

# Five Pillars of Orthodox Judaism or Open Charedism

RABBI ASHER LOPATIN

NOT LONG AGO, I was sitting on a plane with a wonderful man who was a Satmar Chasid. The Satmar Chasidim live in a few, tight-knit communities in America and Israel and are known as being beyond ultra-Orthodox—they are seen as “petra-Orthodox.” They dress religiously—black and white—they speak religiously—Yiddish—and they read religiously—only approved books and censored Internet. They are passionate about, and committed to, a type of Judaism that shuns as much of the world as possible. We had several hours of great conversation on a long flight, and the contrast to my modern Orthodox life reinforced my need to examine once again who I was, what I was passionate about, and what kind of Judaism I was committed to. Was my modern Orthodox lifestyle, which embraces and engages the Western world while still clinging to the details of traditional Jewish law and practice, less religious than his? Was my Judaism a watered-down or compromised version of his?

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Actually, I have pondered these questions over the years, especially since becoming a rabbi of a modern Orthodox synagogue fourteen years ago. The longer I ponder, the more I think that the Judaism that I have adopted for my way of life, and hopefully for my family's way of life, is not only authentic but essential for the well-being of Judaism. For Judaism to thrive, it needs modern Orthodoxy. In fact, I would argue that of all the types of Orthodoxy, I believe modern Orthodoxy is the ideal form. Labels are limiting and off-putting, but Orthodoxy is more of a brand name than just a label; I wish to sincerely define the brand name of Orthodoxy in a way that will make my modern Orthodox brothers and sisters proud to be modern Orthodox, not ashamed that they are not as good as the ultra-petra-Orthodox up the street or in the other part of town.

Yet while it is important to realize that modern Orthodoxy is what Orthodoxy was meant to be, it cannot rest on its laurels. In fact, it may just be the most delicate form of Orthodoxy. Engaging in the world around us, trying to take the good and stay away from the bad, is difficult. All the wonders that modern Orthodoxy provides can fall apart if modern Orthodox Jews do not take their own religion seriously. Ultra-Orthodox Jews seem to do a good job taking Judaism seriously; modern Orthodox Jews need to do the same. There is joy and love for the religiously committed Jew, but to make Orthodox Judaism work, it has to be *r'tzini* (serious) at its core.

## The Five Pillars

A few years ago I came up with five pillars of Orthodox Judaism. They are not principles of faith; I have left that to Maimonides, the fifteenth-century philosopher Joseph Albo, and others who have worked on that years ago. These are the foundations that should help make someone committed to modern Orthodoxy aware of what his or her faith and way of life is based upon and also alert him or her to the passion that life is based on.

### 1. Torah Mi'Sinai—*Torah from Sinai*

Both the Oral and Written Torah come from God and were revealed to the Jewish People at Sinai. In contrast to the great Conservative halakhist Rabbi Joel Roth, who said, "The halakhic tradition is the given, and theology is required to fall into place behind it," I believe our halakhic tradition needs to be driven by theology in order to keep Judaism alive and infinite, rather than ossified and limited. We need to start with awe of the Torah and Talmud coming from God, being infinite and deserving infinite reverence. We need to place ourselves humbly below it, and only then establish ownership of it and make it our "play-thing," as King David says in Psalms. Only when a couple accepts *kiddushin* (betrothal) can they become intimate with each other, and our Rabbis compare *matan Torah* (receiving Torah) to *kiddushin*. Only if you feel Torah is your God-given partner can you then become intimate with her. Only then can you really feel you are so connected to Torah that you can make a conjecture as to what she is thinking; only then you can trust your instincts in interpreting Torah's 3,500-year tradition. This theology and intimacy leads to the second pillar.

