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# The Limmud problem: an Orthodox solution

A single-purpose blog to publish an article on Orthodox attendance at the Limmud Conference.

Thursday, 24 February 2011

*I recently became interested in the grossgemeinde Orthodox rabbis of pre-war Germany, and I hope to publish a full length scholarly article on them soon. During my research it occurred to me that they provide a model for Orthodox Jews today in their relations with non-Orthodox Jewish movements. In Britain this matter has centred on the annual Limmud Conference. I have therefore written the essay below as a contribution to the debate.*

The turning on of the Oxford Street lights marks the beginning of an annual and much loved season in Anglo-Jewry – the debate in the columns of the Jewish press and round Shabbat tables about Orthodox participation in the Limmud Conference, which takes place every year over the December Bank Holidays. There is no doubt that Limmud is an extraordinary phenomenon. For five days, sessions run from early morning to late at night; up to thirty take place at any one time. Two and a half thousand people attend and take part in a huge range of Jewish educational and cultural activities, from high level textual study to politics, drama and music. Limmud has increased the Jewish learning and intensified the Jewish commitment of thousands of Jews. Its model is spreading throughout the Jewish world.

Limmud is a non-denominational (or, if you see it differently, a cross-denominational) event. Jews of all streams attend and present, and this has always been a great difficulty for the Orthodox. It is true that some Orthodox people do attend, both as participants and as speakers, especially from outside the UK, but including some British rabbis and laity. Orthodox participants attend despite the well known view of the London Beth Din that Limmud is not a place for Orthodox individuals, particularly rabbis and teachers. The Chief Rabbi attended before he took up his present office, but has not since. His personal position seems to be that both those who attend, and those who do not, have his blessing.

Every year the debate re-emerges. 'Why doesn't the Chief Rabbi go, when we know he'd really like to?' 'Have you heard that such-and-such will attend?' 'I wonder why so-and-so has finally decided to speak?' Aside from the tittle-tattle, there is also the serious discussion about the principles behind attendance and non-attendance. The Orthodox advocates of attending Limmud make a concise and powerful case. There are 2,500 Jews who want to learn. How can Orthodox rabbis and teachers neglect the opportunity to teach them Torah? For sure there are non-Orthodox people preaching non-Orthodox views, but they will in any case. Why should the Orthodox surrender the field? Let them go and present authentic Judaism. To stay away is to abandon thousands of Jews to mistaken teachings which no-one will correct.

## Orthodox opposition

Orthodox opponents of attendance make an equally strong case. Limmud is pluralist. Speakers from Orthodox, Masorti, Reform and other backgrounds are presented on an equal footing. Participants can attend whichever sessions they like. One can choose to listen to an Orthodox speaker giving traditional interpretations or to a Liberal denying essential principles of Orthodox Judaism and justifying practices forbidden by Orthodox halakha. The implication is that every one of the perspectives presented is equally valid. But for Orthodoxy they are not and cannot be. Orthodoxy recognises a range of different but acceptable views, but it cannot accept views outside that range as legitimate. As the Chief Rabbi wrote the L'eyla in 1990 'Either the Torah is the unmediated word of God or it is not. Either halachah commands every Jew or it does not. Either God speaks to us through history or He does not.'

To say that all views are equally valid is not just non-Orthodox, it is anti-Orthodox, it is a denial of Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy does not and cannot accept that it is one option among

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many. It is the single authentic Jewish view (or range of views). As the Chief Rabbi wrote in 1990: 'Orthodoxy stakes its being on the existence of some truth that transcends the relativities of man'. By giving an equal platform for all opinions Limmud effectively endorses this anti-Orthodox position. Pluralism is based on the assumption that there is no absolute truth, Orthodoxy makes just that claim, and it claims that Orthodoxy alone possesses that truth. Again the Chief Rabbi: 'pluralism proceeds on the explicit or hidden premise that Orthodoxy is false. It could not be otherwise, for if Orthodoxy is true, pluralism would be false.'

How can Orthodoxy give falsehood an equal footing any more than a conference on astronomy can have speakers suggesting the sun goes round the earth as well as those who argue that the earth goes round the sun. Attendance by reputable astronomers at such a conference would imply that the idea that the sun moved round the earth was an acceptable opinion, whereas for all serious astronomers it is simply wrong. In fact the situation for Orthodoxy in relation to Limmud is more serious. An astronomer is only dealing with physical realities. Fundamentally it does not matter whether the earth goes round the sun or not. Judaism is about the whole meaning and purpose of life. Adopting mistaken opinions or attending a service which is not conducted according to halakha is disastrous on a metaphysical level. How can the Orthodox sanction an institution through their attendance which presents both truth and falsehood, fulfilling God's commands and denying them as equally valid choices for each person to make?

