

THE ORTHODOX LEFT: A REPLY

Charles S. Liebman

JACOB NEUSNER'S ARTICLE "The New Orthodox Left" in the last issue of this journal is a response to an article of mine in the 1965 *American Jewish Year Book*. He raises a number of questions which merit discussion, and thereby affords me the opportunity to clarify some points in my earlier article. Obviously an author is flattered when his work is taken seriously. My chagrin at some of what Professor Neusner says ought not to conceal my appreciation for his careful consideration of my work.

my heresies

PROFESSOR NEUSNER BEGINS by quoting a *New York Times* report of my speech to the Rabbinical Council of America. He applauds my comments, but finds them to be an echo of Conservative Judaism's "heresies." I am quoted as saying that Orthodox leaders have failed "to interpret Jewish law as it applies to contemporary problems. . . . They have failed to cope with such problems as the relationship of the Jew and non-Jew, the role of women in Jewish life, and recognition of the radical criticism of religion raised by modern thought." Although Professor Neusner is not responsible for this, the press release of his article highlighted my "heresy." I want to make it clear that whatever the "heresies" of which I am guilty, this statement is not one of them. As I wrote to the *Reconstructionist*, which had editorialized about my statement:

. . . my own position proceeds from what I fear you might consider to be a rather narrow sectarianism. My interest is with that segment of the Jewish community which does accept the notion of the "halakhic authority" and which feels itself bound by the halakhic prescriptions emanating

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from halakhic authorities. It is this community which I believe has been poorly served by its own leaders, who have failed to develop a systematic philosophy, theology, and halakhah which extends to broader areas of contemporary experience.

Orthodoxy's problem is not that it has very little to say to the non-Orthodox Jew or non-Jew today, but that it has not sufficiently developed a system of thought and law which speaks to the questions of contemporary man, and it thus has limited its message to the Orthodox Jew as well. This is a problem which Orthodox leaders face in every generation and must always resolve anew.

But it is a far cry from suggesting that the law must be "adjusted." The law must be greatly expanded and authority reasserted. My concern is for Orthodoxy to put its own house in order. I care less at this point what the non-Orthodox think.

the orthodox left

PROFESSOR NEUSNER IDENTIFIES me with what he calls "counter-reactionary elements in American Orthodoxy . . . pleading for an *aggiornamento* within Orthodoxy . . . a strengthening of ties between Orthodoxy and other Jewish religious groups through the Synagogue Council of America and other comprehensive agencies." To set the record straight, this is not quite my position. Neither, I must add, do I ascribe this position to "The New Orthodox Left." I have elaborated upon what I think the new Orthodox left represents in an article in the last issue of *Judaism* entitled "Left and Right in American Orthodoxy."

I don't want to belabor the issue here. I would simply make this point, speaking now only for myself. I am not particularly anxious for any strengthening of ties between Orthodoxy and other religious groups if our referent is religious institutions. I think Orthodox institutional life is shot through with equivocation. But I don't see where Conservative and Reform institutions are much better, and the Synagogue Council of America may possibly represent the lowest common denominator. I certainly don't believe that Orthodoxy will serve itself or the Jewish community by strengthening institutional ties with the non-Orthodox. I fear this will only serve to compound its vices. On the other hand, I don't advocate Orthodox groups leaving the Synagogue Council either. I just don't think the whole issue is intrinsically very important. (Symbolically, of course, it has great significance for the Orthodox.) Professor Neusner is confusing my position with that of "modern Orthodoxy." I try to clarify that distinction in the *Judaism* article referred to above.

What I'm trying to say is that the issues which I think are important have little to do with institutional relationships. I think the crucial issue which cuts across all institutional lines is how we Jews are to confront our experiences in the twentieth century. This means, first of all, that we must confront the world as Jews. To me, this is synonymous with asking: what are the dictates of Torah today? By and large, modern Orthodoxy, Conservative and Reform Judaism have not asked this question. Rather, they have asked: "How do we square the Torah with our values, and how do we adapt the Torah so that we may live comfortably in middle-class America?" This, I submit is not a legitimate question. On the other hand, the Orthodox right has not asked questions at all. This is why they, in their own way, have become irrelevant.

