

Five Pillars of Orthodox Judaism or Open Charedism
by Rabbi Asher Lopatin

You can be a good member, a wonderful, beloved and productive member of Anshe Sholom, and even an effective leader or officer, without holding of all these. But they are the principals which make us an Orthodox shul. I would hope that every member of our community struggle with them, think about them, and perhaps come up with interpretations or responses that work for their own lives.

1) Torah Mi Sinai – Torah shebichtav veTorah sheba'al peh – both the Oral and Written Tradition. The great liberal Orthodox thinker David Hartman openly declares he believes in this – but he then says that he believes in an interpretive tradition which is close to our second pillar. A great Conservative decisor, Rabbi Joel Roth, has said, “the halackic tradition is the given, and theology is required to fall into place behind it.” I believe our halachik tradition needs to be driven by theology in order to keep the tradition alive and infinite, rather than ossified and limited. We need to start with this awe of the Torah and Talmud coming from God and being infinite and deserving infinite reverence, placing ourselves humbly below it, and only then establishing ownership of it, and making it our “plaything” as King David says in Psalms. Only when a couple accepts Kiddushin can they become intimate with each other, and our rabbis compare Matan Torah to Kiddushin. Only if you feel the Torah is your God-given partner can you then become intimate with it, can you really feel you are so connected to it that you can make a conjecture as to what it is thinking, that you trust your instincts in interpreting it and its 3500 year tradition. This theology and intimacy leads to the second pillar:

2) Chidush MiSinai al Pi Shitat Han'tziv – Believing in new understanding, new, innovative interpretations come if you really believe the Torah is Divine and infinite and, thus, can be interpreted into an infinite amount of ways. If you are truly “chared” – fearful, awestruck - of the “d'var Hashem” – the word of God, then you can never have the audacity, the chutzpa, to believe that you or any human being can truly know what it means. You can never say something is “clear from the Torah”. How can the Divine word of God, communicated to mere mortals, ever be “clear” or easy to understand, or “obvious”. However, a new interpretation must be processed and examined through the traditions of p'sak of the last 2000 years, and that interpretation must follow the Talmud. So we may re-read the Talmud in a totally different way, but we are not changing the eternal Torah of God that the Talmud represents. Our rereading will be debated, will be resisted and challenged, but, ultimately, if it is a real interpretation of the Talmud – as far as can be humanly established – and it fits into the understanding of Rishonim and the subsequent authorities, it will become part of “halacha l'Moshe Misinai” – the Halacha that was given to Moshe at Sinai, even if Moshe never understood it the way someone in the 21st century correctly understands the word of God. As the Netziv explicitly states – our Chidushim originate through the dynamic of external study and sensitivity – listening to the knowledge and philosophy in the world – combined with our careful examination of every corner of the Torah and the tradition. The chidush comes from the dialectic of ideas and thoughts from the world around us, and our allegiance to Torah, the eternal, infinite word of God. Within this dialectic, chidushim, innovative ways of understanding our torah and

tradition, are discovered. And yet, this power of chidush is dangerous, revolutionary, and therefore requires the third principle to help ensure that it will be used properly, by those who respect Torah and care for it.

3) Intellectual and halachic rigor and discipline: When we closely observe kashrut, coming to minyan, kavana (concentration, focus) in t'fila (prayer), Shabbat, family purity and respect for all those in the family, respect for laws of gossip and lashon hara, then we become the vessels through which Torah can be interpreted and even rethought. We become safe space for God's infinite word – we are the inheritors of the tradition which we are obliged to re-examine for ourselves. However, intellectual and halachic rigor has a tendency to lead to intolerance and zealotry, hence there are two more basic principles which balance the rigor and discipline of an Orthodox Jew:

4) Clal Yisrael – inclusivity – Yisrael, Oraita vekudsha b'rich hu echad hem = Israel, the Torah and God are all one. If one of them is disrespected, the other one suffers. How can a person who doesn't feel "Yisrael Misinai" – that the loving and caring relationship between all Jews is a requirement from God - how can that person really believe in Torah Misinai. If a person cannot respect the yearnings of Jewish women or the feel the pain of a patrilineal Jewish teenager who is told that they were never really Jewish to begin with, then that person is rejecting echad heim – the unity of Yisrael Misinai, Torah MiSinai, and the belief in our being connected to the One and Only God. And beyond a respect for the family, for Jews, with whom we are bonded together with God, there is the fifth principle which pushes us to not just look inside, but outside as well, with concern for all those created in God's image.

5) Menschlichkeit and kiddush Hashem – always asking yourself, am I acting like a mentch? Am I acting with respect to all of God's creations? Am I seeing God in every human being the way God wanted us to see the Divine in every descendent of Adam and Eve. Finally, am I acting in such a way as to allow decent people to see God in me? Orthodox Judaism does have a universalistic tendency – to see the Tzelem Elokim in every human being, and to act with the Tzelem Elokim in this world – to be human and humane. "Verachamav al kol ma'asav" – God's mercy extends to all of God's creatures – even feeding the birds on Shabbat, according to the Aruch HaShulachan.