We therefore find ourselves in a stalemate. If an Orthodox rabbi attends Limmud it appears as though he is diminishing authentic Judaism into just one of a range of legitimate options, a position that Limmud implicitly asserts but which is a denial of Orthodoxy, and in Orthodox terms is a denial of Torah itself. On the other hand, there are two and a half thousand Jews who want to learn Torah, and if all Orthodox speakers followed the logic I have set out, there would be no one to teach them. They would be forced to attend sessions which deny Torah and mitzvot as Orthodoxy understands them. Perhaps this is why the debate continues, because each side of the argument is so strong. But there may be a third way, based on a precedent of wide religious co-operation by Orthodox rabbis in pre-War Germany.

#### Grossgemeinde as a model

In Britain, Jewish communities have always organised themselves, but this was not true in Europe. In Germany and elsewhere the Jewish community was a state institution. The *gemeinde* was recognised by the state, instructed to elect a board and was given certain powers, including raising money from all Jews in a particular area to fund communal institutions. As Reform grew in Germany its lay leaders joined and led communal boards. They turned communal policy towards Reform and initially tried to drive out Orthodox practices. That was why Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and others campaigned to secede from the general community. They wanted religious autonomy, known as 'austritt'. They did not want to pay for Reform institutions, such as schools and synagogues. As importantly, they did not recognise a community led by Reformers as an authentic *kehilla*. In their view a real *kehilla* was based on Torah and once a community departed from Torah it ceased to be legitimate. In 1876 R. Hirsch achieved his objective, the Law of Secession was extended to Jews and R. Hirsch urged all his followers to leave the *gemeinde* of Frankfurt-am-Main and belong exclusively to the *austrittsgemeinde*, his separatist community.

The passing of the Law of Secession and R. Hirsch's call to secede frightened the board of the Frankfurt *gemeinde* into major concessions to the Orthodox. They promised that there would be an Orthodox synagogue and rabbi with complete religious autonomy. He would control the *kashrut* of communal institutions and all personal status issues. As a result, many Orthodox Jews did not leave the *gemeinde*. They either retained membership of both communities or did not bother to join R. Hirsch's community at all. There were therefore two communities in Frankfurt with an Orthodox synagogue, R. Hirsch's *austrittsgemeinde*, and the Orthodox community within the general community, the *grossgemeinde*. This pattern evolved elsewhere, such as Strasbourg and Cologne. In other towns and cities, such as Hamburg-Altona and Lubeck there were simply not enough Jews to have two separate communities, and all Jews, Orthodox and Reform remained within the same communal structure, each with their own synagogues, and with religious autonomy, but paying taxes to the same board and working together on social, cultural and political matters. The Orthodox rabbis of *grossgemeinden* included some great scholars and spiritual leaders, including Rabbis Marcus Horowitz, Nehemiah Nobel and Jacob Hoffman of Frankfurt, R. Isak Unna of Mannheim and R. Julius Jakobovits of Königsberg then Berlin. These were not minor or peripheral figures, but pious men and profound *talmidei hakhamim*, passionately committed to Orthodoxy. What is more, they led the majority of Orthodox Jews in Germany, for most did not secede, but remained part of the general community.

All this was done with the blessing of these rabbis' teachers, usually at the Berlin Rabbinical Seminary, and of the Seminary's Rectors, the outstanding Rabbis Esriel Hildesheimer, David Tsvi Hoffman, Avraham Kaplan and Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg. The *semikha* given by the Seminary was conditional on not serving in a non-Orthodox

synagogue, but many of its brightest stars became the rabbis of the Orthodox section of grossgemeinden. Rabbis Horowitz and Nobel were each a talmid muvhak of R. Hildesheimer. Some grossgemeinde Orthodox rabbis went further. They joined the General Association of German Rabbis, which included rabbis from all streams. R. Nobel even became its president.

