

Our Attitude Toward Public Opinion: *an eminent rosh yeshiva speaks*

It was in the last decade of the 19th century, during the outbreak of various "blood accusations" against the Jews, that a prominent Hebrew writer found some consolation in this distressing situation. The fact that such accusations could be launched showed to him that "a whole world may be wrong, and the Jew—right. A Jew and blood, could there be a stronger contradiction? And yet this contradiction enjoys the popularity of a general belief." Thus the blood accusation undermines the belief in public opinion, and it is in this fact, that that writer found a degree of consolation.

His remarks bear witness to the enormous pressure that public opinion, as found in the non-Jewish world,

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began to exert upon the Jewish mind in modern times. Is it not remarkable that a national tragedy, such as the blood libel represents, has to be used as a tool to free oneself from the enslaving oppression of public opinion? Indeed, the weight of the authority of public opinion of the outside world upon the modern Jewish mentality has been all too heavy.

Let us remember that this was not always that way in Israel.

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The surname of our first father, Avrohom, was *Holyri*. In its simplest meaning, this name merely describes the geographic origin of our race, whose cradle was in *Ever Hanohor*. However, there is a deeper meaning to this name that eclipses its simple significance. According to a Midrashic saying the name *Holyri* does not have a mere geographic connotation but derives from the word *ever*, meaning "side," in general; and so the name of Avrohom *Holyri* expressed the idea that Avrohom was always on one side, for himself, while the rest of the world, was on the other side; Avrohom would take a position in life that would be the reverse of the entire world's position. This name *Holyri* retained this meaning for all the genera-

tions to come. In those generations, the name was gradually applied to a widening circle; from being the name of an individual it became, in succession, that of a family, a tribe, and an entire nation. At every stage however, the name *Ivri* denoted that its carrier did not fear to choose one side all alone, even if it was the opposite of the side taken by all the rest of mankind. Single-handedly did the first *Ivri* destroy the idols of Terach; single-handedly did his descendants stand up to the Roman emperors and refuse to pay divine honors to them. As we turn the pages of Jewish history, you find them full of events which underline the association between the *Ivri* and single-handedness. It does not take a very penetrating insight to realize that such an attitude on the part of the Jew involved necessarily a very special state of mind—a disregard, nay, disrespect for public opinion. Such an attitude was not directly cultivated in our educational program; it was rather a result of the strength of our convictions and feelings. A man's reverence for the accepted conventional ideas of his environment suffers a fatal blow after he has personally witnessed a fact which is absolutely denied and disregarded by those surrounding him. This was the case with Israel. The outside world denied and disregarded those very realities which the Jew himself had experienced; hence, the accepted conventions of this outside world enjoyed but little popularity with him.

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I spoke so far of the attitude held by the Jewish people, as a whole, toward the opinions of the outside world. However, these observations also apply to the attitude of one part of the Jewish people towards another. I refer to the relationship of that part of our nation for whom the thunder of Sinai is still reverberating with all its original vigor, towards the rest of Jewry for whom this thunder is no longer audible. Those for whom the overwhelming experience of Mount Sinai has faded away in the long expanse of Galus darkness, are today the moulders of public opinion within the Jewish community. And it is therefore, inevitable that all those within our people whose daily life and innermost soul are shaped by the truths of Torah, have also developed what we can call dis-

regard for Jewish public opinion. Here, again, we have to remember that this has not been a deliberate, conscious and premeditated effort by the educators; it is rather, as in the case of the Jewish nation as a whole, discussed before, the natural outcome of a given situation. The main factor in this situation is the circumstance that that very reality which to the Torah-Jew is the backbone of Israel's existence is disregarded by those Jewish circles which play the biggest part in determining Jewish public opinion. This reality is, of course, the Sinai experience. The authority of a public opinion that disregards this experience is necessarily quite meaningless to the Torah-conscious Jew.

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When we speak of the Torah-conscious Jew, we refer of course to that type of Torah-Jew who has had the happy opportunity to immerse himself in the ocean of Torah, and whose Torah-consciousness was created through a continuous process of absorbing Torah ideals and ideas from the original source. It is only of such a Jew that we can say with assurance that the proud independence of the *Ivri* still marks him, and that therefore the idols of public opinion have no meaning for him. But such Jews are rare, and it would be utopian to build our educational program upon the assumption that you will only have to deal with this ideal type. Needless to say, the goal of our educational scheme must always be the creation of the ideal total Torah personality; but we must also keep in mind that we have to deal with large numbers of Jewish youth, boys and girls, who may lack the opportunity of coming into the closest contact with Torah itself but feel themselves drawn toward its teaching and are ready to submit to its ordinances. In dealing with them, on the lower levels of our educational structure, we must face this question:

Is it not the demand of the hour to develop within our educational system an approach which will cast the proper light upon the ways and methods of our modern public opinion industry? Is it not an urgent task to illuminate the ways in which public opinion is created, in order to eliminate the danger of an unthinking yielding to public opinion?

