

Censorship

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

A few years ago there was a kerfuffle in the Orthodox Jewish world over a book called [Making of a Godol: A Study of Episodes in the Lives of Great Torah Personalities](#). The book was a scholarly history of life in the world of the Eastern European Lithuanian yeshivot of the last century, with specific reference to the rosh yeshiva of [Torah Vodaath](#) in Brooklyn, [Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky](#). Rav Kamenetsky, who lived from 1891 until 1986, was one of a group of prominent Eastern European rabbinical scholars which included Rav Aaron Kotler, who founded the most famous of American Torah centers in Lakewood, New Jersey.

When they arrived in the USA as refugees, Orthodoxy was such a small and ignored section of Jewish life that no one would have predicted that 50 years later the institutions they founded and the communities they helped create would become the most dynamic and fastest growing section of American Jewry. Their single-minded vision to recreate their Eastern European world in the West has succeeded beyond imagination; combined with the resurrection of Chasidism, this will guarantee Jewish survival. The question, of course, is what kind of Judaism.

This question emerged with force in the wake of the ban issued on the book by much of the extreme Orthodox Ashkenazi rabbinic leadership in Israel. The book was written by one of Rav Kamenetsky's sons—himself a distinguished Lithuanian-style rosh yeshiva—[Rabbi Nathan Kamenetsky](#). Its crime was to suggest that Rav Kamenetsky, as well as Rav Kotler, had read secular books in their youth. You might think this more of a compliment than a condemnation, but not in the world of extreme Orthodoxy nowadays. The book was withdrawn from the public. Copies were so rare and in such demand that you could only find them on eBay, costing thousands of dollars. Thanks to my younger son's interest, I have been able to get hold of a photocopy of both [the original](#) and a follow-up called Anatomy of a Ban.

As you will know I support and identify with the intense religious atmosphere, devotion to studying Torah, and commitment of the extreme Orthodox world, and I believe it has more to offer spiritually than any other sector of Jewish life. But the downside is its absolute rejection of any value in liberal, intellectual freedom of thought. I have argued elsewhere that this enclavist, inward-looking rejection of the outside may well be a temporary and necessary phase in order to ensure the rebuilding of Jewish life after the Holocaust, and a reaction to the excessive and corrupt self-indulgence of much of modernity. (Though, of course, it has been a stream within Judaism going back long before the medieval opposition to the rationalism of Maimonides.)

But I believe that it is both counterproductive and indeed impossible to cut oneself off entirely; therefore the only way to deal with the challenge is by confronting it, not by pretending it does not exist or thinking one can hide.

The increasing light shed on domestic violence, drug abuse, and crime, though still at levels well below the norm, attests to the sordid elements in parts of extreme Orthodoxy's struggle with life.

The vituperation directed at Rabbi Nathan Kamenetsky is a scandal by any objective standards and a denial of Torah values. A small group of zealots approached certain prominent rabbis (none of whom could or had read the original). They exaggerated the dangers of the book and, without anything we would consider due process or fair hearing, major rabbis issued a ban reminiscent of the way the Catholic Church used to be fond of proscribing and burning books they considered offensive, such as the Talmud. The episode highlighted the absence of Torah amongst the very people supposed to uphold it.

Rabbi Nathan later wrote but did not publish the follow-up I mentioned Anatomy of a Ban, in which [he recorded the sorry story of misinformation, lies, and deceit that led to the ban, the withdrawal of the book, and the ongoing hounding and delegitimization](#) of him by a small clique of personally invested immoral zealots whose concern was personal vendetta or, at best, the perpetuation of an exclusively hagiographic record of great rabbis.

This sort of intellectual barbarism is sadly now the norm in extreme Orthodoxy and is the reason I find myself unable to see myself as part of it. Yet for all of this I remain optimistic. No one fifty years ago would have predicted the state of resurgent Jewish religious life now. Fifty years ago only Zionism seemed to offer hope. Yet human civilization turns constantly in cycles. We rarely see what trends are coming and we rarely see all the effects our actions have. This raises all sorts of philosophical and moral questions, of course. This is precisely why I have a soft spot for well established and tried moral structures, even if imperfect and flawed humans often make monkeys out of themselves and the systems they purport to represent.

Ben Gurion had no inkling when he allowed yeshiva students to postpone military service indefinitely. There were only a few thousand in 1950. Now there are hundreds of thousands, forced to stay forever in yeshivas even if they have no inclination to study, because the state funds them and without military service they cannot get work in Israel. Quite apart from the immorality of a section of a population refusing to share in its civil responsibilities, the situation perpetuates enormous tension between the secular and the religious segments of society. Now the government has decided to get round the issue by requiring, instead of military service, some sort of community service, such as Magen David Adom or fire and rescue service, which are as necessary as the military in defense of the state, as demonstrated by the latest fires in Israel where the country suddenly realized how undermanned these services are. At the same time, the subsidy has been reduced to five years. Both these measures will ensure that the Charedi world will be forced to open itself up to greater responsibility and social awareness. Where this will lead or how long it will take to filter through cannot be known, but it certainly points to a more hopeful future.

Up until now the inward-looking, embattled, and insecure mood of Orthodoxy in

Israel has produced precisely the worst of a narrow-minded, protectionist mentality that excludes or ignores any idea it fears. It breeds extremism. The Talmud says that wine that is too concentrated is unpleasant to drink. It needs to be diluted to enjoy. I hope the same thing happens to extreme Orthodoxy, so that great rabbis like Nathan Kamenetsky can be read and appreciated and "truth shall spring forth from the earth" (Psalm 85).