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OPPONENTS OF JEWISH REVITALIZATION

Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

The Torah portion Bechukotai begins with the words: “If in my statutes you will walk and my commandments you will study and do them, then I will give your rains in their time, and the land will give its produce, and the trees of the field give their fruit.” (Leviticus 26:3-4)

Immediately our scientifically oriented thinking flags a doubt about any verifiable relationship between doing *mitzvot* (commandments), weather patterns, and crop yields. But the text poses an even more challenging problem. On the one hand, we’re compelled by our reason and the evidence to conclude that the survival and success of the Jewish people is so extraordinarily improbable, we can only account for it by Divine Providence and by the Torah that enabled our people throughout history to be favored by that providence. On the other hand, we’ve mostly convinced ourselves that our own future—individually and communally, and that of the Jewish people generally—mostly is *not* related to Divine Providence and *not* related to our ability to be recipients of its blessings by *shemirah* (שמירה) and *asiyah* (עשיה), learning and living the Torah.

Not surprisingly, a large proportion of Jews we’ve known in the last 15 years have what seems to us to be a sentimental attachment to the Torah. We describe it as sentimental because the overwhelming majority of them had not read it in Hebrew or read any of the major commentaries on it. Since they hadn’t learned what it actually says and what it means, as a practical matter they were not in much of a position to understand and live out its vision and path.

So for many of us, our perspective about Judaism and living a Jewish life is mostly *not* the result of Torah study and knowledge, but biased by the secular forces of the particular historical era in which we’re living. That is, we may occasionally read or think about the history and the beliefs and practices of our people, but our day-to-day consciousness is almost entirely captivated by the allurements of the present moment. In these contemporary moments we are, to put it charitably, distanced from the Torah. In fact, when thinking of it on rare occasions during the weekdays of our lives, it more often than not presents itself to us as an obstacle to some pressing priority or purpose we have in mind at the moment.

So how do we typically accommodate such moments?

We translate our abandonment of the tradition and the Torah as *progress*, that we’ve overcome archaic obstacles to satisfying our legitimate material and sensual desires of the moment. And to those who would presume to remind us of our defection, either by words or the deeds of their own observance, we say to them and ourselves: “It’s my life—I can live it as I please. Who are you or anyone else, including men who lived thousands of years ago, to tell me what to do or to limit my choices. You’ve narrowed your own life to some outdated conception of morality, but you’re not narrowing mine!”

Eventually this hostility to the idea of freely choosing to attach one’s life to God and Torah produces an antipathy to all of the institutional structures and functionaries that promote that choice—the observant congregations that are dedicated to

learning, their religious and spiritual leaders and teachers, and the *chazzanim* (cantors) and *rabbanim* (rabbis) they employ.

What does this alienation from the Torah ordinarily lead to?

What begins as ignorance leads to distance, which progresses into veiled hostility and, not uncommonly, morphs into overt intolerance. That is, it becomes practiced at honoring the Torah by empty symbolic gestures, while openly condemning its teachings and subtly ridiculing and rejecting those who struggle to live up to them. The *mitzvos* are characterized as oppressive, unreasonably and indefensibly limiting our autonomy or the flourishing of our unique individuality. The Torah's commitment to our moral spirituality—the essential foundation for healthy and productive individual, family, community, and national life—is ridiculed as antiquated at best and sexist at worst. Those who historically carried and construed the tradition—the priests, prophets, sages and rabbis—are defined as devious, self-dealing, and anything but in the Divine Service of God.

In the terminal stages of this process, we encounter an unmistakable anomie—social instability caused by the erosion of moral and social codes—that is evident all around us. The depth of that erosion is evidenced by the wholesale abandonment of both God and the congregations that seek to promote the Divine Image in the world—two of the most visible outcomes of raising personal autonomy to the status of a competing divinity. At this point, ignorance and non-observance is not inadvertent or haphazard, but purposive.

Ironically, the first victim of this alienation and its resulting anomie is our own individual self-confidence, which plays out not only by disturbing

our psycho-emotional balance, but diminishing our physical health as well.

It should go without saying, of course, that ignorance of Torah can become endemic in any generation. When it affects many individuals with the contagion of self-satisfying autonomy, the underpinnings of congregational community begin to be sabotaged. Those who are alienated from Torah become, wittingly or unwittingly, a fifth column, a faction committed subtly to subvert the efforts of others who are dedicated to building up the congregation as a *moral spiritual community* (in contrast to a spiritualized social association).

In the final analysis they become a force that eschews any real commitment of time, energy, resources, and especially, spirit, to *shemirah* and *asiyah*—to learning and living the Torah. More than anything else, by their indifference born of self-preoccupied, self-worshipping independence, they become the most dedicated opponents of our generation's Jewish revitalization, the executioners of Jewish learning and living in our time.

Our *parasha* (weekly Torah reading) concludes: “These are the commandments that God commanded Moses for the children of Israel on Mount Sinai.”

It's a reminder that we ought to think very carefully before we arrogate to ourselves the misplaced confidence to jettison what our people has held sacred to our survival and success as a moral spiritual nation for three thousand years, and in its place to hoist up our individual personal preferences for momentary sensual and material satisfactions as the guiding standards of our people's future history.

That future may seem like a long way off, but it's really no farther than the next generation of our children and their children.

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