I am interested in strengthening my ties with anyone who asks the same question that I do. My Orthodoxy is relevant in the sense that, for me, the ultimate authority for resolving the question must come from the "masters of Torah"—those who, at the minimum, have mastered the corpus of Jewish law and Rabbinic thought and are committed to that tradition. This is undoubtedly a kind of sectarianism. I don't mind. Religious commitment of any kind is rapidly becoming a form of sectarianism in the United States. Let's stop beguiling ourselves with the thought that Jewish life can exist without being sectarian. I think we must develop a whole network of sectarian institutions and nurture a sectarian mentality. We must be sectarian vis-a-vis American life, and sectarian vis-a-vis those of our fellow Jews who would lead us along the road of cultural integration. But I do believe that my sectarianism cuts across the institutional boundaries of Orthodoxy, Conservative and Reform. And I am familiar enough with Professor Neusner's writings to be confident that it includes him as well. However, I also think that the basic impetus for this new sectarianism lies within the Orthodox Jewish community.

This raises another point that merits clarification. I *do* believe that Jewish passion today resides primarily among the Orthodox, but I do not believe and did not mean to imply that no Conservative Jews are passionate, much less that they are not dedicated and loyal to Judaism. Of course, one man's passion is another man's hot-water bottle. Perhaps Neusner and I disagree over what the word "passion" means. Nevertheless, however one wishes to interpret it, I certainly believe that there are non-Orthodox Jews whose commitment to Judaism exceeds my own. I offer my apology to those who were pained by my statements because they felt I was casting blanket aspersions on the dedication of all non-Orthodox Jews.

PROFESSOR NEUSNER MAKES REFERENCE to another article of mine in *Tradition*, "Orthodoxy in Nineteenth Century America," which reviewed Moshe Davis' *Emergence of Conservative Judaism*. This article was the subject of a reply by Abraham Karp in the summer 1965 number of this journal. I do not intend to reply to Rabbi Karp because the issue is somewhat peripheral to the present discussion, but I do not accept Neusner's statement that "Karp's rejoinder straightened out the facts." I have had the pleasure of meeting Rabbi Karp and have benefitted from many of his articles. But I think Karp is wrong about the historical school, and that he missed the point of my *Tradition* article. But even if Karp was right, I don't understand Neusner's reasoning. I argued that Davis was wrong from Davis' own logic and evidence. My sources were, with two exceptions, Davis' sources. Now Karp brings external evidence to show I am wrong and Davis is right. Neusner, however, reasons that since Karp is right and I am wrong there must be some ideological reason why I thought Davis was wrong. What manner of argumentation is this? Does it imply that I was wrong because I was unaware of Karp's evidence? No, because Neusner insists on crediting me with scholarly omniscience, so he can accuse me of intellectual dishonesty. He says that all along I knew Davis and Karp were right, but that I had to prove they were wrong so I could identify myself with the "historical school," while denying its spokesmen the appellation of Conservative Jews. In that case, I could answer in turn that Davis and Karp insist on denying Morais' Orthodoxy because they would then be forced to admit that their movement has betrayed its presumed founders. This kind of psychologizing could go on endlessly. It is simply no way to argue. Furthermore, my own position is not nearly as sympathetic to the "historical school" as Neusner states. I certainly do not find "in their ideas everything right and nothing wrong." In my *Tradition* article I specifically raised the question of whether the Jewish unity which was sought at the Cleveland conference of 1855 was strategically correct for the Orthodox. My introduction to the same article should make clear how far I am from the historical school's affirmation of western culture.

Neusner also finds this kind of ideological-theological ratiocination in my efforts to question the nature of the Orthodox commitment of the East European immigrants. Here, he does not even bother to adduce evidence against me, other than his own grandparents. I mean no offense to Neusner's grandparents. But as long as we are becoming anecdotal I might relate an incident told me by Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg. Rabbi Hertzberg is, of course, a Conservative Rabbi and his grandpar-

ents' Orthodox credentials are impeccable. Hertzberg wrote an article some time ago in which he made many of the same points I do about the Orthodox commitment of the early immigrants. The fact that his article did not appear in print does not alter the point. Neusner does "not pretend to know the facts of Eastern European Jewish religiosity" but he thinks I am wrong and does pretend to understand the "ideological necessity" for my saying what I did. This is a pretty strong accusation. (I must add that since he wrote the article Neusner and I have become good friends. But this places me in the most awkward position of having to refute a friend's arguments written before he was my friend!)

