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EMANUEL RACKMAN AND MODERN ORTHODOXY

SOME PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS[1]

Emanuel Rackman is the central figure in modern Orthodoxy. It is appropriate, therefore, in a volume honoring Emanuel Rackman, to offer some assessment of his special place within it.

Modern Orthodoxy is generally described as an orientation shared by a large segment of Orthodox Jews.[2] Rackman, however, describes modern Orthodoxy as an orientation confined to "no more than a coterie of a score of rabbis in America and in Israel whose interpretations of the Tradition have won the approval of Orthodox intellectuals who are knowledgeable in both Judaism and Western civilization."[3] I am sympathetic to the description of the modern Orthodox as a relatively small group, though I do not believe that all of them were ordained rabbis and the reader should be cautioned that many of the rabbis did not hold pulpits. But I would also add that confining the modern Orthodox family to a small group of rabbis and intellectuals has important implications, as I seek to demonstrate below, for Rackman's own position within the Orthodox

1 I am indebted to Bernard Susser and Gerald Blidstein for their helpful comments. I have deliberately added the words "personal recollections" to the subtitle of this article. I am basing myself primarily on my memory and my observations during the years 1963 to 1969, when I taught at Yeshiva University. Of course, while at Yeshiva University I heard people speak of the past and, although I moved to Israel in 1969, I have tried to follow developments in Orthodox Jewish life in the United States. However, others — not least among them Rackman himself — no doubt recall things in a different light.

This article is less than a personal memoir in one sense. It doesn't convey the enormous regard, respect, and appreciation I feel toward Emanuel Rackman for his intellect, his courage, and his dedication to Jews as individuals and to the Jewish people as a collectivity.

2 The nature of modern Orthodoxy is described and its merits debated in many articles. A number of them, including two of my own, are reprinted in Reuven P. Bulka (ed.), *Dimensions of Orthodox Judaism* (New York: Ktav, 1983).

3 Emanuel Rackman, *One Man's Judaism* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1979), p. 266.

world. It is a definition which defines Rackman's role in very different terms to that ascribed to him by his opponents.

In an essay reprinted in his 1970 volume *One Man's Judaism*, Rackman articulates the mood of modern Orthodoxy in the following manner:

> ...silence is not the alternative when one is convinced that precisely a measure of candor is the *desideratum*, not only because God wills that we speak the truth as we see it — for His name is Truth — but also because silence and its concomitant smugness are estranging Jewish intellectuals. Jewish intellectuals are becoming interested in the Tradition, but they will not accept the rigidity of most contemporary exponents of Orthodoxy. They crave more autonomy of the soul. Moreover, some effort ought to be expended to reaffiliate those who, principally because of the way in which Jews have organized themselves politically in Israel and socially and institutionally in the English-speaking countries, find themselves identified with groups whose ideology they do not truly share.... The time is ripe for a candid re-examination of fundamentals and a challenge to those whose principal claim to authority is that they have closed minds and secure their leadership by exacting a comparable myopia from their followers.[4]
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> Ours is a commitment which invites questioning and creativity in thought and practice, as applied not only to the Law but also to theology.[5]

Modern Orthodoxy was not simply an effort to reconceptualize traditional beliefs so that they appear consistent with modernity; the effort, for example, to demonstrate the equality of women in Jewish law, or the legitimacy of plural interpretations of Judaism, or freedom of choice in *halakha*. The mood, or style, or set of concerns to which Rackman referred encompassed more than this. It was a mood which did not necessarily affirm all or even most of the values and currents associated with modernity, but did affirm the necessity of Orthodoxy's involvement in contemporary life in its broadest sense. This meant, for example, that Orthodoxy had to articulate a position with respect to civil rights and the war in Vietnam, which occupied the attention of all American intellectuals in the 1960s, or with regard to Zionism, Israel, and the consequences of the Six-Day War. No less important, the modern Orthodox were convinced that, in view of the decline in religious belief and practice that characterized contemporary culture, Orthodoxy had to reformulate its position with respect to non-Orthodox Jews. Because modern Orthodoxy sought to remain faithful to the