Limmud is effectively a grossgemeinde for five days a year. Everyone pays into the same central fund; there are Orthodox and non-Orthodox services and speakers and whoever attends makes their choice, just as each member of the grossgemeinde decided which synagogue and which shiurim to frequent. Each speaker works under the aegis of Limmud but is given autonomy to say more or less what they want. It is clear that the proponents of Austritt would have heartily opposed Limmud, but the annual conference is much less thoroughgoing as a cross-communal institution that the grossgemeinden were in their day. Limmud is temporary, is not the permanent employer of its speakers (and usually does not pay them at all) and, naturally, does not involve itself in marriage, divorce, conversion etc. It is perhaps most similar to Franz Rosenswieg's Frankfurt Lehrhaus, where speakers with divergent views, including R. Nobel, taught. The reasons Orthodox rabbis within the grossgemeinden gave for remaining part of the general community, if they are sound, could therefore justify Orthodox attendance at Limmud.

#### Kehilla, Klal Yisrael and Areivut

When R. Hirsch declared secession from the general community mandatory under halakha in 1876 he was opposed by no less an authority than Rabbi Seligman Baer Bamberger, the Wurzbberger Rav, who was the leading German halakhist of his day. R. Bamberger held that while it was permissible to secede and create an exclusively Orthodox community, it was acceptable to remain in the grossgemeinde. R. Hirsch had accused the Reform leaders of the grossgemeinde of being minim lehakhis – deliberately rebellious heretics. R. Bamberger disputed this. If the Reform members of the board were willing to make all provisions the Orthodox felt were necessary, they were not rebellious heretics, merely mistaken. He disagreed that membership of the grossgemeinde in any way suggested agreement with non-Orthodox practices or that non-Orthodoxy was equally valid, why, after all, were the Orthodox demanding their own synagogue, rabbi, control over kashrut and so forth if they condoned Reform practices?

There was therefore no imperative to secede as a matter of principle. The matter became a practical one. If the grossgemeinde would give binding assurances that the Orthodox would have complete autonomy to conduct their affairs in accordance with halakha it would be possible to remain within the united community. R. Bamberger also touched on the practical question of all those Jews inclined towards Orthodoxy who, for whatever reason, did not secede. Where were they to be left to the spiritual care of Reform rabbis? Only a continued Orthodox presence in the grossgemeinde could safeguard their spiritual welfare.

The fundamental dispute between R. Hirsch and R. Bamberger was on the nature of the kehilla. For R. Hirsch the kehilla was either based on Torah, or it was no kehilla. Even if his personal behaviour fell short, all members of the kehilla had to accept in principle the authority of the Torah. For R. Bamberger the kehilla was based on Jews. Any Jew who had not converted to another religion could be included, whatever his views or behaviour. They might do many regrettable things, and these should be opposed, but they had not completely alienated themselves from the Jewish community. He was supported by Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Spector who ruled in 1886 that even an uncircumcised Jew could count towards a minyan. R. Hildesheimer expressed it in more abstract terms and asserted that all Jews, whatever their behaviour or views were 'living members of the organism of Klal Yisrael'.

R. Hirsch saw Judaism as fragmented into denominations, some of which were authentic and others which were not. The inauthentic denominations had to be opposed, and were certainly not appropriate partners for co-operation. The Orthodox rabbis who remained involved in the grossgemeinde did not think in denominational terms; they only saw Jews. Some of these Jews had objectionable views, and they had to be tackled, but they remained Jews nevertheless, and Jews without a qualifying label, either 'Reform' or 'Orthodox'.

Limmud would fail R. Hirsch's test of acceptability. The Conference as a body is not committed to Torah as Orthodoxy understands it, and it is a forum where many different Jewish denominations operate. R. Hirsch would not have attended Limmud. But the Conference seems to meet R. Bamberger's criteria. Orthodox needs are attended to, through tefillot and kashrut. The Orthodox who attend should certainly ensure that acceptable standards are maintained, without any compromise or pressure to compromise. No one at Limmud preaches Christianity or Islam in an attempt to convert Jews. They simply present their sincerely-held understanding of Judaism. Those understandings may be right or wrong, but it is unlikely that any are more radical than the extreme positions adopted by German Reformers in the nineteenth century, who advocated the abolition of all ritual laws and moving Shabbat to Sunday, and therefore are not so offensive that they preclude attendance. The grossgemeinde permanently

institutionalised Jewish religious pluralism. If R. Bamberger was unconcerned that Orthodox participation in the *grossgemeinde* would indicate Orthodox acceptance of pluralism it is difficult to see that he would object to the much more temporary and informal Limmud Conference on that basis. Further, there are thousands of Jews who need authentic Orthodox teaching and should not be abandoned.

