

# Politics of Exclusion in Judaism

## Saul Lieberman and the Orthodox Part 3

In 1959 Lieberman became rector of the Seminary, and one of his responsibilities was "guiding the general religious policy of the institution." Thus, there is certainly justice in the assertion that, whatever his personal religious commitments, Lieberman had become part and parcel of the Conservative movement and was assisting it at the time that the Orthodox were attempting to expose what they regarded as the Conservative's distortions of halakha. Furthermore, there is no question that the leaders of Conservatism were able to use the presence of Lieberman at the Seminary to help legitimize the institution when it was challenged on religious grounds. For example, when Chief Rabbi Herzog came to New York he was willing to meet with some members of the Seminary faculty, but would not enter the building because Kaplan worked there. Finkelstein recalled telling Herzog, "It can't be as bad as you think if [Saul] Lieberman sits on the faculty."

The presence of Kaplan at the Seminary was one of many problems mentioned in the following nasty letter Lieberman received:

Dear Sir,

For the sake of Parnasah and glory you have sold yourself to the Sitra Achra [the other side]. Do you not know that you are lending prestige to Mordecai Kaplan (Yimach Shemo) and to the other Kofrim at the Seminary, as well as to the graduates who are almost in every case M'gulche-Taar and Boale-Niddah? The United States has many Rabbinical Schools where honest young men are studying Torah and developing Talmide-Chachamim. Is your presence at the Seminary necessary for the spreading of the Torah? Or is the glamor [sic] of being a professor among Ame-Haaretz with a comfortable salary so powerful that even Saul Lieberman is not man enough to withstand it? Do not deceive yourself that you will change the Seminary. You will be influenced by them, and you will be separated from the K'lal of Talmide-Chachamim who have not sold themselves to Parnassah. Oi Larasha V'Oi Lishcheno. Better to be a poor Rabbi in a little synagogue than a Professor who produces Rabbis Chot'im and Machtiim Et Harabim. There is yet time to repent.

Yours truly,

A Friend. (Shapiro, 24-25)

In opposition to this letter writer, from Lieberman's perspective everything he was doing was within the bounds of halakha, and he was helping, rather than hurting, the cause of traditional Judaism. Although he regarded himself as an Orthodox Jew, when it came to his students it was not the denominational label that was important to him, but rather their commitment to halakhah. Thus, in a letter to Israel's Chief Rabbi Isser Yehuda Unterman, he defends the skill and halakhic acceptability of those Conservative rabbis who were trained to write *gittin*. Similarly, during the dispute over Lieberman's newly formulated Ketubah, which was designed to help solve the *agunah* problem and met with strong Orthodox opposition, Lieberman told the members of the Rabbinical Assembly:

I saw that some of you were accused of being frightened by the Orthodox rabbis. I want to tell you that I am not frightened by them at all.

I want, therefore, to give you a point of information. In truth they were frightened, and I want you to know why they were frightened. They weren't afraid that the בית דין [beit din, court] would issue some תקנות [takkanot, decrees]. No, not at all. They were afraid that the בית דין would issue תקנות in accordance with the law.

As a matter of fact, one of the very important members of the Orthodox rabbis said in so many words: If this בית דין of the Rabbinical Assembly will issue a תקנה, that will be a great misfortune because they will get authority and that is the reason why they oppose this. Many of them think that that בית דין will begin to move in this line, the movement can become strong and it will affect them. (Shapiro, 26-27)

The growing alienation of the Orthodox from Lieberman was clearly seen in 1957, when Lieberman was chosen to receive the Rav Kook prize awarded by the municipality of Tel Aviv...Even before the prize was officially announced, the news paper *Shearim*, which was published by the Poalei Agudat Yisrael, published a story under the heading: "The Rav Kook prize should not be given to one who is unworthy of it." The article notes that traditional Judaism does not distinguish between the authors and their works. If an author is not worthy of being regarded as one of the Torah sages (*gedolei ha-Torah*), then his books must be viewed similarly. (Shapiro, 27)

Together with Lieberman, R. Meshullam Roth was also chosen to be awarded the Rav Kook prize for the publication of his volume of response, *Kol Mevasser*. However, Roth surprised everyone by announcing that he refused to accept the award together with Lieberman. What made this so surprising was that Roth was hardly the stereotypical haredi extremist. On the contrary, he was a member of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and a supporter of the Mizrachi movement. He did not arrive in Palestine until 1944 and thus, unlike so many of the other great rabbis there, never had any personal dealings with Lieberman...In Roth's letter of refusal to the Tel Aviv municipality, he explained that it was forbidden to him to

receive his prize together with a rabbi of a "Reform community." In support of this refusal, he cited II Chron 20:37: "Because thou has joined thyself with Ahaziah, the Lord hath made a breach in thy works." He also cited *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 9:4: "Do not associate with the wicked, even for [the study of] Torah." These are very strong words, especially when one compares them to the glowing titles of honor given Lieberman by Herzog and Unterman, Roth's colleagues in the Chief Rabbinate. (Shapiro, 28)

Among those who expressed approval for Roth's stand was R. Mordechai Gifter, Rosh Yeshiva of the Telz Yeshiva in Cleveland, one of the most right-wing yeshivot in the United States. Regarding Lieberman, Gifter wrote that from the time he joined the Seminary he was no longer in the good graces of the *gedolim*. Yet now matters were much worse, as "he continues to be associated with it [i.e., the Seminary] even now when the movement intends to uproot the fundamentals of the faith, and his involvement with the movement is as its chief rabbi, the replacement of his predecessor Professor Levi Ginzberg. Is it any wonder that R. Meshullam Roth concluded that it was forbidden for him to participate in receiving a prize together with the chief rabbi of the Conservatives?" (Shapiro, 30)

One final example: When Professor Yitzhak Gilat took the first steps to establish the Institute for Advanced Torah Studies at Bar-Ilan University, he was attacked for wanted to create a rabbinical seminary, a concept strongly opposed by the haredim. In *Ha-Modia* he was compared to Zunz, Geiger, Buber, and Lieberman. By look at the company Lieberman was placed in here, it is clear just how far his reputation had fallen with at least one segment of Orthodoxy. (Shapiro, 34)

Roth and Gifter regarded Lieberman as nothing more than a turncoat whose Torah learning should not be acknowledged, and this was the view of many in the haredi world. Lieberman's death was not even mentioned in *Ha-Pardes* or other rabbinic journals, and because of the "blackout" of his name and works, most yeshiva students today have never even heard of him. Haredi authors who deal with the Tosefta never even mention his commentary (although many undoubtedly use it). In a recent biography of R. Yehezkel Abramsky, who is best known for his own monumental commentary on the Tosefta, there is a discussion of other commentaries. Needless to say, there is no mention of Lieberman or *Tosefta ki-Feshutah*. This is so even through Lieberman goes out of his way to praise Abramsky's commentary. It is also not surprising that a search of the Bar-Ilan Responsa CD-ROM reveals that while Abramsky's commentary is cited numerous times, Lieberman's *Tosefta ki-Feshutah* is referred to just once (by R. Jehiel Jacob Weinberg). (Shapiro, 35)

## References

Shapiro, Marc B. [Saul Lieberman and the Orthodox](#). Scranton: University of Scranton Press. 2006