4 Ibid., p. 265.
5 Ibid., p. 267.

halakhic tradition, it insisted that positions be grounded in *halakhic* sources and it was, therefore, concerned to find allies within the "yeshiva world" — the world of talmudic scholars who taught at the institutions for advanced talmudic study — and at Yeshiva University in particular. It is more than likely that most participants in that "coterie" to which Rackman refers knew full well on which side of the issue the *tradition* stood — in favor of civil rights, a more liberal posture toward the non-Orthodox, a militantly pro-Zionist position, and against the war in Vietnam. But I believe that it was the process of engagement itself which was deemed more important than the outcome. Perhaps this was because the modern Orthodox were convinced that if the Orthodox establishment in general, and the representatives of the yeshiva world in particular, were to become engaged in the concerns of the modern world they would have to learn more about the modern world. This experience alone, in the opinion of the modern Orthodox, would insure a more thoughtful response, as well as one that most of the modern Orthodox favored. However, not all of those included in the coterie of modern Orthodox shared the same values. Michael Wyschograd, for example, spoke and wrote in defense of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

The enthusiasm for the notion of engaging the *tradition* with problems of universal concern attracted a few talmudic authorities who were otherwise quite close in outlook to the very "yeshiva world" against which the modern Orthodox were inclined to rail. Aaron Lichtenstein was the outstanding example.

There is a second aspect to the mood or style which the majority if not all of those who fell within the coterie of modern Orthodoxy shared, and which generated sympathy among others outside this coterie. Like the student counter-culture which flourished in the 1960s, touched perhaps by the same spirit, the modern Orthodox tended to be, almost in principle, anti-establishment. They were attracted by a radical style, even if they did not always imitate that style. What was especially attractive was the honesty and integrity which seemed to characterize the counter-culture in its early years. The Orthodox establishment, many of the spokesmen and leaders of Orthodox organizations and institutions, many pulpit rabbis, and even many talmudic scholars appeared corrupt in the eyes of the modern Orthodox. They did not stand accused of the sort of corruption that characterizes the religious parties in Israel, the rabbinical courts, or the Israeli rabbinate today — serious violations of the spirit if not the letter of religious as well as secular law. Rather, they stood accused, in the eyes of the modern Orthodox, of a kind of petty corruption, a smallness of mind and an insensitivity of heart, stemming at least in part from the constricted world of Orthodoxy and the limited rewards and perquisites its leaders could share. The Orthodox establishment, including the yeshiva world, seemed, to those who

knew it with some measure of intimacy, as characterized by cant and humbug, pretentious posturing on the one hand, and lack of self-confidence and even self-respect on the other. In addition, by the 1950s and 1960s the Orthodox establishment — the rabbis of many leading Orthodox congregations, the leadership of the Rabbinical Council of America, of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, of the religious-Zionist Mizrachi movement — was increasingly deferential to the yeshiva world, to its leading personalities, its symbols and its concerns. This, combined with the fact that the Orthodox establishment was also party to religious laxity and even deviation from *halakhic* norms, certainly in spirit, struck many of the modern Orthodox as hypocritical.

As noted, not all who shared the same contempt for the Orthodox establishment were modern Orthodox. The radical mood, if one may call it that, was so strong, at least for a brief period in the 'sixties, that it allowed individuals in many different ideological camps to believe that they shared much more in common than they really did. When Gerald Blidstein and I developed plans for a journal of modern Orthodoxy, we invited the participation of Nachman Bulman, the editor of *The Jewish Observer*, the English-language monthly published by Agudat Yisrael. We considered ourselves close to Bulman because of his integrity, openness of mind, and radical spirit, despite his own identification with Agudat Israel.

In spite of, but perhaps because of, its radical posture and aggressive criticism of the establishment, the modern Orthodox, however few in numbers they might have been, enjoyed popularity. The non-Orthodox, of course, saw them as the ideal Orthodox. But they also enjoyed quite a measure of influence within the Orthodox establishment.

How is one to account for this? The Orthodox establishment recognized that the modern Orthodox were the most effective apologists for Orthodoxy. There may have been a conscious or unconscious effort to co-opt them. I also suspect that members of the Orthodox establishment, especially the more competent among them, harbored a sympathy for what the modern Orthodox were saying, and even the style in which they were saying it. This was certainly true of the RCA's professional leader, Israel Klavan. Rabbis who were not part of the modern Orthodox coterie nevertheless welcomed the modern Orthodox into their congregations, as speakers in adult education series and as scholars-in-residence, because they spoke the language of their congregants and generally said the kinds of things their congregants wanted to hear. The Orthodox laity saw the modern Orthodox as legitimaters of their own deviations from Orthodox norms. And, as already suggested, this may have been true of the Orthodox establishment as well.