There are other points in the article to which I am not responding. One point, of particular interest, concerns the argument that "Conservative Judaism is not only a legitimate heir to Jewish tradition, but *the only* legitimate, authentic and worthy consequence of the Jewish past. . . . Orthodoxy is heretical . . . preserves theological convictions which err . . . and presents a quite wrong interpretation of both the letter and spirit of Judaism." I found this statement shocking. But please, let us hear no more charges against Orthodoxy for its belligerence toward Conservative Judaism. After all, one could hardly expect Orthodoxy to hold views any less definitive about non-Orthodoxy. I would, however, ask Professor Neusner one question. Can he name a single halakhic and theological scholar of note, be he Conservative, Reform, or non-affiliated, who believes that Orthodoxy is heretical, or "incongruent with the spirit and letter of Jewish theology" or who agrees to any of the other accusations he makes? After all, what Neusner is saying is something quite different from the view that Orthodoxy reflects only one line of the tradition.

But this is peripheral to the main argument as to whether Conservative Jews have acted as though they believe what Neusner says they do. It seems clear to me that, if Neusner is correct in saying that his colleagues share his convictions, they have not acted upon them.

Finally, a very minor point. Rabbi Soloveitchik is a charismatic leader for the Orthodox. His authority in Talmud is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for this leadership. I would not pretend to weigh Professor Saul Lieberman's knowledge of Talmud against Rabbi Soloveitchik's. But that misses the point. Professor Lieberman simply is not a charismatic leader of Conservative Judaism, in the opinion of every Conservative Jew I have queried. What I find interesting, however, is that Neusner thinks a "Professor" could be a Conservative charismatic leader. The Orthodox still reserve that role for "Rabbis."

Of course, I do not disagree with all of Professor Neusner's comments. Some of them are quite well-taken, and for this I am indebted to him. But I regard it as healthy that we should engage in full and frank discussion about the things on which we do disagree. This is exactly what I have attempted to do in what I have written here.

Professor Neusner Responds:

Professor Liebman's statement greatly illuminates matters. I cannot agree however that Conservative Judaism has not asked what the dictates of the Torah are today. Quite to the contrary, it was with precisely this question that our movement began in the nineteenth century. We expect that our "masters of Torah" will have mastered not only the corpus of Jewish law, but also the lessons and truths emerging in the latest generation.

As to the review of Moshe Davis' *Emergence of Conservative Judaism*, Liebman there wrote, "It would be a *chilul haShem* to leave unchallenged the assertion that Conservatism today has its origins in the wellsprings of traditional Jewish thought." It was this sentence that led me to think Liebman's review reflected ideological or theological issues, and not only factual ones. His failure, moreover, to comment on Rabbi Karp's article suggested the same. But no imputation of intellectual dishonesty was intended, nor offered.

Since everyone, including the immigrants themselves, always thought that most of the Eastern European Jews were Orthodox, I was led to speculate on why Liebman found it necessary to deny it. As I reread his discussion, I still find no effort to amass facts. Hence I looked for the source of his evaluation in his theological attitude.

I cannot name *any* theological scholar within Conservative or Reform or Reconstructionist Judaism who believes that Orthodoxy today is congruent with classical Jewish theology. That is why we are not Orthodox. As to halakhic matters, I suggest he poll the members of the Rabbinical Assembly Law Committee, whose judgment would carry weight. I must confess, however, that it is the monotonous assertion by Orthodox rabbis that we are "deviants," "heretics," and the like which suggested the appropriateness of such strong words. Apart from Professor Liebman, is there anyone in Orthodoxy who thinks that "Orthodoxy reflects only one line of the tradition," if indeed he thinks so?