Tradition vs Innovation

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Long before I was formally introduced to polarities, I experienced and learnt to balance the tension between tradition and innovation.

Growing up in an Orthodox home in Milan, Italy, I experienced life in two worlds; one Jewish, the other Italian. My family, school and community shaped my personal identity as an orthodox Jew, and my commitment to traditional Jewish values of modesty. Living in one of the fashion capitals of Europe, I imbibed fashion consciousness at a very young age, developing an appreciation for what was trendy and a desire to fit in. But unlike my Italian peers, my Jewish religious upbringing emphasised a modesty that was often at odds with what was trendy and fashionable. This tension forced me to consider what Jewish values I wanted to see reflected in my mode of dress, and pushed me towards a creative interpretation of fashion. Successfully managing the two poles meant that when I was out in the fashionable Vittorio Emanuele galleries I stood out slightly and retained my Jewish identity, whilst my cosmopolitan style marked me out as Italian amongst my Jewish peers.

While orthodox feminism seeks equality in order to gain greater access to traditional roles and rituals, many in the Orthodox community perceive feminism as a threat, as it challenges many traditional norms. Before we analyse this particular polarity in detail, I would like to look at some instances where the upsides of this polarity have been maximized.

The Chabad-Lubavitch movement presents an illuminating case study on how to successfully manage the polarity between tradition and innovation. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Shneerson, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe was a master at balancing this tension, innovating within tradition, and keeping tradition at the heart of his innovations. In his mission to bring Torah observance to non-observant Jews in 1950s America, he recognised the need to balance ancient customs with the demands of modern life in a new country. Unlike other hassidic rebbes, whose approach was to build walls around their communities by shutting out anything that was not inherently part of Jewish tradition, the Lubavitcher Rebbe realised that shutting out the outside world in this way was counterproductive. He understood that building protective walls around tradition would only cut it off from the world inhabited by a new generation of Jews, and render it irrelevant. He also understood that innovation was not at all bad, and that it brought with it the potential for the creativity and renewal which was sorely needed if Judaism was to thrive in the modern world.

Because he took a broad outlook, and focused on the big picture, the Rebbe was able to both inject innovation into traditional customs and practices, and reintroduce and reinforce traditional observances.
The key to his success in creating an army of shluchim, who would act as his ambassadors in promoting traditional Jewish values in the unlikeliest of places, was the balance he managed between tradition and innovation.

Sending young newlywed couples out to live far away from their Orthodox communities posed a risk. Would these young men and women manage to maintain their traditional Orthodox lifestyles in alien environments far from the established Orthodox communities, with their tight social and religious frameworks? Or would they become victims to their new environments?

The Rebbe mitigated this risk by inspiring his shluchim to create an intensely Jewish atmosphere in their homes and encouraging them to raise their children to take immense pride in a very traditional Jewish way of life. Thus anchored firmly to tradition, they were able to safely navigate the opposite pole of innovation; embracing technology, social media and popular culture to promote and frame their essentially traditional message.

Another example of the Rebbe’s polarity management was in the way he advocated for women to return to the traditional custom of hair covering. The majority of Jewish women who immigrated to the USA from Europe at the turn of the 20th century had abandoned covering their hair with kerchiefs as they did in Eastern European villages. The Rebbe understood that his campaign would not succeed if, in covering their hair, women felt out of place in their environment. This is why, while he advocated the return to a very traditional value of hair covering, instead of the traditional kerchief, he innovated the wearing of wigs. He felt it was important that women were comfortable and fashionable even in the most elegant of settings. His creative navigation of the tradition/innovation polarity enabled women to reclaim what seemed an outmoded tradition in such a way that it allowed them to function confidently in the modern world.

While encouraging the wearing of wigs may not appear to us today as a feminist position, one must at least appreciate the context in which the Rebbe managed polarities so as to find a place for traditional Jewish women in wider society.

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I recently came across another compelling example – in the 2014 Times Christmas appeal – that highlights how zooming out and looking at the big picture enables leaders to manage the tension between tradition and innovation. It featured the story of a Masai tribe whose leaders have decided to abandon the tradition of FGM (female genital mutilation) for their teenage girls. FGM is a practice deeply entrenched in the tribe’s cultural norms. It is an important marker of women’s chastity and believed to preserve women and their babies’ health. No respectable tribesman would marry a woman who has not undergone FGM. So what convinced the tribal leaders to take such a radical step? It was not the sudden realisation that the practice is barbaric and actually detrimental to women’s health, and endangers them in childbirth. The Masai tribal leaders have been won over by the prospect of long-term strategic benefits. They have great ambitions for their tribe. They want to ensure their people are well-equipped to thrive in a changing world. But, while girls from other tribes have taken advantage of educational

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opportunities and become doctors, lawyers and even MPs, bringing economic benefits and political advantage to their tribe. The Masai practice of FGM between the ages of 11-12 followed by marriage means girls’ education comes to an abrupt end.

The leaders are acutely aware of the challenge they face from their own people in eradicating the practice of FGM. It is tied in with values of honor, respectability, and chastity, and is an important rite of passage into womanhood. Their approach is one of polarity management; balancing the traditional with the innovative. They address the traditional values of honor associated with FGM by pledging that they, the tribal warrior leaders, as the highest ranked in the honor hierarchy, will only marry girls who have not undergone FGM, thus turning what was until now seen as a curse into a respectable practice. They are also addressing the cultural need for maintaining traditional Masai rites of passage by creating new rituals to mark girls’ transition into womanhood.

Returning to the challenge of Orthodoxy and feminism, Orthodoxy offers a sense of authenticity by maintaining an unbroken link with a three thousand year-old tradition. This provides a significant sense of stability in a fast changing world. The clearly defined roles, rules and rituals combine to create an intense sense of purpose and direction. Feminism, in its broadest definition, has advanced women’s education and rights, and has therefore created a more tolerant and aware society, which gains directly from the inclusion of its female members. In all areas – economic, political and social – the inclusion of women has created tangible benefits. Similarly, the religious life of Orthodox Jewry has grown rich through the fresh perspectives and creativity brought by women. As a community, we have seen increased engagement with, and a novel approach to Jewish texts, as well as renewed enthusiasm for traditional rituals.

By holding both of these crucial values in creative balance, we can bring the authenticity and connection of tradition, as well as the inclusion and energy of feminism, to Orthodox Judaism, without risking either irrelevance and stagnation, or the loss of traditional values key to our identity as a faith.

In failing to manage the polarity of orthodoxy and feminism, we run the risk of estranging large portions of the female population, leading to a loss of talent and contribution that would impoverish the entire community.

Whilst as Orthodox Jews, we have absorbed and profited from the values of feminism in our secular lives, opposition to the perceived danger of feminism has left us much the poorer religiously. Far from being a threat to orthodoxy, feminism presents an opportunity. Instead of asking how Orthodox Judaism can protect itself from the apparently alien set of values advanced by feminism, it would be far more valuable to ask the following: How do we ensure a relevant and engaging Judaism that is deeply rooted in traditional Jewish values? Can we, through feminist values, create entry points into Orthodox Judaism and enhance Jewish women’s commitment to Orthodox Judaism? How do we invite women’s participation while retaining core orthodox traditional values? Most importantly, the key question to be asked is not whether feminism has roots in our tradition but whether it holds the key to the future of our tradition. By reframing the question in this way we can zoom out and creatively manage the tension between tradition and innovation, empowering Orthodox Judaism with new energy and relevance, without sacrificing its authenticity and meaning.

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