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Responding to the Conflicts of Religion and Secularism: The Struggle of Maintaining Jewish Continuity and Identity

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As part of the Hartman Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Thought Leaders, fellows were given a deceptively simple task: write a short persuasive essay or create a persuasive piece of multimedia that grapples with big Jewish ideas. The fellows proved themselves equal to the challenge and responded with an array of remarkable and powerful projects on a vast array of subjects, representing a wide array of political positions. We have highlighted a number of the pieces which showed particular originality or writing and production excellence.

Responding to the Conflicts of Religion and Secularism: The Struggle of Maintaining Jewish Continuity and Identity

The conflict of maintaining Jewish continuity and values in a secular world has been a constant struggle throughout the ages; different periods have presented varying problems for Jews, meriting a variety of approaches to dealing with the specific concerns of each era. Two eras that have presented significant challenges to Jewish continuity are the Hellenistic era and today. Although during the Hellenistic period isolation was the most effective method of maintaining a Jewish lifestyle, today, accommodation presents the best option for ensuring Jewish continuity.

The Chatam Sofer wrote in his ethical will that three things are necessary for Jewish continuity: maintaining the Jewish language, names, and style of dress. The Chatam Sofer makes a compelling point, revealing that it is important to maintain Jewish culture in addition to *halakha*.

The conflict between the Greeks and the Jews posed a threat to Jewish continuity by threatening both Jewish culture and *halakha*. Hellenists and Jews mainly clashed on three topics: Jews believed in one G-d as opposed to the polytheistic Greek culture; Jews valued the soul in combination with the body as its vehicle, while the Greeks believed in the body as the highest form of perfection and spirituality; and Jews believed that humans are made in the image of the Divine, whereas the Greeks believed the opposite. These clashing beliefs led to violent conflicts and the outlawing of many Jewish laws.

At some points during this era, accepting Hellenism was merely a choice, with political and economic incentives for those who decided to accept it; however, as time passed and tensions rose, the spread of Hellenism became mandatory as opposed to optional. Because of this evolution, isolation was vital for Jewish survival during the Hellenistic period. Assimilation meant the end of Jewish culture, while accommodation was not an option after Jewish practices were outlawed.

The Jewish response to Hellenism was diverse: Jews were already split politically based on loyalties to the battling Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires as well as loyalties to the combatting Onias and Oniad families of High Priests. To add to the divide, Jews who responded to the conflicting cultures in which they dwelled using accommodation, assimilation, and isolation ended up splitting politically to form polarizing groups, even going as far as slaughtering people with different approaches.

Originally, Jews were subject to religious tolerance and moderate Hellenization under the High Priesthood of Jason Onias, who bribed Antiochus IV for the position. However, since Jason set the stage for corruption regarding the High Priesthood, Menelaus Onias, then bribed Antiochus IV for the Priesthood position with even more money. Once Menelaus was in power, the previous religious tolerance ended. Menelaus instituted more radical Hellenistic reforms, causing anger among many Jews. Eventually, Jason Onias came back and rebelled in an attempt to regain his position as High Priest. His rebellion was quashed, leaving a devastating aftermath in which Hellenism became mandatory, its violations punishable by death. In response to the

rebellion, Antiochus IV outlawed many Jewish laws, including circumcision, Shabbat, and Jewish holidays.

During all of this turmoil and violence, the Hasmoneans, a Jewish family led by Matthias, rejected Hellenism and fled to the countryside. There, they joined forces with Jewish peasants called the *Hasidim*, who had not been affected by Hellenism, since they did not live in the *poleis* (Greek cities) or have contact with urban Hellenized Jews. Together, they formed the Maccabees, a group that revolted against the Greeks to regain control of Judea and maintain Judaism there. The Maccabees had no tolerance for any Hellenism, and they even turned to violent measures such as murdering Hellenized Jews in order to eradicate Greek beliefs within the Jewish community. Though the group was flawed and radical, the Maccabees' isolationism worked to their advantage, allowing them to maintain their beliefs and organize a revolt that ultimately resulted in Jewish control over Judea.