R. Bamberger's grandson, R. Isak Unna pressed the Wurzbeger Rav's views well into the twentieth century, advocating continued involvement. R. Unna stressed the practical benefits for Orthodoxy of remaining within the *grossgemeinde*. There they would have greater access to non-Orthodox Jews, increasing their ability to have a positive influence. They could ensure that communal institutions maintained halakhic principles maximising observance to Orthodox standards. As he wrote 'we will be able to work for the authority of Torah and combat those erroneous tendencies connected to Judaism only if we are found in the midst of the community' just as Shimon ben Shetah entered the Sadducee-dominated Sanhedrin in order to purify it. As for the suggestion that mere membership accorded legitimacy, R. Unna was incredulous at the possibility: 'It is well known that we do not affirm their deeds. We emphasise repeatedly our opposition to them. We do not enter their synagogues, nor do we join in their prayers or religious ceremonies.' In this spirit, Orthodox people attending Limmud would have to be careful to make clear that they neither approved nor would ever attend a non-Orthodox service or session, and Orthodox rabbis should make it clear that they oppose doing so on halakhic principle. They should not be gratuitously rude, but through a robust presentation of Orthodox principles and teachings they could make it clear where they stood on the issues that divide Orthodoxy and non-Orthodoxy.

Rabbi Bamberger was primarily interested in practicalities, and believed that once he were satisfied that secession was not mandatory, there was more to be gained for Orthodoxy by staying within the *grossgemeinden*. These arguments alone might be enough for Orthodox Jews to attend Limmud. But R. Unna and others advanced arguments for remaining in general communities as a matter of principle. R. Unna upheld the dictum that 'kol Yisrael areivim zeh bazeh' (Sanhedrin 27b), that all Jews are responsible for one another, whether they were technically members of the same community or not. One Jew's sin was every Jew's sin, and nothing could alter that fact. This, he said 'is no mere sermonic flourish but...a halakhic principle of decisive practical importance.' Within Klal Yisrael all Jews had reciprocal responsibility for one another, which could not be abandoned except under the most pressing circumstances. Therefore, argued R. Unna, there was an obligation to work with them, to turn them back to authentic Judaism. As we have seen, he believed *grossgemeinde* Orthodoxy was the best way to achieve that. Another way might be Orthodox attendance at Limmud. There might be an obligation to teach real Torah and return people to authentic Judaism.

Other rabbis went further even than R. Unna. R. Nobel became the Orthodox rabbi of the Frankfurt *grossgemeinde* in 1910. He was a strong opponent of Reform, which he called 'un-Jewish' and accused of 'walking in the footsteps of Paul'. He considered an attack on the halakha as an attack on Judaism itself. However, he conceived of the Jewish people as not just a confessional group, like R. Hirsch had done, but as a people developing through history. The Torah was essential to the eternity of the Jewish people, but so was its past, as he wrote, 'there is a unity of Judaism. That unity is guaranteed by the eternity of the Torah. It is guaranteed to us by the common history, which we have experienced.' It followed that the only appropriate models for Jewish religious life included everyone, because only they reflected Klal Yisrael the nation, as opposed to theologically distinct groups, which could only be fraction of the nation. Limmud reflects the range of views in Klal Yisrael, by Orthodox standards some right and some wrong, but it is an authentic representation of the Jewish nation, and according to R. Nobel, that is where the Orthodox should become involved. It is not a case of accepting or affirming pluralism. It is a tragedy that non-Orthodox theology and practices have developed and become so widespread, but it is also a reality. A plurality of views is simply a fact about Klal Yisrael, wishing it were otherwise will not make it so. The question is simply what to do about it. Recognising that a range of opinions exists is simply acknowledging the obvious; it need not be seen as in any way an endorsement. In R. Nobel's view the Orthodox must become involved with Klal Yisrael as they find it, and seek to change it.

R. Nobel's successor in Frankfurt in 1922, and its last *grossgemeinde* Orthodox rabbi before the Shoah, was Rabbi Jacob Hoffman. He was also passionate about communal unity. On Shabbat Hannuka 1926 he told his congregation: 'Standing as we do on the foundation of traditional Judaism we are not entitled to demand of the Jewish individual all or nothing. On the contrary, we should greet with joy any Jewish action, indeed any Jewish inclination. Again, we base ourselves upon traditional Judaism; we are not entitled to challenge the Jewish individual: you are desecrating halakha and you have no place in our congregation. You have no part in the God of Israel and you have no part in our congregation. For, as Rabbi Yohanan taught us "a Jew – any person who denied idolatry is called a Jew." In other words, any Jew who recognises one God is still a Jew and has a part in our congregation. Any Jew who seeks a link to Judaism is welcome.' Limmud is made up of such people, who may not keep all the halakha but certainly perform Jewish actions and show Jewish inclinations.