Emanuel Rackman was something of an exception among the modern Orthodox in at least three respects. First, he was among the oldest in age. Mendel

Lewittes was roughly the same age, but Lewittes lived outside New York and was a person whose essays were read rather than an individual with whom other modern Orthodox came into regular contact. Secondly, of all the modern Orthodox, Rackman held the most distinguished position within the Orthodox world. Indeed, in some respects Rackman might be thought of as a quintessential member of the Orthodox establishment, and he was certainly the best known of all the modern Orthodox figures. In addition to his reputation as a lecturer and essayist, Rackman was a former president of the Rabbinical Council of America and remained enormously influential in RCA, as well as religious Zionist circles which he represented on the Board of the Jewish Agency. He was the rabbi of a large, wealthy, prestigious congregation. Most significantly, and perhaps not unrelated to the above, he functioned, to all intents and purposes, or so it seemed to many people, as second to Dr. Samuel Belkin, the president of Yeshiva University, and as the most likely heir to the presidency despite Rackman's contention — whenever the issue was raised — that he and Belkin were close in age. His age and his distinguished public position, not to mention the demands on his time, excluded him from the social network which bound a good many of the modern Orthodox to one another.

The third respect in which Rackman was an exception among the modern Orthodox was the extreme hostility with which he was regarded by the "yeshiva world." That hostility was shared, for a brief period of time, with Irving (Yitz) Greenberg. But without minimizing the pain which this animosity may have caused Greenberg, the "yeshiva world" tended to dismiss Greenberg, simply labeling him as non-Orthodox, rather than confront him. Rackman, by virtue of his position, lived under a state of constant attack.

The question of why Rackman was the target of such animosity was of interest and concern to many of his sympathizers. It surely did not stem from his own style or the manner in which he behaved and/or expressed himself. His personal style of life was exceedingly modest, at least as far as his modern Orthodox admirers could tell. His manner of speech, his assessment of his own abilities, his friendliness and openness, but most of all his concern for others and his willingness to help, were evident characteristics. I have heard the term "a rabbi's rabbi" used with respect to Rackman by many individuals, but I was most struck when the term was applied to him, in gratitude and respect, by the offspring of a talmudic authority who, on more than one occasion, sought to publicly embarrass him.

Rackman's own formulations of Orthodox doctrine were carefully drawn. (An item in *Commentary* on the notion of Torah from Sinai in which he made rather much of the notion that the Torah was given "scroll by scroll," literally "leaf by leaf," was something of an exception.) His articles, his speeches, his newspaper columns were more defensive than critical of Orthodox belief and

practice. His critical stance tended to come in the area of religious politics.

There is no doubt that many were jealous of Rackman. Furthermore, the yeshiva world was dismissive of all pulpit rabbis, who were considered, by definition, to be ignorant in matters of traditional text and too accommodating in *halakhic* matters. However much time Rackman devoted to writing, lecturing, and administrating at Yeshiva University, he was also a pulpit rabbi. But this cannot explain the measure of hostility directed toward Rackman nor could it explain why, for example, Joseph Lookstein and other rabbis of prestigious synagogues did not suffer the same degree of animosity.

Part of the reason, of course, may have stemmed from Rackman's stature as a communal leader, intellectual, and fund-raiser, which meant that the non-Orthodox in particular looked to Rackman more than to any other figure in the Orthodox world as the spokesperson of Orthodoxy.[6] This made him a more formidable figure than anyone else within the coterie of the modern Orthodox. Secondly, Rackman was a scholar of Jewish law who took *halakhic* sources seriously and was able to comment upon and interpret them with the authority of a scholar. This alone made him a threatening figure to those within the yeshiva world who claimed a monopoly on the authoritative interpretation of *halakha*. A third reason for their hostility, I suspect, was that within the yeshiva world Rackman was a partial surrogate for Samuel Belkin, the president of Yeshiva University. Belkin was immune from overt hostility for a number of reasons. First of all, he was a product of the yeshiva world and, in the eyes of many, remained part of that family; this alone offered him a measure of protection. In addition, Belkin was a powerful figure as far as the yeshiva world was concerned. He personally decided on the hiring and firing of the talmud teachers, and probably made decisions with regard to their salary and other benefits. Even members of the yeshiva world outside Yeshiva University never knew when they might require a favor of Dr. Belkin for family members, if not for themselves. Belkin's power, alone, would have aroused ambivalent feelings toward him. But the matter was more complicated.