In modern American society, Jews face challenges that are both extremely similar and yet vastly different from those our ancestors faced during the Hellenistic period. Elements in modern American culture are a threat to Jewish continuity, with an astounding 58% of American Jewry intermarrying, according to a recent study conducted by the Pew Research Center.

Though too much secularism presents dangers and high rates of assimilation which leads to the distillation of and eventual abandonment of Judaism, modern American culture is much easier to integrate into Jewish culture than Hellenism, posing a much smaller threat. American culture does not outlaw nor prohibits Jewish practices. While it contains some aspects that are antithetical to a Torah lifestyle, there is no coercion in adopting American mores, and many Modern Orthodox Jews find they can adopt those aspects of American culture and values that do not contradict their religion or way of life. Hellenization, on the other hand, was much more harmful and threatening to Jewish continuity because of its inability to coexist with Judaism, as well as being forced onto Jews. There was no room for middle ground back then, causing masses of Jews to completely assimilate and leave Judaism behind. Modern American culture is much less harmful to Jewish continuity: the fact that many observant Jews exist—and thrive—within modern society is a testament to the possibility of synthesizing both Torah and modernity as it's defined in America today. Instead of being forced into either fleeing to the countryside or giving up Judaism, Jews can have the best of both worlds and maintain their religion while living in a progressive and modern society.

Today, it is vital for Jews to maintain a balance between Judaism and adopting modern practices due to the benefits modern technology and secular education provide. With incredible advances of technology, Jews can enhance their religious education and studies through websites such as Mercava and Sefaria that translate and compile Judaic sources to make them more accessible and easy to learn for everyone. In addition, with the vast reach of the Internet, various thoughts and ideas about Judaism can be spread to expose people to many viewpoints that can improve religious outlook and relationship with G-d. Without access to technology, from which many

modern isolationists abstain, these resources are limited, thereby limiting Judaic growth along with it.

Also, to maintain a healthy lifestyle and income that allows Jews to work and maintain their religious lives, it is vital to have a secular education today. According to a study done by the UJA Federation of New York, thirty percent of Jews as well as nearly fifty percent of Jewish children in New York are living in or near poverty (quoted by Haaretz). According to William Rapfogel, the chief executive officer of the Metropolitan Council on Jewish poverty, “the numbers are distressing.” This devastating situation can be largely attributed to a lack of secular education among some Jewish circles in New York. According to the study, the largest groups below the poverty line among Jews in New York are elderly Russian speaking Jews as well as Hasidim. Both groups attempt isolationist methods of coping with American culture and end up struggling to maintain a stable income. In today’s society, it is simply not practical to practice isolation. Unlike the Maccabees who could live in the countryside with minimal interactions with Greeks and Hellenism, most people in modern society are not self-sufficient, and the majority of careers today involve some level of interaction with people who are not Jewish or religious. Nowhere in the Torah is being a doctor or lawyer prohibited, nor is having access to non- Jewish resources. By adopting an accommodating outlook on society, modern Jews can practice *halakha*, as well as receive a secular education and career.

Modernity often has many advantages in our lives, but sometimes comes with the cost of giving up on parts of Judaic culture, posing a threat to Jewish continuity. Like in Hellenistic times, Jews have split into factions of isolation, accommodation, and assimilation. Each of these approaches comes with negative side effects, such as isolationists struggling for financial stability and assimilating Jews intermarrying, which threatens to end their Jewish legacy. Accommodation to modern culture while maintaining Judaic beliefs is a difficult balancing act, but it seems to be the most beneficial approach to maintaining Jewish identity and practices in the modern era.

In every generation, it is crucial to reevaluate what approach is necessary to maintain Jewish continuity. Though isolation was necessary during the Hellenistic era, in modern days, it is crucial to use accommodation to balance modernity and Judaism in order to hold onto our religion while not only dwelling on the past but also taking strides into the future. No one approach to dealing with modernity and new beliefs will be applicable in every situation, so it is extremely important that Jews always think about how to hold on to their identities in the given time.