R. Hoffman believed strongly that the Orthodox had to use whatever opportunities they could gain access to in order to press their message. This was the demand the principle of areivut made upon each Jew, but especially a teacher and religious leader. 'It is not enough', he wrote, 'to work in homogeneous circles for our ideals. We believe it our duty to work in larger organisations and associations for our goals, and to put the religious cultural systems we have created – or helped to create – at the disposal of all.' In this view, attendance at Limmud, especially for Orthodox speakers, might not just be permitted, but highly recommended.

#### A way forward?

The leaders of grossgemeinde Orthodoxy whose thoughts on communal involvement I have reviewed, opposed both Reform and religious relativism. They did not believe that Orthodoxy and non-Orthodoxy were equally valid options. They believed their way was right, and the theology of their Reform colleagues was wrong. They were not pluralists. They saw the development of communities where the leadership was made up of opponents of authentic Torah and where many activities took place that contravened halakha as a matter of huge sadness. Yet, for both practical and ideological reasons when faced with this regrettable but unavoidable reality they worked in combined communities, which established and supported both Orthodox and non-Orthodox institutions. They did not feel compromised by doing so, they did not worry that they were granting legitimacy to the opponents of Orthodoxy. There were some who accused them of doing just that. The leaders of Austritt Orthodoxy, R. SR Hirsch and the Breuer family declared they had placed a mezuzah on a temple of idolatry.

I have shown, however, that the Austritt tradition was not and need not be the only valid expression of Orthodoxy. If R. Bamberger publicly and repeatedly ruled that secession from communities with both Orthodox and non-Orthodox sections was not mandatory, if R. Hildesheimer and R. Hoffman were content for their students to work within grossgemeinden, and preached in their synagogues, if figures such as R. Horowitz and R. Nobel took those posts, then the advocates of co-operation also have leading Orthodox authorities on which to rely.

In the context of contemporary Anglo-Jewry and the open sore of the Limmud problem, this recognition could provide a solution. Austritt is a perfectly valid position, and advocates of Austritt would not attend Limmud, and regard it as wholly wrong to do so. There is no evidence that Orthodox leaders of pre-War Germany would have advocated the creation of an institution such as Limmud, just as R Bamberger and R Horowitz never wanted to see the emergence of Reform controlled communities. But once they did exist, a policy towards them had to be developed; their approach was based on co-operation without legitimisation. Similarly, whatever the rights and wrongs of the creation of Limmud in the first place, now it exists the stance taken by the grossgemeinde Orthodox rabbis might well support attendance. Advocates of this view could give the same arguments about Limmud as these rabbis gave about the grossgemeinde: that we need not think in terms of denominations and that all Jews are part of the kehilla. Even if the kehilla acts in some respects against the halakha it remains a valid kehilla nevertheless, as long as it does not attack the religious rights of the Orthodox by restricting their learning of Torah or performance of mitzvot as they see fit. As such, and as a result of the principle of areivut, it is the duty of Orthodox Jews to involve themselves in the kehilla and all its activities to press the cause of authentic Judaism, to try to bring less observant and knowledgeable Jews back to the fold. Otherwise, the responsibility each Jew has for every other, means that Orthodox Jews are liable for the mistakes and sins of their co-religionists which they did nothing to correct.

That forms a possible foundation for Orthodox participation at Limmud. Orthodox Jews who attended, particularly rabbis, would have to make it clear that they did not recognise non-Orthodox Judaism as authentic, valid or a legitimate alternative (although they would wish to do so respectfully and in a way that will not alienate). Or, to put it in non-denominational terms, Orthodox participants should be unequivocal that there are people speaking at Limmud with whom they fundamentally disagree and whose understanding of Judaism they do not regard as legitimate. They would have to ensure proper religious standards were maintained for the benefit of Orthodox Jews who attended. Finally, they would have to use their attendance to promote authentic Torah teachings and serve as an influence for more learning and more observance. In that way, Orthodox attendance might not only be permissible, not only be advisable, but a Kiddush Hashem.

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