

And Further Reconsiderations

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The Orthodox Jewish world has been witness over the past few years to a number of attacks upon observant orthodox Jews who have authored books that have raised controversy because of some of the contents of those books. The attacks against the books and the authors of these books have come from many great leaders and sages in the Orthodox world. Many of these great men have relied upon the hearsay evidence of others when forming their opinion regarding the books in question, never having read the books themselves. The books in question, like all human books, contain flaws, errors of judgment and personal opinion. Some of the personal opinions expressed in the books may not be in concert with current accepted wisdom or the traditions of many of the scholars who opposed the books. Nonetheless, it is one thing to disagree with a book and point out its errors; it is a much more serious matter to attempt to ban the book and vilify its author. What happens in this scenario of banning the book and vilifying the author is that the book is read now by many more people than it otherwise would have been while the author of the book is permanently and often unjustly scarred for life in Orthodox society. Criticism of books and ideas presented is valid and should always be welcomed in scholarly and civil debate. Destroying the life of the author, himself an observant, Torah knowledgeable Jew, is in my opinion not justifiable under any circumstances. And the rub of all of this is that in the history of the Jewish people, the banning of books, groups and individuals has always proved to be ultimately unsuccessful and counterproductive. It is a losing tactic and should be considered in that light before being continually exercised.

Many instances of book banning dot Jewish history. The works of Saadia Gaon, Maimonides, Azaryah di Rossi, Moshe Chaim Luzatto, Yisrael Lipkin of Salant, Shneur Zalman of Ladi, Zvi Hirsch Chajes, among others, all suffered bans and even burnings. Yet *Emunot V'deyot*, *Moreh Nevuchim*, *Meor Einayim*, *Mesilat Yesharim*, *Igerret HaMussar* and *Tanya* have all weathered the initial attacks upon them and become classics in the Jewish world in spite of their allegedly controversial statements and opinions. Great men criticized these works and their authors for writing them. But history has the final vote and the great critics were proven mainly mistaken in their attacks. In fact, as noted earlier in this article, it was the bans themselves that guaranteed the longevity of popularity of these books. Just as in the case of these recent bans, the popularity of the books banned has increased and not decreased. Thus the ban works against itself.

Baruch Spinoza would be little known today if it were not for the ban imposed upon him and his works. All of the bans against the Chasidic movement only served to gain it more adherents. The bitter personal attack against some of the leading adherents of Mussar and their printed works undoubtedly hurt and stung but did not prevent Mussar from capturing the yeshiva world of Lithuania. The attacks themselves only served to eventually strengthen the Mussar movement. Benign neglect is also a powerful weapon – perhaps even a more powerful weapon than bans – in dealing with opponents and variant ideas.

The great Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, one of the leaders of the Mussar movement and the head of the Talmud Torah Beis HaTalmud at Kelm, Lithuania, wrote the following to one of his students in response to the bans placed on his institution by the rabbis who opposed his rational approach to Torah and Mussar: “We have seen the great work of Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim (*The Guide for the Perplexed*), about which he wrote in the introduction to his book that even if a thousand fools will not be helped by the book, and even if because of their lack of intelligence they may yet be harmed by reading it, nevertheless if there be one living person helped by it to become a true human being [the work is justified.] We see how great and holy this work was in the eyes of Rambam and yet many who did not understand his purpose and intellect, banned the book and forbade Jews from holding the book in their possession. Yet truth springs forth from the earth, (Psalms, 85, 14) and this thought should be sufficient to remove any criticism or complaints against our holy institution. I have also found in the responsa of Rambam the basic idea upon which our institution, Beis HaTalmud, rests. Rambam wrote: ‘We attempt with all of our might to explain the Torah in a rational fashion and those parts of the Torah that we are unable to explain rationally we then assign to the realm of miracles and God’s inexplicable command. I have seen Torah scholars whose sole intent is to deal with the Torah as being purely supernatural and irrational and their desire is to remove the Torah far away from logic and rationality.’ Rambam mocked them for this position and stated that this was not his way of dealing with Torah. Those who understand our policy at Beis HaTalmud realize that our purpose is to present, as far as possible, Torah in a rational and logical fashion so that the truths of the Torah will be permanently established in the hearts of people - especially in the hearts of the young of our time. By so teaching, it will be established within them the faith and logic of Torah and those who truly understand [our times] will realize how great and exalted this task is.”

From a purely tactical sense, we must admit that even the justified nineteenth-century bans issued against Reform have in no way seriously damaged the movement and the issuance of those bans probably further

radicalized Reform. Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant said: ‘I would have not banned Reform. Rather, I would have attempted to build a study hall for Torah study in every Reform temple.’ In any event, Reform’s failure in preserving itself – there are unfortunately very few descendants of nineteenth-century Reform Jews who are affiliated with any type of Judaism today – is mainly a product of its own doings and policies and is in no way related to the bans issued against it.

Cognizance should also be taken of the effect that the publication of these bans have on the image of Orthodoxy in the non-orthodox and non-Jewish world. In a society that has forced Hollywood and the Catholic Church to abandon codes and bans, it is difficult to justify tactically the continued use of bans by Orthodox Jewry. The Orthodox world does not live in a cocoon of isolation. Every action and statement of Orthodox leaders is subject to scrutiny and criticism by the outside world. In the present atmosphere of media Orthodox-bashing, which is so prevalent in Israel and America today, it seems to me that issuing bans only provides more grist for the anti-Orthodox mill. The non-Orthodox world will only see this as a further attempt to impose medieval clericalism on a secular, free society and it will help justify thereby in their minds their non-adherence to halacha and tradition. In a world of Muslim fundamentalist fatwahs against books and authors who do not meet the standards of the Iranian mullahs, bans of books just do not resonate well in our present society. And the damage done to *kiruv* organizations and outreach projects by such strident bans is incalculable. Aside from the facts that at least in two of the recent incidents, the books in question have great *kiruv* value in themselves, it is becoming increasingly difficult to speak to the non-Orthodox world and give it a true appreciation of Torah and Judaism from a backdrop of a society that condones bans of books and personal attacks and vilification of other observant Orthodox Jews and recognized scholars with whom we may not agree.

Orthodox leaders have to finally make up their minds as to whether they really are committed to outreach and spiritual help to other Jews – most of who are unfortunately far distanced from Torah and tradition. If such a true commitment is present, then the tactics of bans and personal attacks upon those whose views differ from those of the banners have to be severely modified if not entirely abandoned. This is truly a difficult reconsideration but I am convinced that it is one that should be considered and analyzed by the leaders of Orthodoxy.