

## ***Modern with a Capital "M"***

Joseph C. Kaplan

**Biography:** Joseph C. Kaplan practices law in New York. He has been a frequent contributor to Jewish publications such as *Sh'ma* and the Baltimore Jewish Times.



# Modern with a Capital "M"

Joseph C. Kaplan

About 15 years ago, the phrase “Modern Orthodox,” which had been used to describe Orthodox Jews affiliated with Yeshiva University, the Orthodox Union, Young Israel and other similar institutions and organizations, was replaced by the locution “Centrist.” Recently, though, “Modern Orthodox” has made a comeback, and appears frequently in both the Jewish and, as a result of Senator Lieberman’s vice-presidential campaign, the non-Jewish press.

Indeed, Edah uses this term, albeit in a slightly modified manner in its slogan, “The courage to be modern and Orthodox.” In so doing, Edah has decided to use a lower case “m” in the word “modern,” as do many others who write about Modern Orthodoxy. I, however, deliberately choose to use a capital “M.” Let me explain why.

To be “modern Orthodox” means that our Orthodoxy is modern and that our modern life is Orthodox. As modern Orthodox Jews, we check our Donna Karan dresses and Armani suits for *sha’atnez*; use Davka and Bar Ilan computer applications to learn *dafyomi* and research medieval *responsa*; employ a cell phone and the Kotel Cam to give our children studying in Israel a Rosh Hashanah blessing; go to movies, keep up-to-date on the latest music and best-sellers, and enjoy nouvelle cuisine – but only, of course, if they are glatt kosher. Indeed, the modern Orthodox Jew fully resides in the twenty-first century while adhering to our timeless Torah and *mitzvot*.

To be “Modern Orthodox,” though, has one important additional feature: Modern Orthodox Jews —modern with a capital “M” —do more than modernize our Orthodoxy and ensure that the modern twenty-first century lives we live are Orthodox; we have a strong affirmative commitment to modernity and certain of its values which we strive to infuse with sanctity. To the Modern Orthodox Jew, “Modern” is not simply an

adjective modifying “Orthodox”; rather, it also connotes an extra-halakhic allegiance to certain modern values apart from, in addition to, and – to state the obvious – not in conflict with our Orthodoxy. Let me discuss a few examples.

The Modern Orthodox Jew is strongly devoted to democracy, an allegiance that arises primarily out of our secular values. Our intense devotion to democratic political systems is not grounded in what we learn in the *yeshivah*. It emanates, rather, from Hobbes, Locke, Mill and Burke, from Adams, Madison, Hamilton and Jefferson, from the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address and Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream.” And it is reinforced daily by what we read on the front pages of our newspapers and see on our television screens.

The Modern Orthodox Jew not only recognizes the evil in despotic or segregationist political systems, but also opposes theocratic governments that impose a “State Religion” to the exclusion of others. We understand that despotic, segregationist, and theocratic systems diminish the value of those they subjugate. We support the democratic ideals of freedom of speech and freedom of religion as basic rights of all peoples. While those among us may differ about how extensive these freedoms should be, we earnestly embrace the idea that the lack of such freedoms results in tyranny and oppression.

The Modern Orthodox Jew believes in being an actor in history. We are avid Zionists not only because we believe God gave the land of Israel to the Jewish People, but also because we cannot sit back passively and wait for God to lead us to the Promised Land. We applaud and feel a strong kinship to those, Orthodox and not, who built and continue to sustain the State of Israel. We send our children to study there so they can learn first hand to love *Medinat Yisrael* as we do.

The Modern Orthodox Jew believes in the inherent value of secular education. We and our children study in universities not only because such study enables us to make a living, but more importantly, because it opens up to us the grandeur of our God-given world. We value literature, music, history, psychology, mathematics and science because they speak to our soul as they enlighten our minds. Torah study is, of course, of prime importance, but our definition of “sacred” includes much wisdom that cannot be found in our religious texts.

The Modern Orthodox Jew also believes in intellectual honesty and scientific methodology. Other than our faith in God and the few other essential beliefs posited by our sages, we believe little that cannot be proven through logic, control groups, blind studies, statistics and all the other modes of modern rigorous thinking and proof. For example, when confronted with scientific facts that contradict facts posited in the Talmud, we cannot side with those who argue that both are right and the facts have changed from the time of the Talmud to our times. Instead we ask: “Where is the scientific proof - that is, proof that can be tested and challenged - that these facts have changed, that what was scientifically true in generations before us, has now been altered?”

The Modern Orthodox Jew refuses to reject that which has been proven true; refuses to accept answers whose truth cannot be proven; refuses to be intellectually dishonest even in the face of contradictions that appear to challenge aspects of our belief system. Rather, when scientific discrepancies arise we side with those who argue that the rabbis of the Talmud were experts in Torah scholarship and not in science; that in their halakhic debate and decision-making, the rabbis used the best scientific knowledge available to them. And, when the science relied on by rabbis of earlier generations has been proven false, Modern Orthodox Jews believe that, in appropriate situations, the *halakhah* based on such science must be adapted to reflect the true scientific facts, in order to ensure that *halakhah* is *emet*, an indispensable ingredient of Torah. *Mosheh emet ve-torato emet.*

The Modern Orthodox Jew believes in tolerance. We may disagree strongly with much of what our brethren in other Jewish denominations believe and practice, but we believe it is necessary and proper to treat them as we wish to be treated by the society in which we live. We therefore reach out to and interact with all Jews and their leaders with love and respect.

The Modern Orthodox Jew is not afraid to admit that we are sometimes influenced in our Jewish observance by some of the moral, ethical and political norms of the communities in which we live. For example, those Modern Orthodox Jews who are also Orthodox feminists admit that we have been motivated, in part, by the rise of secular feminism over the last quarter of a century. We do not hide, nor are we ashamed of the fact, that we have been affected by modern values that whisper in our ears and echo in our hearts that women deserve an equal place in our world, including our Jewish world. We are proud of our attempts to sanctify that which has not been traditional.

In this last instance, of course, there are, at times, tensions between what we believe as feminists and what *halakhah* demands of us; we must accept that there are certain cases where the Modern and the Orthodox cannot co-exist. And, when reconciliation between the two is impossible, *halakhah* does, as it must, take the day. But when, through effort, the two can exist side by side or be blended into a new synergistic element, we strongly believe that it is of prime importance to expend as much effort as possible on such a task despite the brickbats that are thrown at us.

Being a Modern Orthodox Jew—modern with a capital “M”—presents serious challenges. It means living in two worlds with strong, though not equal, commitments to both. It means having different and sometimes conflicting allegiances and values. It means grappling with issues that some of our compatriots can ignore. It means sometimes living with doubt, stress and angst. But it also means partaking of all that is good in God’s creation.