

Old Faiths in New Ages

Two recent headlines about other religious communities in America have much to say about a fundamental dilemma facing our own community. The first occurred a few ago in Salt Lake City, at the convention of the Southern Baptist Convention, when the Baptists amended their essential statement of beliefs to declare that (and I quote) "a woman should submit herself graciously" to her husband's leadership, and that a husband should "provide for, protect, and lead his family." Whatever we might think of that declaration, whether it was courageous, misguided, ridiculous, or absolutely correct, the fact is that it was made not by some fringe group but by a mainstream faith community of 16 million Americans, including the President, Vice-President, House Speaker and Senate Majority Leader of this country. Moreover we must understand what the statement attempted to do: to reaffirm unambiguously what they believe to be essential to their traditions and values, as well as to pointedly reject some major contemporary social trends and popular thinking. Essentially the Baptists were saying "we don't care what modern cultural trends are doing — we can and will go our own separate way, we will fight to maintain a different set of family values and structures, one that is more in conformity with what we believe to be right and good for our selves, our families, our communities, or for that matter our country." Seen in those terms, the Baptist statement was an attempt to insulate themselves from a culturally and religiously incompatible society, to preserve what their traditions require, against the stream.

The second headline occurred just this past week. It had to do with the Pennsylvania Amish community, which, as everyone knows, is in many ways the very symbol of religious separateness and insularity in this country. Rejecting the ways of modernity, clinging to a pre-modern way of life that is as quaint in its expression as it is tenacious in its methods, the Amish have raise successive generations of their young to a life filled with their self-contained definitions of faith, virtue, piety, and truth --- all in defiance of the larger society. Yet there was the headline this week, accompanied by the graphic pictures and story: several Amish men in their mid-20's (not simply adolescents on a youthful fling), stand accused of involvement with a motorcycle gang (ironically named "The Pagans") over the course of a five year plan to distribute cocaine and methamphetamine. Furthermore, in their general outlook, it would appear that these two fellows are not completely different from their peers. As the local police chief put it, "times are a-changing; the Amish young folks get out into the world. They believe in sowing their wild oats while they're young." And so, jarring as the image and association might be, here again, as with the Southern Baptists, was a case of an old-fashioned faith-community that finds itself, and its venerated way of life, being encroached upon by powerful and decidedly unwelcome social trends, totally at odds with its most cherished tenets and values.

Common to both stories, and of crucial concern to our own Orthodox faith, is the following question: at the end of the 20th century, is it possible for a religious community to be an integral part of this open society, benefitting from its traditions of freedom, tolerance, democracy, and tolerance, and enjoying its many blessings both material and social — but at the same time successfully insulating itself from all of the negatives that we see around us? Or is it possible, and indeed

necessary, to effectively and functionally withdraw from that society in order to preserve what that community dearly cherishes and believes in?

For us as traditional Jews, the question is not an idle one. And it is especially pressing, given the fact that the same social forces and trends that are of such concern to those other faith communities, are causing large numbers of our fellow Orthodox Jews to conclude that they too, nay too that *we* too, should more and more withdraw from the social and cultural milieu that surrounds us. Thus many of our fellow Jews, as they consider the various social pathologies, sexual depravities, drug and alcohol excesses, family breakdown, violence, and spiritual anarchy, choose to retreat into their own enclaves, throw out the tv's, stop reading newspapers, avoid the movies, and pointedly reject the notion of college education or even a rudimentary familiarity with the great works of western higher culture. Indeed one might say, and I do not exaggerate, that in the Orthodox world in the Jewish community today, the mentality or weltanshaung that would draw the wagons round in ever tighter formation to withstand the slings and arrows of outrageous influences is more and more ascendant, while the alternate thinking that supports engagement with the surrounding culture is very much on the defensive.

But one doesn't even have to be Orthodox to face this dilemma: what, for instance, does an old-fashioned, thoughtful individual do when confronted with the seemingly inexorable mainstreaming of same-sex marriages? With an increasingly debased and depraved movie industry whose trends are followed closely by prime-time television? With an interactive multi-media Internet culture that brings the worst of what is out there into your home for your children or grandchildren to see and experience? When graphic insinuations of immorality at the highest levels of the land became the daily faire of radio and news shows?

