

## **A Challenge to Orthodoxy: Remarks at *Yeshivat Chovevei Torah***

Michael H. Steinhardt

**Biography:** Michael H. Steinhardt founded the Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation in 1994 to strengthen and transform American Jewish life. He is a well-known philanthropist of Jewish and general causes.



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I would like to speak today about what has become a remote backwater in Jewish life, except for a few obscure places: Full-hearted cooperation between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews.

Once, perhaps ten years ago, I was in a room filled with Orthodox gentlemen to meet the then-Education Minister of Israel, who himself was Orthodox. I had been invited by a good friend of mine, with whom I used to spar comfortably about our difference in religious views. But that difference was overwhelmed by our shared commitment to Israel and to our people in general. However, as the discussion became heated during that evening, one of the participants stated, quite comfortably, “And as far as the other Jews are concerned, we all know that they are lost. It’s just a matter of time.” He meant that the non-Orthodox community was lost. Assimilation and intermarriage would ultimately lead to our erosion and perhaps disappearance, which he felt was inevitable. The view was largely shared throughout that room.

I have the feeling that in the year 2006, there remains a substantial portion of the Orthodox community that adheres to that view. It starts with the belief that the forms of Judaism practiced outside of Orthodoxy are inauthentic. This leads to a refusal to sit together in joint organizations. More than that—it leads to disdain. I am told that Rabbi Moshe Feinstein ruled that an Orthodox Jew should not answer “*amen*” to a blessing uttered by a liberal rabbi. I fear that by now there is a certain *Schadenfreude* over the demographic decline that plagues the non-Orthodox Diaspora.

Rabbi Soloveitchik once suggested that Jewish unity should be as elemental as Siamese twins—that if we pour scalding water on one, the other should cry out in pain. In the case of American Jews, it is not a small minority that is being cut off, rather the great majority of our people—the non-Orthodox and non-affiliated.

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And while even I, at times, say that we are becoming two separate peoples, I truly say it in sorrow, because in the end, it will not be good for the Jewish people.

I remain uncomfortable with the fact that there is so little Orthodox philanthropy directed outside the community in contrast to the amount of non-Orthodox philanthropy coming in. How many in the Orthodox world give to the UJA? How many Orthodox philanthropists are involved in our organizations such as ‘birthright israel’?—This despite the fact that Orthodox are among the primary beneficiaries of the community’s programs. I remain uncomfortable with the fact that almost all outreach in the Jewish world is done by the Orthodox, and that there are virtually no metrics to determine its efficacy. I remain particularly uncomfortable with the ever-sharpening contrast between the rigors of Orthodoxy—and in this respect, I mean all shades of Orthodoxy—and the growing looseness, a lack of rules, a lack of law, in the non-Orthodox world. These trends are bad for liberal Jews, and it is a

pity that Orthodox disrespect weakens its ability to positively influence the non-Orthodox. These issues are not being addressed seriously. Halfhearted efforts by a few rabbis are, to me, of little meaning. So in addressing the subject of Orthodox giving to the non-Orthodox, I would simply say that it will only change as the result of a great deal of new and more intimate communication on a variety of levels, which I hope for, but do not as yet see.

Maimonides states that a person who separates from the total community commits an unforgivable sin and loses his portion in the World to Come. He defines "separation" as "one who does not suffer in their suffering and does not rejoice in their rejoicing." I submit that in separating itself out of fear of spiritual contamination, in leaving the trans-denominational organizations out of fear of legitimating other viewpoints, and in pulling back from serving in Hillel and community day schools, Orthodoxy is losing its ability to share in the joy and sorrow of the Jewish community.

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There are profound reasons why the Orthodox community should be concerned with the non-Orthodox world. Hillel's famous question, "If I am only for myself, what am I?" applies. Any community that is unable to see beyond itself is doomed, eventually, to deterioration from within. By removing itself from the larger Jewish world, the Orthodox community isolates itself from other Jews and from other ideas. As we have seen in Jewish history, isolation can have immediate benefits, but it also has serious costs. I'm afraid that by refusing to be involved in the larger Jewish community, Orthodox Jews risk becoming self-satisfied and myopic, which is a risk inherent in all isolated communities.

We in the non-Orthodox world have much to learn from the Orthodox—and, I would argue, some things to share with you. But first we need to recognize that without each other, each of our groups might very well wither. We in the non-Orthodox world can learn from the Orthodox. You have a self-sustaining devotion to Jewish practice that inoculates you against the problems the rest of us have in maintaining and perpetuating Jewish culture. Your commitment to Jewish education is unequalled. You have a true sense of responsibility for the Jewish future. In personal terms, you understand that the bedrock of Jewish civilization is the family, and you make sacrifices in the name of larger, more tightly-knit families and of Jewish education from the earliest age.

Having said that, one must ask why Orthodoxy, with its relative isolation and insulation, doesn't work for the overwhelming majority of us. Orthodox Jews go to different schools, eat different food, marry different people, often live in different neighborhoods, and have, in some important areas, different values. These are not easily reconcilable differences. Even being sent by the God I don't believe in, and educated by a Rabbi I adore, a group of one-gender Orthodoxy "young 'uns" are going to have a little difficulty changing this miserable Jewish world.

I would like to offer you the opportunity to be a partner in renaissance with all of *kelal Yisra'el*. I ask that you recognize that non-Orthodox Jews have values also, and that these values are not empty. To do that, you must learn to judge non-Orthodox with the benefit of the doubt ("*le-kaf zekhut*," as the Rabbis say). I ask you to focus not only on their glaring weaknesses; try to respect the commitments of non-Orthodox to education and critical scholarship, to family and *tsedaqah*, to Israel and to solidarity with all Jews. I do not deny the excesses, the materialism, the assimilation and the ignorance that are eroding the non-Orthodox world. But the impression that non-Orthodox Jews are living meaningless lives is a caricature. We need to see each other as equals who are able to teach the other something. Frankly, this is quite a challenge.

I want to acknowledge that the philosophy of “open Orthodoxy” represents the alternative Orthodoxy that the Jewish community badly needs. However, Orthodoxy has let the separatists and the judgmentalists come to dominate community policy and public perception. I appreciate the ethic of *Yeshivat Chovevei Torah*, with its commitment to engaging the world, and I see the students and graduates here as part of a new

kind of Orthodoxy. I only ask that you join the rest of us to ensure that the joy in Jewish experience is felt by more than a minority of Jews. With the right attitude and with an urgent and massive effort, I believe that we may usher in a Jewish renaissance.

In the process, perhaps we could become one people again.