Opinion

The Challenge For Modern Orthodoxy

Rabbi Barry Gelman
Special To The Jewish Week

Over the last 50 years American Orthodoxy has managed to create a national community that is successful in the realm of imparting knowledge, Jewish commitment and continuity. Over the past years Orthodox rabbis convinced entire communities to change their eating habits by refraining from "eating out" and to raise a generation of Jewishly literate and deeply committed youth by sending their children, at great personal expense, to Jewish day schools. It is precisely these rabbis, on the heels of these successes, who can galvanize the Orthodox community to broaden its focus in a way that can contribute so much to the American Jewish community, and the world at large. In many ways the envy of other denominations, the Orthodox community could reshape the way it is perceived if it becomes more engaged and relevant by broadening its conversation.

Those who are "in the trenches" best understand the social, religious and economic realities of the Jewish community.

Small numbers notwithstanding, Orthodoxy, specifically Modern Orthodoxy, must start believing that it has a contribution to make to the larger Jewish world. First, it must see itself as a full participant in the activities of the wider Jewish community, from Federation to groups like the American Jewish World Service. It must be seen and heard in the places where the broader Jewish community meets and studies.

Related to this is the need for Modern Orthodoxy to become a movement that speaks to all Jews by relating to the full gamut of human conditions. This includes Jews whose lifestyle deviates from halachic norms. Modern Orthodox communities have managed to integrate those who do not observe Shabbat and Kashrut in the traditional sense without creating the perception of condoning that behavior; it can and must do the same for all Jews.

Second, Modern Orthodoxy needs to speak out on the major cultural and ethical issues of the day. Darfur, materialism, poverty, global warming and immigration are just some of the issues facing the American and world public. The imperative to imitate God establishes a moral responsibility to speak out and to act on issues facing humanity.

While Modern Orthodoxy must maintain concern for the details of the laws of the Torah, its adherents must expand the discussion to include the ethical, moral and social issues that are part of the broader message of the Torah. Modern Orthodox Jews have a unique potential to make the wisdom of an ancient tradition compelling to a modern and diverse audience.

Third, Modern Orthodoxy must promote those traditional, though often neglected interpretations of Halacha that are faithful to Jewish law, while at the same time being compassionate and open. Jewish law must be applied in ways that make halachic living attainable to as many Jews as possible, particularly in the areas of kashrut, conversion and family purity.

Orthodoxy is fast becoming a world of chumrot, or stringencies, while the koach d'hetera, the priority often given to leniency, is quickly disappearing. The point of embracing leniency is to bring more people to observance of halacha as the more people recognize that they can live according to halacha in specific areas, the more they will be willing to try it in other areas.

In a similar vein, while community rabbis should always consult with academics and rabbinic scholars, it is the community rabbis in the synagogues who must ultimately set the agenda, message and tone of the Modern Orthodox community. Those who are "in the trenches" best understand the social, religious and economic realities of the Jewish community.

Finally, Modern Orthodoxy must begin to tackle issues of the spirit, meaning and relevance of Judaism, and answer questions like: What do the myriad of steps that need to be taken before meat is rendered kosher teach us about the Jewish view of eating meat? What do the laws of the Sabbatical year teach us about labor relations and property ownership? How can a full understanding of the laws of Shabbat impact social and family life? Should the Biblical laws prohibiting waste and destruction impact on our choice of the cars that we drive, as well as the food we waste at our lavish weddings and bar mitzvahs?

In order to achieve all of the above, Modern Orthodoxy must develop self-confidence and stop looking over its right and left shoulders hoping for approval and acceptance from others. Doing so is self-defeating and is largely responsible for the reason Orthodox Judaism remains irrelevant to so many.

Modern Orthodoxy, as a movement grounded in Jewish text and tradition while at the same time appreciating the fluid nature of modern reality, is the Jewish movement in America best suited to speak to the issues of the day with conviction and confidence. We have a unique message that can benefit the entire American Jewish community.

We have to stop only preaching to the choir. ■

Rabbi **Barry Gelman** *is rabbi of United Orthodox Synagogues of Houston. He is a member of the Rabbinical Council of America, the rabbinic cabinet of United Jewish Communities, and is placement director for Yeshiva Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School.*

NEWS.
WE BREAK IT ALL WEEK LONG.
Now updated with important news as it happens!
www.thejewishweek.com

Join Drisha's Learning Community
January 14-18 we invite you
to try any of our ongoing classes for free.
See for yourself why the Slingshot *resource guide cited Drisha for innovation and impact in Jewish adult learning.*
Spring Semester begins January 14
Holiday Classes • Lunchtime Learning
Coed Classes and Classes for Women
דרישה
Drisha Institute for Jewish Education
37 West 65th Street, New York, NY 10023
212.595.0307 • www.drisha.org

u café
Call Us to Cater Your Next Event
www.ucafeny.com
Manhattan's Premier, European-Style, Dairy and Vegetarian Cafe

1436 Lexington Avenue
(between. 93rd and 94th Streets)
New York, NY 10128
212-427-UCAFE (8223)
Fax: 212-427-8225

INSIDE ISRAEL
*2 WEEK TOURS
JAN. 13 • FEB. 10 • MAR. 2 • MAR. 16
KINGS HOTEL $2199 • SHERATON PLAZA $2599
CALL FOR PASSOVER BROCHURE
(LAND ONLY)
DISCOUNT FOR SENIOR CITIZENS**
**restrictions apply
TRIPS INCLUDE: ✦ Daily tours throughout the country ✦ Round-trip on EL-AL ✦ 2 Kosher meals a day ✦ Touring by air-conditioned bus with licensed English speaking guides ✦ Per Person/Double Occupancy
* Additional taxes and fees apply.
For more information please contact:
ERETZ YISRAEL MOVEMENT
142 W. 36 St., Suite 411, New York, NY 10018
(212) 684-7370

WORLDWIDE CELLPHONE RENTALS
Incoming Calls FREE in over 70 countries!
- Overnight nationwide shipping
- Blackberry rentals worldwide
- Student & Group discounts
- Corporate accounts welcome
Winter Sale!
FREE CELL PHONE RENTAL
FREE MOBILE TO MOBILE
on Israeli cell phones

TravelCell
Global Cellular Rental Solutions
1.877.CELLPHONE
www.travelcell.com