And for all committed Jews who seek to strengthen Jewish identity and Jewish community, that is confronted with the looming catastrophe of assimilation and intermarriage, potentially leading to massive defections from the fold of Jewish identity, there is the overarching question: how can the broad masses of our fellow Jews continue to be part of our larger society, yet maintain a strong Jewish identity, separate and apart from their social milieu, in the face of the powerful forces of homogeneity and loss of particularistic identity?

One answer to the issue is to be found not in today's parshah, but in the powerful lessons to be learnt from our haftarah, in the story of the Yiftach ha-Giladi and the Jewish people, as it unfolded in the time of the Judges after the death of Joshua. As you will recall, the nation had been in Canaan for some time, surrounded by threatening nations, in particular the Amonites. Yiftach, the son of a harlot, is expelled by his brothers on his father's side from the family. He leaves the confines of the Israelite community and goes to live in the land of Tov, where we are told in graphic fashion, "worthless, empty men, *anashim reikim*, gather around him, and together they go raiding and pillaging." Essentially Yiftach, bitter at his family and surroundings, comes under the influence of an alien culture, that is both corrupt and corrupting. But a few years later, the Israelites are attacked by the Amonites, and threatened with imminent defeat and destruction. They cannot defend themselves, and in desperation and humiliation they turn to the Yiftach whom they once scorned and spurned, and beg him to use his considerable military skills to defeat the enemy. In one of biblical history's keenest ironies, this man of low repute, this outlaw and bandit, surrounded by his

"low-life" friends, leads the people to victory and salvation. Indeed, we are told, the spirit of God comes to rest on Yiftach, and he is elected to be the Judge of all Israel for a 6 year period. But the story does not have a happy end: we are told that Yiftach, uncouth and uncivil man that he is, is the cause of a tragic, and gratuitous, civil war that ensues between the tribe of Efraim and the rest of the people, resulting in the death of 42,000 Israelites, and a legacy of a bitterly divided people.

What is the lesson to be learnt from this epic episode in the history of our people? I realize that there are significant differences between that period and our own, and yet I also believe that there is a powerful message for our time. On the one hand, Yiftach surrounding himself with "worthless, empty men" becomes just like them, teaches us how powerfully and deeply we are influenced by our friends and associates. We delude ourselves if we think that we can expose ourselves, and especially our youngsters, to a culture and social setting whose values and norms, practices and conventions, are at fundamental variance with those of the Torah, without being negatively impacted upon. There must be clear boundaries that prevent unfettered socialization that might lead to internalizing such alien values and behaviors. Man is indeed a social animal who is deeply influenced by his environment: physical, social and spiritual. Without such boundaries, we, like Yiftach, are at risk of terminal loss of Jewish identity, and essential Torah values. And God knows, ours is a generation whose continuity, and value system, is fundamentally at risk.

But on the other hand, we learn from this story that when all is said and done, we as individuals and as a people, cannot reside in splendid isolation, not physically and not ideologically. It is the enduring lesson of this episode that when the Jewish people and especially the Torah community, withdraws into itself, and cuts itself off from the world around it, it effectively endangers its integrity and its future, in very specific ways:

Firstly, if we will refuse to cultivate the essential tools of physical survival in the larger world, we will not be able to defend ourselves when we are militarily attacked by other nations, and instead will have to depend on the questionable good will of those whose ultimate intentions God only knows. If we do not learn to live in peaceful relations and coexistence with other peoples and nations, we face unending enmity and tragedy. Surely that is a lesson born out by the experience of the Jewish people in this bloody century now drawing to a close. *Secondly*, however, we learn from this story that if the Jewish people, and especially the traditional community, is unwilling or unable to develop and reinforce the sense of group solidarity that will enable us to appreciate the commonalities that we share with our fellow Jews, we too will face the very real possibility of a cataclysmic split in our people. If a mere 100 years after the death of Moses and Aaron a civil war between the tribes could break out, it is not unthinkable that given the deep divisions among Jews today, especially in and over Israel, could, God forbid, lead to either physical, ideological, or other forms of internecine warfare. And God knows, in today's overcharged communal atmosphere, both in America and in Israel, such fundamental long term divergences are not at all out of the question.

But *thirdly*, and finally, there is the ideological question we have raised, of the desirability of embracing the good that is in the larger world, even as we would reject the evil that doubtless is there to be encountered.