

# We Are Not Alone in the World

Mayer Schiller

Orthodox Jews believe their faith to be objectively true. To us the Torah is not merely metaphor or symbol, nor of questionable authorship. It is literally God's spoken word. Accordingly, *mitzvot* and *halakhot* (commandments and laws) are not results of time-and-place contingencies, but are eternally binding upon the entirety of the Jewish people.

Having established this objective metaphysic as his doctrinal bedrock, the Orthodox thinker is forced to confront the reality of a humanity which rejects it. Where do non-Jews or Jews who deny these truths (whether consciously or not) fit in the Orthodox worldview?

These are not merely academic questions, for they impact upon the Israel-Palestinian confrontation, as well as upon the currently acrimonious relations between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews throughout the world and especially in Israel. The controversies swirling around the peace process and Yitzhak Rabin's murder are only the latest reminders of these agonizing divisions.

One further area deserving of attention by Torah Jewry is that of disagreement in our own ranks. Although the Torah is God's revealed will, nonetheless, it does not yield clear perspectives on all individual, communal, and national matters. Hence, we frequently reach conclusions in life that, although informed by Torah, are also based upon our own intuition, logic, counsel of friends and rabbis, etc. These conclusions are not Torah itself, but rather applied Torah. How authoritative are our Torah-imbued decisions, and what should be our approach to those who differ with us about them?

Beyond the elementary demands of ethical monotheism embodied in the "seven commandments of the sons of Noah," the Torah is largely silent on the subject of a Gentile's task in this world. How should a Gentile view his religion, nation, race, culture, or ethnicity? How does God view Gentile enthusiasms for all or some of the above? By what standard does He judge the individual and communal loyalties of Spanish Catholics, Afrikaner Calvinists, Tibetan Buddhists, or Palestinian Muslims? To adequately

answer these vexing questions would require a lengthy exploration of the Torah texts relevant to Gentiles, primarily those that focus on the parameters between monotheism and idol worship. It would seem a logical and fair working hypothesis, however, that the Lord is pleased with Gentiles if they are oriented toward Him and uphold the natural law ("seven commandments").

Accordingly, we are taught that a pious and ethical Gentile will find favor in God's eyes and merit "a share in the world to come." Piety in the larger sense of the term extends to the sense of bonding which we all feel to our own people and their physical place in the world. The materialist will see this as the result of biological impulses, but to the believer the love and loyalty we experience for kinfolk and the soil of our ancestors is yet another of the tender blessings that a loving Creator has bestowed upon us.

Yet human traits that are virtues when properly embraced are often perverted. Loyalty to one's own becomes a hatred for the other. Love for one's place leads to conflict with others who claim it. Ideally, mutual respect can yield a compromise of sorts which allows all concerned to see their dreams partially fulfilled. In reality, history is full of instances in which wisdom and a spirit of charity did not prevail; instead, victory went to the stronger side.

It is this seemingly intractable human tendency toward aggression and deceit that daunts those who desire a more humane world. We must respect the other while keeping our own guard up. Sadly, it is the first part of this equation—the granting of humanity to the Gentile either as an individual or as a people—that is often lacking in Orthodox circles. Suffering from a kind of moral blindness, we find it difficult to see the non-Jew as anything more than a bit player in our own drama.

The Palestinians are people both individually and as a community. This must serve as our starting point in dealing with them. Whether this means that the P.L.O. is a suitable peace partner, or the West Bank is a security necessity I don't know, but surely it will have much impact upon our approach. Similarly,

*Rabbi Mayer Schiller teaches Talmud at Yeshiva University High School for Boys in New York. He is the author of numerous books and articles.*

our approach to Gentile people elsewhere in the world should be governed by our recognition of their peoplehood. It is simply unfair to advocate public policies solely on the basis of "what's good for the Jews" while disregarding the well-being of Gentiles, either as individuals, nations, ethnicities, or races. We need not ignore Jewish self-interest, but it must be balanced against the just claims of those among whom we dwell.

But what about Jews who have strayed from Torah? In an era that values "pluralism," the Orthodox Jew labors under a heavy burden. He cannot, in the manner of those who reject Orthodoxy, speak of multiple truths or forever-open questions. To the Orthodox Jew, Judaism has never and will never have "denominations." The teachings of Torah, no matter how much they are at odds with the cultural "elites," are not subject to debate. Sinaitic revelation and all that it implies is axiomatic. We are pledged to its truth with a fervor that even surpasses the liberal's dogmatic belief in democracy, pluralism, human rights, or tolerance.

Hence, from an objective perspective, Orthodoxy, or—as we would much rather call it—Judaism sees non-Orthodox Jews as errant. Yet, God does not judge us solely by objective standards. In His infinite kindness He views each of us against the backdrop of our particular circumstances. This is the wonder of what we might describe as God's subjective charity. This charity values not only the objective good a man performs—all the giving and caring and sacrifice and suffering—but extends at times to actions of dubious objective metaphysical status. For the not-yet-observant Jew, every drop of Jewish practice and identification that he has is beloved by God. Conceivably, the sacrifice and passion brought to an act whose sole value is due to God's sub-

jective charity achieves a greater ontic status than a properly performed deed. The Hasidic tradition in particular is replete with tales and teachings of this sort, but there are earlier sources as well.

Imbued with this sense, Orthodox Jews can approach the non-Orthodox without abandoning their basic, absolute assumptions, while still granting the non-Orthodox metaphysical value. This understanding should enable Orthodox Jews to view other Jews—from prime ministers to their next-door neighbors—not merely with charitable love, but with respect as well.

Finally, there is the matter of disagreements in the area of "applied Torah." When the Torah is silent on an issue, we are deprived of the only guarantee of certitude. Hence, although in those instances we may base our views upon Torah sources and their spirit, we are forever doomed to educated speculation at best. Awareness that we have no "right" answer should yield a temperate tone when dealing with one's opponent. In Israel, this awareness should produce a softening of tone in the peace-process debate.

Nonetheless, those areas of life that are left without clear-cut Torah guidance at times involve life-and-death issues about which it is difficult to remain dispassionate. If, for example, one regards the peace process as either endangering or protecting lives, how can this be expressed without a sense of urgency and a strong condemnation of the opposition? It is well and good to call for a tempering of rhetoric, but how is the rhetorician who views the other as dangerous and immoral to speak softly?

First, we must grant our opponents legitimacy of intent. Jews involved in the peace-process debate are all motivated by a desire to do what is right. This acknowledgement by all concerned may help preserve our feelings of kinship.

Second, we must concede that passion is a natural ingredient of those who confront communal questions with moral commitment. While our passion must be circumscribed by decency and sanity, it cannot and must not be eliminated.

Orthodox Jews believe—as do all people not "committed" to a totally relativistic rendering of reality—that certain truths are absolute. To deny this and present the Torah as "one opinion" is to falsify our ancestral faith. The very nature of humankind's God-given dignity and the Creator's great love for all, however, demand that we rethink our evaluation of and response to the "other." By approaching all people with understanding, empathy, respect and, perhaps, even love, we can begin to realize the universal implications of God's descent upon Sinai millennia ago. □

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