

Judaism – Then and Now

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Introduction

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn (1880 – 1950), known as the Frierdiker Rebbe (Yiddish for “Previous Rebbe”), was the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe. He served in this position for 30 years beginning in 1920. The Rebbe passed away on Shabbos morning, January 28, 1950 (10 Shevat 5710) and was buried at Montefiore Cemetery in Queens, New York City.

Recently someone sent me a link to a video clip of his Levaya. (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9RSdGG6Y3E> .) From this clip one can see a number of external differences between Orthodoxy circa 1950 and Orthodoxy today. First, most of the men in the crowd are wearing hats and coats that are not black. Indeed, grey seems to have been the favored color for men’s hats at this time. Second, the majority of the men shown are clean shaven. Third, there are men and women standing together in the crowd. Apparently, no separation of the sexes was imposed upon those gathered to give the Rebbe a final tribute. In short, this assemblage does not look anything like what one would see today at the levaya of a well-known rebbe or rosh yeshiva.

Then and Now

Judaism was indeed different in 1950. Yeshiva education was just beginning to expand, and a goodly number of elementary yeshiva graduates went to public high school. Even fewer went on to study in a Bais Medrash after high school, and still fewer entered kollel. The overall level of Torah knowledge amongst Baalei Batim was nowhere near as high as it is on average today. For example, the Daf Yomi shiurim that one finds in almost every Orthodox shul today did not exist then.

Tzinius standards were not what they are today. A relatively small percentage of women covered their hair. Mixed dancing was still part of the social life of far too many Orthodox shuls. There was little separation of the sexes so that boys and girls more often than not interacted with each other at social gatherings. The dating system that is so prevalent today was not followed by most young Orthodox men and women in those years. (Some might argue that this was a plus!) In short, it was indeed a very different Orthodox world.

Today we can proudly point to many improvements. These include, but are certainly not limited to, a perhaps unprecedented commitment to and level of Torah study on the part

of the “average” Orthodox young man and woman; relatively high Tzinius standards in many circles; daily synagogue attendance by thousands; higher kashrus standards including the use of Cholov Yisroel products by many; many chesed organizations; an overwhelming commitment to Shmiras Shabbos by those who consider themselves Orthodox; a proliferation of Mincha minyanim in some cities, a phenomenon that hardly existed years ago; etc.

Each of us can add more items to this list. In short, today more careful attention is given to the performance of many mitzvos. Some of the mitzvos that were often neglected in the fifties are observed scrupulously today by a large segment of the Orthodox community.

This is indeed good news for Orthodoxy. Still, there are those who feel that there is much missing from today’s Orthodoxy. They feel there is an unhealthy focus on appearances and *chumros* at the expense of good *middos* and “*ehrllichkeit*.” Many who project the image of being very *frum* seem at the same time to be overly concerned with materialism. True, more women cover their hair today, but some seem to think nothing of spending a small fortune on a *shaitel*. Only the finest name brand apparel will do for their family. It is not uncommon to see an observant man driving a car that costs as much as some people make in a year.

Emphasis on form at the expense of substance seems to be in vogue; image is all important to far too many. Some of our children have come to think that this emphasis on externalities is the acid test of religious observance. A friend of mine once told me that after his children had viewed the wedding album of his parents, they asked, “Abba, were Bobby and Zaidy Jewish when they got married?”

There are other real differences between the nature of Orthodox in the 1950s and Orthodoxy today. Below we deal with some of the more prominent ones.

Chillul HaShem

Chillul HaShem has become all too prevalent in recent years. I personally cringe whenever I see the media report about a so-called *frum* Jew in an unflattering light. I am not implying that there was no wrongdoing years ago. There certainly was. Nonetheless, it seems that what has transpired with far too much regularity in recent years has focused a most unflattering light on too many Orthodox Jews.

In his essay **Chillul HaShem** that first appeared in 1975 in the *Mitteilungen* and is reprinted on pages 213 to 216 of **Selected Writings**, C. I. S. Publications, 1988, Rav Shimon Schwab, ZT”L, writes

The second sentence of Sh’ma Yisroel begins with the command: “You shall love Hashem”, which is interpreted by our Sages: “Let the name of Hashem become beloved through you.” In other words, we are supposed to lead the kind of exemplary life which would contribute to the universal adoration of G-d and

which would, in turn, enhance the glory and lustre of the Torah, adding respect for the dignity of the Jewish people as a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation.

The very opposite of the sanctification is the desecration of the Name as condemned by the Prophet with the scathing words (Yechezkel 36): “They came to the nations and desecrated my Holy Name, so that one said to them, is this the people of G-d who came from His land?”

Every form of Chillul Hashem lowers the awareness of the Divine Presence in the world. But if the desecrator happens to be a professed Torah observer or, even worse, a so-called scholar of the Torah, then the Chillul Hashem not only weakens the respect for Torah on one hand, but strengthens on the other hand the defiance of the non-observer and adds fuel to the scoffers, fanning the fires of religious insurrection all around. Chillul Hashem is responsible, directly or indirectly, for the increase of frivolity, heresy and licentiousness in the world.

Derech Eretz

Respect for one’s elders seems to have become a thing of the past for many young people. One even encounters so-called “*frum*” adults who appear to have never learned that Derech Eretz for one’s fellow man and woman should be part and parcel of all of one’s dealings with others. The Torah commands us to honor our parents, our older siblings and older people. Indeed, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch points out that honoring parents is one of the foundation stones of Yahadus, because our basis for accepting the truth of the Torah is something that is passed on from one generation to the next.