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In answer, I would like to formulate three propositions based upon what has been said:

1. An independent, suspicious and negative attitude toward the authority of public opinion follows normally

from the development of a healthy Torah-consciousness in our days of spiritual chaos and confusion.

2. The only way to develop a healthy Torah-consciousness is through a continuous process of intimate contact with the original Torah sources.

3. Where this normal process does not take place, we must take recourse to special efforts to create the necessary immunity to the pressure of public opinion.

This point may be illustrated by the common experience that, in the case of a healthy organism, no special efforts have to be made to stimulate its normal functioning; but in case of ill health, we must come to nature's aid with artificial means. This can readily be applied to our educational program.

On the higher levels of our educational program we can reasonably expect that a healthy state of Torah-consciousness and Torah-understanding will be developed among our youth, and we can rely on this to produce its normal and expected result—protection against the mass hypnosis of public opinion and the public opinion media. However, on the lower levels of our educational system, we would be negligent if we were to rely on the automatic development of this attitude. Here it is our duty directly and purposefully to cultivate the right state of mind, a non-susceptibility to the pressure of public opinion. On one hand, the concept of the *Ivri*, as we saw it in the life of Avrohom, should be applied to the present and the future as well as the past, reinforced by the idea of the historic uniqueness of Israel. On the other hand, it should be made clear that there is nothing spontaneous, nothing natural and self-understood in public opinion, as we find it today.

Modern public opinion is in large measure deliberately manufactured; like every other industry, it has its product designers, its engineers, its manufacturing plants, and its production is planned in accordance with the needs of the market and the predilections of the manufacturer. We may therefore speak of public opinion as we speak of other products of our society—at best as a reflection of the transitory spirit of an age, but never as the expression and revelation of objective ideological or ethical values. Among the manufacturers of public opinion the press is of course one of the biggest. Insofar as it represents the higher interests of the community, it may be compared with the pulpit orator or the schoolmaster. Insofar as it exists to advertise particular objectives, it is but like the town crier or the public announcer, informing the public through its countless voices where a watch chain has been lost or where the best tobacco is to be procured. These two

functions are mated in our press; the product is public opinion.

A proper understanding of public opinion and the public opinion media must be part of our educational

program, for it will serve to help undermine the tyranny of public opinion. The more independent we are in the face of its pressure, the closer we come to the true ideal of the *Ivri*. □

The **VANISHING** Yeshiva Teacher

The Yeshiva Movement In Danger

It may not be pleasant—but the time has come for us to face certain facts that can no longer be overlooked:

- According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a family of four in the New York City area needs \$11,236 a year to maintain a “moderate” standard of living; \$6,771 a year is required for *subsistence*.
- Salaries paid to Hebrew teachers in New York City Yeshivos range from \$3,000 to \$6,000 per year; if they are employed till 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon, they *may* receive as much as \$8,000—but, on the other hand, in some schools beginning women teachers are paid as little as \$1,800 a year for a morning’s work.
- For the last couple of years, the annual increments normally received by Hebrew teachers have been significantly less than the yearly increase in the cost of living; salaries, in other words, have been shrinking, as far as purchasing power is concerned.

What do these facts mean? In the first place, they throw a frightening light upon the poverty which we impose upon the teachers of our children. Secondly, they explain why it becomes increasingly difficult to secure competent teachers for our schools. Lastly, they thus make clear the fact that the Yeshivah movement faces the gravest danger since its inception.

How Bad is the Situation?

Actually, the figures quoted do not tell the whole story. The Bureau of Labor Statistics figures were compiled in December, before the recent fare hike; they apply to families with two children; they do not make allowance for the much higher cost of *kosher* food,

for Yeshivah tuition for children, and for a great many other expenses that fall specifically upon the Orthodox Jew. It is obvious, therefore, that present Yeshivah salary levels force a teacher to exist well below the subsistence level.

Of course, it will be said, they only work half a day; let them take another job in the afternoon. Except for women who are not the main breadwinners in the family, all teachers are forced to do so. But the work available, by and large, is uncertain and pays poorly, such as selling insurance, say, or real estate. Even teaching in the general studies departments of most Yeshivos adds only another \$2,000 to \$4,000 to a teacher’s salary, while burdening him with a teaching schedule extending from early in the morning till late in the afternoon (in comparison, a beginning public school teacher starts with \$7,950 for 6 hours and 20 minutes, which include lunch and free periods, and can reach a top salary of \$12,000). Almost the only type of work providing sufficient additional income is one that is surely unacceptable to us: teaching in non-Orthodox Talmud Torahs.

As a result, the rank and file teacher all too often has to take on two or three jobs that inevitably sap his energy and enthusiasm for his work; frequently feels he has to accept jobs that undermine his self-esteem or place him in schools that he knows he should not help prosper; and, after all that, is still left with an inadequate income. So he tries to earn a few dollars by teaching a *shiur* in a nearby synagogue, has his wife make a little money through some projects that can be done at home, cuts expenses right to the bone, and finally, precariously balances his budget.

The situation is, of course, somewhat different outside the major metropolitan areas. There the cost of living is frequently lower and—demand for Hebrew teachers being more intense—salaries are much more