### 2. Chidush Mi'Sinai—*Innovation from Sinai*

New understandings and innovative interpretations come if you really believe Torah is divine and infinite and, thus, can be interpreted in an infinite amount of ways. If you are truly *chareid* (fearful, awestruck) of the *d'var hashem* (the word of God), then you can never have the audacity, the *chutzpah*, to believe that you or any human being can truly know what that word of God means. You can never say something is "clear from Torah." How can the divine word of God, communicated to mere mortals, ever be clear, easy to understand, or obvious? Any new interpretation must be processed and examined through the traditions of *p'sak* (rulings) of the last two thousand years, and that interpretation must follow the Talmud. And yet, we may re-read the Talmud in a totally different way without changing the eternal Torah of God that the Talmud represents. Our re-reading will be debated, resisted, and

challenged, but, ultimately, if it is a real interpretation of the Talmud—as far as can be humanly established—and it fits into the understanding of Rishonim (medieval authorities) and the subsequent authorities, it will become part of *Halakhah l'Moshe mi'Sinai*—the Halakhah that was understood to have been given to Moses at Sinai, even if Moses never understood it the way someone in the twenty-first century understands the word of God. Innovation comes from the dialectic of ideas and thoughts from the world around us and our allegiance to Torah, the eternal, infinite word of God. Within this dialectic, *chidushim*, innovative ways of understanding our Torah and tradition, arise in every generation.

### 3. Halakhic Rigor and Discipline

When we closely observe our detailed laws of *kashrut*, davening, coming to minyan and making sure there is a minyan in our communities, *kavanah* (concentration, focus) in our davening, Shabbat as it is expressed in its myriad rituals and ethical aspects, family purity in its own ritual and social aspects, the laws of gossiping and loving our fellow Jews and respecting our fellow human beings, then we become worthy vessels through which Torah can be interpreted and even rethought. The Netziv put it in terms of two words: *lishmor v'la'asot*, “To preserve and to do.” We need to first be the preservers of Torah who inherit from the previous generation; then we can move on to doing, relooking at everything with fresh, innovative eyes to understand Torah for our generation. When we are preservers of Torah and Torah practice, then we become safe space for God's infinite word. We become the rightful heirs of the tradition, which we are obliged to re-examine for ourselves. Only through this rigor and commitment to Halakhah, *minhag* (custom), and tradition can our lives reflect the living Torah that God gave us at Sinai.

### 4. Klal Yisrael: Inclusivity

*Yisrael, oraita v'kudshah b'rich hu echad hem*, “Israel, the Torah, and God are all one.” If one of them is disrespected, the other one suffers. How can a person who doesn't feel *Yisrael mi'Sinai*—that the loving and car-

ing relationship between all Jews is a requirement from God—really believe in *Torah mi'Sinai*? If a person cannot respect the yearnings of Jewish women or the feel the pain of a patrilineal Jewish teenager who is told that they were never really Jewish to begin with, then that person is rejecting *echad hem*, the unity of *Yisrael mi'Sinai*, *Torah mi'Sinai*, and the belief in our being connected to the one and only God. And beyond a respect for the family, for Jews, with whom we are bonded together with God, there is the fifth principle, which pushes us to look not just inside, but outside as well, with concern for all those created in God's image.

### 5. Menschlichkeit and Kiddush Hashem: Always Asking Yourself, Am I Acting Like a Mensch?

Am I acting with respect to all of God's creations? Am I seeing God in every human being the way God wanted us to see the Divine in every descendant of Adam and Eve? Finally, am I acting in such a way as to allow decent people to see God in me? Orthodox Judaism does have a universalistic tendency to see the *tzelem elohim* in every human being and to act through *tzelem elohim* in this world—to be human and humane. *V'rachamav al kol ma'asav*, “God's mercy extends to all of God's creatures,” even feeding the birds on Shabbat, according to the *Arukh Hashulchan*.

Modern Orthodoxy is “Coke Classic,” not “New Coke” as many think. Coke Classic still may taste different to different people in different times. And Coke Classic needs to maintain a high level of quality control, otherwise it will be replaced by Pepsi or, worse, distilled water! Coke Classic is the standard by which all other flavored, fizzy drinks are judged, just as modern Orthodoxy should be that standard, with an infinite amount of subflavors. Modern Orthodoxy can newly sing the infinite word of God “in perfect harmony” from the generation of Sinai until the end of time.