

THE TRUE CHALLENGE Rabbi Benjamin Hecht

The challenge of assimilation that our generation is facing is an awesome one. However, this is not the first time that Torah is challenged by the philosophical developments of an age. What is unique, and perhaps most sad, is the general response to the challenge.

Maimonides in Iggereth Teman states the following: "Were it not for Saadia, the Torah would almost have disappeared from the midst of Israel; for it was he who made manifest what was obscure therein, made strong what had been weakened." The generation of Saadia Gaon was one beset by philosophical challenges. The response to the challenge was led by no one less than Saadia Gaon, the leading Torah scholar of the age. His response was an intellectual one. He defended the Torah against the philosophical attacks but he also used the philosophical attacks to better understand Torah. His response was a dynamic one, recognizing that the challenges should not simply be quelled but should be used to find greater understanding of the Torah. Who less than a Saadia Gaon or a Maimonides, should supervise and personally delve into this Phoenix-like study of Torah--from the attacks should rise new great insights into Torah.

Our generation, though, has coined the word kiruv. In coining the word, the problem is not deemed to be knowledge, but rather emotional. The sages of our age are not responding through using the questions of our age to discover new Torah thoughts. Rather, the soldiers are generally not scholars but "nice guys" who can relate well, who can exude warmth and make someone feel wanted. When the intellectual questions arise, they are not deemed to be of the essence--pat answers suffice. "After all, the problem is not the question--just make the person feel wanted. You have to give some answer so you don't look stupid but the question is not



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important." Obviously "the Gedolim" need not waste their time on the questions.

This was not the response of previous times. Saadia Gaon understood that at the root of assimilation is philosophical challenge. It is just as true today, maybe more so. We live in perhaps the most intellectual society ever. The words of Freud and Sartre are well known and have a fundamental influence on the ways members of our society, especially college-educated individuals, think and act. The threat of assimilation does not originate with the attacks of cults but with the majority of Jews aligning themselves with secular humanism. Assimilation is, in fact, only the symptom--the disease is our lack of Torah understanding. It is unfortunate that our scholars, in general, do not want to lead us into this new territory of Torah study. Only there can the answers be found. Only there can we find the cure to the disease which has assimilation as its symptom.

NISHMA's prime goal is to offer the forum for this investigation. Assimilation bothers me but that is not the prime reason for my investigation. I want to know Torah for Torah is the guide for Mankind. The challenges of our age are questions on my understanding of Torah. In certain ways, I thank G-d for bringing out these challenges for they make me go beyond the previous generations. They make me squeeze more from myself and from Torah.

I cannot forget that there is also a duty to meet these challenges, to intellectually investigate the problem for the downside is assimilation. Yet I do believe that assimilation will not be quelched until, one day, the question becomes a "kasha" (a question in learning). When the yeshiva student wakes up, determined to look through the Talmud, to spend the day in Torah study attempting to find a path in which to answer the question from society he heard the day before, then we have a chance.

NISHMA hopes to blaze that trail, to allow our generation's Saadia Gaon(s) to come forward.

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NISHMA-Torah articles broadly cover the complete spectrum of Torah study - from Halacha to Tanach, from Gemora to Hashkafa, from Rationalism to Mysticism. Their objective is not only to increase Torah knowledge but to encourage one to think about Torah issues and to be drawn into the Torah discussion.

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