The yeshiva world, including the talmudic authorities at Yeshiva University, was generally hostile to the expansion of the institution and the development of a variety of secular colleges and faculties. Some of them were even more hostile to the growth of scholarly Jewish studies, at both the undergraduate but especially the graduate level, as distinct from studies of rabbinic text in the classical mode. Institutionally, Yeshiva University was highly suspect. The major part of Belkin's endeavor was viewed as the unconscious if not conscious effort to redefine "Torah Judaism" beyond the bounds of the permissible. But, by virtue

6 To this day I have found that the name Rackman is better known among American Jews than is the name of the institution which he headed for so many years, Bar-Ilan University.

of Belkin's background and power, it was convenient to blame all this on Rackman.

In fact, even within the coterie of the modern Orthodox, many were unhappy with the conduct and direction in which Belkin was leading Yeshiva University. They were less concerned over general policy, and quite satisfied by the expansion of Jewish studies in the accepted academic mode, but they were troubled by the kinds of sacrifices that Yeshiva University seemed prepared to make in order to raise money. Fund-raising needs seemed to dictate policies regarding the opening of departments and colleges, their location and staffing.[7] But, most troubling of all, were the kinds of compromises Yeshiva University was prepared to make in its fund-raising and public relations campaigns. The Albert Einstein College of Medicine was an especially sore point. The Yeshiva University medical school was rumored to have sponsored non-kosher dinners as part of its fund-raising efforts. On the other hand, the modern Orthodox found Einstein's own public relations efforts, which downplayed its association with Yeshiva University, offensive. I'm not sure that the modern Orthodox were aware of the contradiction in their own feelings toward Yeshiva University's School of Medicine.[8] But no less troubling were seemingly trivial aspects connected to Yeshiva University's public relations and fund-raising campaigns. For example, Belkin's yarmulke was airbrushed off in certain types of publicity photos. It was improper to blame anyone but Belkin himself for this. And if one chose to level the blame at a lower level, it rested at the door of the public relations department of the University, not at that of Rackman. In fact, in an article which Rackman and I co-authored on the subject of Orthodoxy in America, we referred to Yeshiva University as an Orthodox institution, and were reproached by the director of public relations. This was a period in which, in order to remain eligible for public funds, Yeshiva University was anxious to demonstrate that it was a nonsectarian institution. But the yeshiva world found it convenient to blame Rackman for all this.

But there was still another reason for the animus which was directed toward Rackman, and this goes to the heart of the nature of modern Orthodoxy and its relationship to larger currents in the world of American Orthodoxy. Many, probably most Orthodox synagogues in the United States deviated from the norms of "Torah Judaism" as they were understood by the yeshiva world. These deviations, from their perspective, were in both the letter as well as the spirit of

7 Much of this conflict is reported in Jeffrey S. Gurock, *The Men and Women of Yeshiva: Higher Education, Orthodoxy, and Ameican Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

8 It reminds one of Jewish attitudes in the 'fifties and 'sixties toward intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews. Most Jews opposed such intermarriages, but when non-Jews expressed similar opposition this was taken as evidence of antisemitism.

the Torah. Synagogues called themselves Orthodox despite the fact that they tolerated mixed seating of men and women, in many cases on a regular basis and in some cases only on festivals and the high holy days. Orthodox synagogues sponsored dances to which the rabbi conveniently closed his eyes. Few rabbis adjured their congregants against the practice of men and women swimming together, an *halakhic* violation in the opinion of virtually all talmudic authorities in the post-World War II period. In one prominent Orthodox synagogue in New York, mixed swimming took place in a pool within the synagogue building. No less objectionable, from the point of view of the yeshiva world, was the spirit that prevailed within the majority of Orthodox synagogues. This spirit affirmed the merit of blurring distinctions between Orthodox Jews and others, Jew as well as non-Jew, in the social and cultural as well as the economic and political realm.