When I was growing up (I was born in 1941), it was made very clear to me that you never called an adult by his or her first name. It was always “Mr.” or “Mrs.” or “Miss” or “Aunt” or “Uncle.” Calling an older person by his or her first name would instantly result in a rebuke from my parents.

Today I often hear children call their adult aunts or uncles by their first names. Some years ago one of my sons had a classmate over for Shabbos. (The boys were 10 years old at this time.) After Shabbos I asked our guest what he was going to do now, since his parents had gone away. He replied, “I am going to call Shloime. He will pick me up.” I asked, “Who is Shloime?” He replied, “My uncle.” I was taken aback at how this young man thought nothing of calling his uncle, who was, of course, an adult, by his first name.

I have asked people in their twenties or thirties and even older why they let themselves be called by their first names. They reply, “Being called ‘Uncle’ (or ‘Aunt’) makes me feel old.” They do not seem to realize that they are doing a disservice to their nieces and nephews. Allowing them to address older people by their first names fosters the idea that everyone is on an equal level. This is not true. The Torah tells us that age deserves respect, and children have to be made aware of this as often as possible.

And then there is the youngster who pushes ahead of me when I am about to leave shul. Often I put my hand on the shoulder of such a fellow and say to him, somewhat facetiously, “Sir! I believe that I am a bit older than you are!” More often than not the young man has no idea what I am talking about. I was taught that you always let an older person go through a door before you. It was just one more part of practicing *Derech Eretz*, but it seems to have been lost in many circles today.

Unfortunately, lack of *Derech Eretz* is far too widespread, and it evidences itself in the way children and youngsters behave in yeshiva and Bais Yaakov. I heard the following story.

In one sixth-grade classroom a teacher asked one of her students to pick a sheet of paper up from the floor. What was the student’s response? “I don’t work here, you do!” The teacher was so flabbergasted by the student’s *chutzpa* that she was at a loss regarding what to do. She was so taken aback by this behavior that she did not know to respond!

I am sure that what this sixth grader did is an extreme example of lack of *Derech Eretz*. Most of her fellow students would, I am sure, never do such a thing. Still, I can only wonder what kind of a learning environment can exist in classrooms where even one student would behave in this fashion.

Fifty years ago the overwhelming majority of Orthodox parents made it very clear to their children that a key ingredient in going to yeshiva was behaving and treating the teachers with respect. Why is this not also the case today?

Our Grandparents

Could it be that we have become lost in the forest for the trees? While we may be outwardly more observant than people a generation or two ago, some would maintain that our grandparents embraced far more *mentchlichkeit* and *ehrllichkeit* than we see today. Their Yiddishkeit seems to have been simpler and more to the point than ours often is.

Our grandparents were able to transmit their Yiddishkeit in a fairly simple fashion. One might summarize their teachings as follows: Be a *mentch*, learn Torah, and make the most of every minute of every day. Keep in mind that people are watching you and judge Yiddishkeit by how you behave, so make sure that whatever you do is viewed as a Kiddush HaShem. Be sure to become self sufficient through honest labor and contribute to the community at large. And, above all, be *Ehrlich* in all of your dealings with others.

This message was clear and straightforward, and it led to the rebuilding of Yiddishkeit after the terrible losses that we experienced during the Holocaust. The guidance our grandparents gave their children kept them from the confusing blend of *Halacha*, *minhag*, *chumrah* and common practice that has left too many today groping for an understanding of what is important and what is not. There were no mixed messages about what they

taught the next generation, because they lived these values each and every day of their lives.

Time for a Reevaluation

One can add to the items discussed above a lack in the area of *mesiras nefesh*; for some, the notion of sacrifice hardly seems to exist today. One can only wonder how they would react if confronted with the challenges of the 1950s.

No one should look for or want tests. Still, perhaps in light of the financial gyrations going on today which are creating difficulties for so many, now is perhaps the time for each of us to evaluate the *substance* upon which our religious observance is based? Indeed, what should be the basis of our relationship to HaShem? How should our actions and values reflect our relationship to the Creator?

Rav Samson Rafael Hirsch, ZT”L, in his commentary on Shemos gives us insight into this. On the *pasuk* **20:9** *Six days shall you serve and do all your [creating] work*; he writes,

Not for your own glory should you do your work, by which you rule over the world. You should regard your work as “service,” service in God’s kingdom, done in the service of God. Do your work at His bidding and for the sake of His world, in which He has placed you, “to serve it and to keep it.” [*Bereshis* 2:15] By appropriating, transforming and altering the world’s resources, you are to elevate this world from blind physical compulsion to the purpose of moral freedom and the service of God in freedom. (**The Hirsch Chumash, Sefer Shemos**, (New) English Translation by Daniel Haberman, Feldheim Publishers and Judaica Press, 2005 ISBN 1-58330-746-x, page 330.)

Rav Hirsch goes on to write in his commentary on **20:14** *You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, his servant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.*

All “religion” and all “worship of God in heart and spirit” are worthless if they lack the power to control our words and deeds, our family life and social life. Only through our actions and way of life can we prove that we are truly and genuinely God’s servants. Conversely, all social virtue is worthless and crumbles at the first test, as long as it aims merely at outward correctness and at doing what is right in the eyes of man, but neglects inner loyalty and does not base itself on conscientiousness and on the purity of inner conviction, which only God can see and judge. (Ibid., page 340)

Striving to accomplish this will mean that we maintain the higher level of mitzvah observance that we see today and combine this with the values of our grandparents. The result will be a more meaningful synthesis of externalities and our connection to HaShem, ending up with the best of both worlds – the pluses of the internal values of our

grandparents and the stricter mitzvah observance of today. The result, a Yiddishkeit that our grandparents would be proud of, would be nothing less than a Kiddush HaShem.