



**October 5, 2006
13 Tishrei, 5767**

A modern Orthodox manifesto

By MARTIN LOCKSHIN

A few weeks ago, The CJN ran an informative two-part series that addressed the tensions between modern Orthodox and non-modern Orthodox Jews in Toronto.

Since one of the articles quoted me, a number of Torontonians have recently asked me whether there really is such a thing as modern Orthodoxy in Toronto, and, if so, where is it? Some wondered if modern Orthodoxy is an oxymoron, like “kosher pig” or “postal service.”

I may be an incorrigible optimist, but I see some positive developments in modern Orthodoxy in North America. Before I outline them, I will define my terms. Admittedly, my definition of what modern Orthodoxy is – or should be – is not the only one possible, but, for the record, here it is.

- Modern Orthodoxy is unabashedly Orthodox Judaism. It’s not “Orthodox Judaism lite.” It involves prayer three times a day, intensive study of Torah, and making life decisions – even on delicate, personal matters – based on traditional halachah (Jewish law). Modern Orthodoxy does not see personal autonomy as a value, but rather prefers “heteronomy,” that is, allowing something else (God’s Torah) to influence our decisions and make our lives holier and more fulfilling.
- A modern Orthodox Jew feels that the State of Israel is a positive religious value. Aliyah is seen as the fulfilment of a mitzvah (a religious duty). Modern Orthodox Jews who have not yet made aliyah support Israel in any way that they can. And they believe that the language of the State of Israel – modern Hebrew, the language now spoken by more than half of the world’s Jews – is a holy language.

Hebrew, of course, has changed much over the last three millennia. But modern Hebrew is the national language of the Jewish people in its most recent incarnation. As such, modern Orthodox Jews see fluency in modern Hebrew as a crucial Jewish value.

- Modern Orthodox Jews in Canada feel that it’s their Jewish duty to take part in public life here. They should feel empowered not just to lobby for the State of Israel or for day school funding (although those are important causes), but also to try to make Canada a better country for all of its citizens – striving to eliminate poverty, ignorance, corruption

and discrimination. It should go without saying that modern Orthodox Jews see it as their religious duty to pay the taxes that are required by our government.

- Modern Orthodox Jews should see it as their Jewish duty to do what they can to help those in need in other countries, for example, by fighting illiteracy, AIDS-HIV and poverty. And as Jews living after the Holocaust, we have a particular duty to get involved in preventing genocide wherever it may be occurring.

- In a modern Orthodox synagogue, men and women don't have identical roles. Men and women sit separately, separated by a mechitzah. But a modern Orthodox synagogue takes steps to make women more involved in communal religious life than they were in pre-modern times. A modern Orthodox synagogue has a women's section from which the women can see and hear as well as the men can. In a modern Orthodox synagogue, men and women study Torah together. All classes, even Talmud classes, are open to both women and men. All classes may be taught by women or men.

In a modern Orthodox synagogue, women and men serve on the board and the executive.

In a modern Orthodox synagogue, laypeople – both women and men – can make announcements or teach Torah from the bimah in the sanctuary.

In a modern Orthodox synagogue, rabbis strive to find new ways, while still conforming to Jewish law, to involve women in religious activities. In some such synagogues, women read the megillah on the holiday of Purim. In others, they participate in some form of Torah reading, or dance with a Torah scroll on Simchat Torah. While modern Orthodox leaders are still trying to work out boundaries for such activities, what all modern Orthodox people have in common is a sincere desire to find new ways to accommodate the spiritual needs of women.

- Modern Orthodox Jews believe in the words of the classical rabbis that wisdom is found among the gentiles. Study of secular subjects is not seen as forbidden. It's appropriate to study and learn to appreciate the great works of world culture: prose, poetry, science, music and art. That is why modern Orthodox Jews are life-long learners of Jewish texts, of modern sciences and of the humanities. They do not shy away from controversial topics. They disdain simplistic, glib answers.

A teacher or a rabbi in a modern Orthodox synagogue will draw on secular wisdom, not just to contrast it in an unflattering manner with Jewish teachings. Quotations from Shakespeare, and even from great writers who were not friends of the Jews, such as T.S. Eliot, are appreciated in a sermon, as are analyses of opinion pieces by journalists such as Margaret Wente or Robert Fulford (even if they do not discuss Israel).

- A modern Orthodox synagogue is proudly Orthodox, but it strives to be welcoming to all Jews. The synagogue promotes meticulous halachic Sabbath observance, but it welcomes, in a non-condescending manner, members or guests who drive to the synagogue on Saturday.

