh. I believed that the ideals of Rabbi Lamm, Rabbi Lichtenstein and the like would be on the lips and in the hearts of my talmidim. Sadly, the reality of Modern Orthodox High School education at that time bore almost no resemblance to the worldview and life's path that I had read about.

Of course, this is true in any social setting. Reality lags behind the ideal. Yet, here there was almost no reality at all. And, clearly the idea that the Torah and mitzvot of this system could in any way compare with what I had experienced in Skver or Beth Shraga or even Breuer's was absurd. Not only was there no notion of Madda l'shem shamayim, there was little notion of Torah learning, davening or anything beyond the most perfunctory of mitzvah performance.

This is not to imply that I didn't find the young men and women that I encountered in YHSQ and later as coach of the inaugural Ramaz hockey team (1979 - 1981) to be delightful people. I thoroughly enjoyed and still cherish the years I spent in both places in their company. But it was, by any stretch of the imagination, not the movement I had read about and developed a long distance "crush" on.

The Revolution Cometh

Social revolutions sometimes occur to the fanfare of manifestos, barricades and conscious struggle. Alternatively, things evolve and the participants themselves are only dimly aware that they are players in seismic cultural changes. The revolution that has swept Modern Orthodoxy since the seventies is of the latter category. It has been nurtured by a host of factors, widespread acceptance of the year of learning in Israel, readily available English seforim in all areas of Torah, the increased levels of learning and piety amongst Israeli religious Zionists, the influence of the chareidi world, the presence in Modern Orthodox schools of young and idealistic educators and the explosion of Jewish cultural items and events.

This revolution has some downside (about which, more in a moment) but suffice it to say that it has totally changed the face of Modern Orthodoxy. Of course, the change is far from universal. There remain communal, educational and certainly individual holdouts trapped like "Richie" and "Fonzie" in a forever fifties time warp. Yet, it seems that almost all trends are towards greater observance, knowledge and performance of Torah and mitzvot.

In my days as a rebbi in OTI (1981 - 1987) and later MTA (1987 till the present) I have witnessed, participated and derived spiritual sustenance from the across the board improvement of every aspect of Modern Orthodoxy's Torah observance.

This inspirational transformation is readily apparent in microcosm right here on the YU campus as year after year sees positive changes undreamt of in previous generations. Speak to those who attended here just a few decades ago and inquire about minyan attendance, morning and evening, or the numbers of boys who maintained a committed night seder or the simple numbers immersed in learning throughout the morning. Ask them about many other indicators of mitzvah observance. Invariably you will be told of radical changes -- all for the better. Baruch Hashem!

Breaking a Few Eggs?

There are those who bemoan these changes, asserting that they are part of an ill defined "move to the right." The meaning of this journalistic cliché simply escapes me. Does the YU'er of the present generation offer less loyalty to Israel, to a university education or to the sense that we are forever linked to the totality of Klal Yisroel? Surely not. However, he does evidence far greater devotion to halachah, learning and tefilah.

Has anything been lost in the two and half decades old transformation of the institution that so enchanted me years ago?

Well, it does seem that the effects of Religious Zionism of a particular orientation have had their impact. Many streams of this orientation are far from convinced that secular studies or mankind as a whole are deserving of Jewish attention or empathy. The effect of this is that many now see their general studies at YU in a purely functionalist sense, as means to earn a living. Surely this is a good motivation but something less than the lofty vision that my ideological Modern Orthodox heroes advocated.

In addition, the protracted conflict with the Palestinians and what many Jews see as the world's misreading of it, has hardened the view of the Israeli Zionist right towards non - Jews in general. It is not our task at present to debate the pros and cons of a tradition stretching back to Betar and Jabotinsky but simply to note that its fusion with the vision of Rav Zvi Yehudah Kook and others has yielded a philosophy, the idealism and dedication of which captures the fancy of many a YU talmid past and present.

This Likkudian song, born of deep love for and pride in the Jewish people and land, ah, I am not tone deaf to its passion. Yet, for myself, I find it sadly similar to the widespread demonization of the Gentile which I have found dominant in the chareidi world. Heavens, to be told that Gentiles are genetically built to hate us, I need not come to YU but can simply step out of my house in Monsey and go to the local mikveh.

Of course, neither of the above trends is unanimous. And, even among those YU lads who find chardalism to their liking their remains the more essential fact that they are serious Ovdei Hashem. Yes, I'd like a bit more universalism in their morality and love and a greater embrace of creation and humanity but, if my life has taught me anything, it is that you can't have everything.

Indeed. But, where else besides our Yeshiva will you find a Makom Torah where the ideological likes of Oz Veshalom and Kach both cavort freely and never disrespectfully or unintelligently? (Well, as the Captain of the Pinafore would say, "Hardly ever!") Where else will the thought of Rav Lichtenstein and David Shatz and Shalom Carmy and so on and so forth add so much to our understandings of our faith experience?

Yes, the YU radical left ideologues (not too many of these, though!) may slip into pluralist notions that reject truth itself and our right seems to lack a bit of understanding and love for all -- not to equate these two errors! - but it is here, within minarets and futurist cubes, that so much of the drama of contemporary Torah faith is grasped, lived and presented to Jewry and mankind.

May Chancellor Norman Lamm and President Richard Joel know only blessings, b'gashmiyut and ruchniyot as they lead us.

I thank G-d always that I call YU one of my homes.

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