This was the condition of American Orthodoxy against which the yeshiva world reacted. It affirmed a militant and aggressive form of Orthodoxy which espoused strict adherence to maximalist *halakhic* standards, and isolation from the non-Orthodox as well as the non-Jewish world. This form of Orthodoxy has continually gained strength since the post-World War II period.

Elsewhere, I have referred to the more permissive, open, lax Orthodoxy against which the yeshiva world aimed its barbs as accommodationist Orthodoxy.[9] Modern Orthodoxy is distinguishable from accommodationist Orthodoxy, and this suggests the merit of Rackman's definition of modern Orthodoxy. Unlike the accommodationists, it argued for strict adherence to *halakhic* standards, albeit standards that might have differed from those which the yeshiva world sought to apply. Its affirmation of the importance of Orthodox involvement in the modern world was not a concession to the larger culture, but a feeling that this was the requirement of authentic Judaism. Modern Orthodoxy was not a prescription for latitude, but a demand for a militancy in its own right. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that modern Orthodoxy suited the needs of accommodationist Orthodoxy for a kind of legitimacy, just as the neo-Orthodoxy of Samson Raphael Hirsch suited the needs of a Jewish community that sought to compartmentalize its religious obligations, on the one hand, and its responsibilities and privileges as modern Germans no different in any way from other Germans on the other.

Rackman was an outspoken ideologue of modern Orthodoxy. He did not

9 In the chapter "Orthodoxy Faces Modernity," in Charles S. Liebman, *Deceptive Images: Toward A Redefinition of American Judaism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988), pp. 43–60. A good description of the style of life of such Jews can be found in Jenna Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) and articles by Joselit as well as Jeffrey Gurock in Jeffrey S. Gurock (ed.), *Ramaz: School, Community, Scholarship and Orthodoxy* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav, 1989).

believe in accommodation to contemporary culture or currents of life out of convenience. But he did firmly believe that at least some of those norms which the yeshiva world claimed as *halakhic*, were, in fact, recently invented prohibitions, with no basis in Jewish sources or norms which merited change through *halakhically* valid modes of interpretation. As far as I know, for example, Rackman was the only Orthodox rabbi to publicly state that mixed swimming was permissible. His colleagues in the Orthodox establishment may themselves have engaged in mixed swimming, but by the late 1950s believed that what they were doing was a violation of *halakha*. From the perspective of the yeshiva world, Rackman was far more dangerous than, for example, Joseph Lookstein. Lookstein led a synagogue which was an anathema to the yeshiva world.[10] But Rackman was a more bitter antagonist because, by virtue of his position, his intellect, and his command of Jewish sources he provided, at least in the eyes of the yeshiva world, a legitimacy to the deviations of American Orthodoxy.

Modern Orthodoxy no longer enjoys the popularity it once had. Indeed, it is significant that the present leader of Yeshiva University, Norman Lamm, who was always identified as modern Orthodox, in an effort to develop an ideological platform to resist the continuing shift of Orthodoxy in the direction of obscurantism, adopted the label "centrist Orthodoxy." This suggests, by implication, that there is a left-wing Orthodoxy, presumably modern Orthodoxy, a right-wing Orthodoxy, that of the "yeshiva world," and a centrist Orthodoxy, represented by the present institutional leaders of Yeshiva University. Had modern Orthodoxy prospered, I think it unlikely that Lamm would have chosen a new label, even if he found cause to reformulate modern Orthodoxy's rather vague ideology. I think that modern Orthodoxy declined because it was associated in the mind of many Orthodox Jews with the kinds of accommodations and *halakhic* latitude that characterized the behavior of middle and upper middle-class Orthodox synagogue members in the previous generation. But there is no question that the spirit of modern Orthodoxy lives on in centrist Orthodoxy. It is more than likely that many Orthodox Jews who participate in this-worldly endeavors will feel the need to articulate an Orthodoxy which stands in reasonable relationship to intellectual currents and moral sentiments that may owe their derivation to non-Orthodox sources, but which they feel to be embedded in the very nature of reality. Any such effort will build upon the contribution of Emanuel Rackman.

10 On Lookstein's synagogue, see Joselit and Gurock in the previous note.