The rabbi in a modern Orthodox synagogue will realize that not everyone there is learned. He will give sermons that can be understood by all. When he uses Hebrew, Yiddish and Aramaic phrases, he is careful to translate every word into English.

- Modern Orthodox Jews realize that they do not live alone. Accordingly, a modern Orthodox synagogue will host guest lecturers who are not Orthodox and ones who are not Jewish if they have messages that help promote the synagogue's values or advance the education of the congregation.

Modern Orthodox Jews are eager to co-operate with haredi Jews. They will accept some compromises for the sake of unity, but will not allow the more insular approach to win out consistently.

Modern Orthodox Jews believe in tolerance. They are saddened, and occasionally upset, by the treatment that they receive from those haredi Jews who try to destroy the careers of some modern Orthodox rabbis by labelling them heretics, who work behind the scenes to try to make modern Orthodox educational programs fail, who phone out-of-town rabbis and tell them not to appear at local modern Orthodox venues and who seek out Orthodox university students to warn them of the dangers of studying Judaism with modern Orthodox scholars. (All of these things have occurred here in Toronto.) Modern Orthodox Jews wish to be treated with tolerance, but they themselves still extend tolerance to the intolerant.

Modern Orthodox Jews seek out ways to co-operate with the non-Orthodox when possible on issues of mutual concern, so long as we do not have to abandon our values. Modern Orthodox Jews treat non-Orthodox rabbis – both women and men – with respect, as leaders of large segments of the Jewish people.

- With all their openness to the outside world, modern Orthodox Jews oppose intermarriage as a serious sin and as a grave danger to the Jewish people. They don't seek out converts to Judaism, but when potential converts come to them, they adopt positions of the more lenient halachic authorities in reaching out to them.

- Modern Orthodox Jews respect the quest of all Jews who are sincerely trying to find God and live a life of the spirit in ways other than modern Orthodoxy. They are often very impressed by the deep fear of God demonstrated by some haredi Jews who have rejected the modern world and dedicated themselves solely to the study of Torah, recognizing that sometimes their accomplishments in depth of Torah knowledge are remarkable.

Nevertheless, when modern Orthodox Jews need, as they often do, to consult with Torah scholars on halachic issues, they will first seek out scholars who subscribe to the tenets of modern Orthodoxy as listed above, rabbis who have deep knowledge both of the world and of the law, rabbis who believe in the principle that "koach dehetera adif," that the knowledgeable scholar will rule leniently on issues of law when possible and will not

decide to follow the stricter path simply “to be safe” or to avoid criticism from the religious right.

Is the description above of modern Orthodoxy based in reality? Is modern Orthodoxy gaining in strength or slipping into oblivion here in Canada?

The pessimists appear to have a case. Not long ago, there was a chapter of the Rabbinical Council of America in Toronto – a group of university-educated rabbis who gathered together to advance the cause of non-haredi Orthodoxy. It no longer functions. These days university-educated Orthodox leaders often kowtow to the haredi worldview.

Some people worry that developments here in Toronto are just part of an international phenomenon in Jewish, Christian and Muslim circles, where there has been enormous growth in the popularity of the kind of “old-time religion” that eschews intellectualism, avoids nuance and provides simplistic feel-good answers.

But there are also reasons for optimism. Here in Toronto and throughout North America, there are several synagogues that incorporate some or many of the tenets listed above. And I believe that in the future, there will be even more modern Orthodox Jews and modern Orthodox synagogues.

Here and elsewhere, observant lay people are coming together to form new minyanim, and sometimes new synagogues. First-rate educational outfits such as Torah in Motion in Toronto and Drisha in New York reflect the strength, depth and vibrancy of modern Orthodoxy. Their effect will inevitably be felt. Successful day schools that teach modern Orthodoxy, such as Netivot HaTorah and the Bnei Akiva high schools in Toronto, are producing more and more graduates who are not likely to be pleased with the status quo. Finally, the new and unabashedly modern Orthodox rabbinical school in Manhattan, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, continues to produce top-quality rabbis with excellent pastoral skills, deep Torah knowledge and openness to the world in which we live.

I can't help thinking that all these factors mean that a better future awaits modern Orthodoxy. In a few years, The CJN might have to run another series of articles about the surprising growth of dynamic modern Orthodoxy in Canada.

Martin Lockshin is a modern Orthodox Jew. He is also a professor of humanities and Hebrew at York University and an ordained rabbi.