

SLIFKIN, SALEM, AND THE SENATOR:

A Path to Understanding and Healing

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It is now about a year since the “Slifkin Affair” erupted. During that time, many aspects of this unfortunate episode have been debated. The most common area of discussion has been the core topics of Torah vs. Science – the age of the universe and the fallibility of the scientific pronouncements of the Talmud. Others have approached this episode from different angles, such as the *halachic* extent of rabbinic authority or the viability of book-banning.

While all these analyses shed light on the situation, a number of curious aspects still require examination. These include, but are not limited to:

- The insistence that Rabbi Slifkin not just retract his books but also publicly recant his views;
- Some of the most vigorous condemnations of Rabbi Slifkin coming from those who had been formerly sympathetic to his approach;
- The extremely long life of this episode (as compared to, say, the ban on *Making Of A Godol* or *One People, Two Worlds*) and its sheer hysteria.

Perhaps these and many other aspects of the Slifkin affair can be understood by making a sociological analysis. In particular, we should study it in light of previous, similar events in history. Such has been the approach of others who have tried to make sense of strange periods:

The reason I think that I moved in that direction [of explaining the situation in terms of a similar situation of three hundreds years earlier] was that it was simply impossible any longer to discuss what was happening to us in contemporary terms. There had to be some distance, given the phenomena.

These words were written by the playwright Arthur Miller in the 1950s, when Senator Joseph McCarthy led a reign of terror in which people were charged with the crime of being Communists. They had to confess and name other people guilty of the crime, or face imprisonment. It is difficult for those who did not live in that era to comprehend the sheer hysteria of those times. Miller, himself charged as a Communist conspirator, finally made

sense of the madness by realizing its similarities to the witch-hunt of Salem, and wrote a famous play on this theme entitled *The Crucible*.¹

In 1692 the Massachusetts village of Salem saw a charge of devilry which initiated the witch-hunt that made the term famous. Hundreds of people were accused of witchcraft; they either had to publicly confess and name their co-conspirators, or face execution. Many were imprisoned, and ultimately nineteen men and women were hung. As Miller wrote:

I had known this story since my college years and I'd never understood why it was so attractive to me. Now it suddenly made sense. It seemed to me that the hysteria in Salem had a certain inner procedure or several which we were duplicating once again, and that perhaps by revealing the nature of that procedure some light could be thrown on what we were doing to ourselves.

As we shall see, there can be no doubt that, despite significant differences, there are fundamental similarities between the Slifkin Affair and both the witch-hunts of Salem and the era of Senator McCarthy. Analyzing it in light of both sheds much illumination, and may even help heal some of the scars.

Prelude: Establishing the Differences

Before discussing the similarities between these episodes, it is important to note a fundamental difference. With both Salem and McCarthy, the persecutors enjoyed universal official support. With the Slifkin affair, on the other hand, nothing could have been further from the case.

The ban on Rabbi Slifkin's books was met with widespread opposition within the Charedi world at many levels. Not just laymen, but many *rabbanim* strongly disputed both the content and process (or lack thereof). Several of the most prominent Gedolim did not attach their signatures to the ban and implicitly opposed it. And, of course, two of the most important rabbinic authorities in the US had written endorsements for the books and opposed the ban.

Some would have predicted that the official organs of the Charedi world would have leapt to endorse the ban. But although the Israeli *Yated Ne'eman* did so, and began the publicity of the ban, the U.S. newspapers did not do so, and their silence was deafening. Both *HaModia* and the U.S. *Yated Ne'eman* – the two major newspapers in the Charedi world – refused to print any condemnations against the books. *The Jewish Observer* likewise kept silent. The Council of Torah Sages of the Agudas Yisroel of America issued no statement in support of the ban, and the spokespeople of the Agudas Yisroel had no comment. The apologetic journalists and outreach workers that usually leap to defend controversial aspects of the Charedi world did not discuss the matter, and it was obvious that they fervently wished it had never happened.

¹ Published by Penguin Books, *The Crucible* is recommended reading for anyone seeking to enhance their understanding of the Slifkin Affair.

Even secular newspapers that reported the controversy, such as *The New York Times*, *Moment* and *Ha'aretz*, noticed that this was not a dispute between Ultra-Orthodoxy and Modern Orthodoxy, despite the obvious temptation to portray it that way. Rather, they observed that there was a split within the ultra-Orthodox world.

One of the many intriguing aspects of the Slifkin Affair is how supporters of the ban spoke of “the Gedolim,” as though there was some kind of authoritative body of Gedolim that reached a unanimous consensus. The reality was that, as noted earlier, the official body of Gedolim that does exist – the Agudas Yisroel – did not endorse the ban. Many Gedolim opposed the ban. Furthermore, many of those who did sign were virtually unknown figures that were not considered Gedolim until they signed the ban.

It seems that whichever is the most vocal and distinctive group acquires the label of “the Gedolim.” This is especially true when it includes the single scholar currently considered by some (but not Chassidim, Sefardim, the Modern Orthodox, Briskers, and numerous others) to be the undisputed Gadol HaDor. To counteract this disingenuous terminology, we shall refer either to “these Gedolim” or “The Gedolim” with a capital “T.” (The questions of the difference between a *talmid chacham* and a “Gadol,” and of which areas of knowledge and other aptitudes qualify one as a Gadol, are fascinating and relevant but must be left aside for now.)

Thus, the opposition to Rabbi Slifkin’s books cannot be considered to have been a universal or official phenomenon, as was the case with Salem and McCarthy. Nevertheless, the similarities are most significant and are worth studying. In fact, although many people opposed the ban due to their rationalist approach to Torah and science, others who had no position on this issue (or who were even opposed to such an approach) nevertheless opposed the ban precisely because they understood it to be a witch-hunt.

The Empowerment of Zealotry

The persecution in Salem was spearheaded by young girls. They attained the power to name people who were supposedly in league with the Devil – and they exercised it, eagerly naming those who were to be hung. Yet these girls did not begin as fundamentally evil people. One must realize that to be a young girl in seventeenth century Salem was to be on the lowest rung of the social ladder; employed as little more than a slave and being on the receiving end of whippings. When they gained the attention of the most senior people in the state, they found new meaning in life. Christopher Bigsby, a professor of American Studies who wrote the introduction to *The Crucible*, explains:

Those usually deprived of power... suddenly gain access to an authority as absolute as that which had previously subordinated them. Those ignored by history become its motor force... Those whose opinions and perceptions carried neither personal nor political weight suddenly acquire an authority so absolute that they come to feel they can acknowledge even the representatives of the state.

Richard H. Rovere wrote likewise in his biography of McCarthy:

At the start of 1950, McCarthy was an empty vessel to the general public outside Wisconsin. There he was known as a cheap politician of vulgar, flamboyant ways and a casual approach to the public interest. It is unlikely that one in a hundred Americans knew of his existence. He was a voice making no sound in the wilderness. Then, on February 9, 1950, he made a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, in the course of which he said that the Department of State was full of Communists and that he and the Secretary of State knew their names... He had been talking through his hat; if there were Communists in the State Department, he did not know who they were. Nevertheless, he had cued himself in. The lights played over him. Eyes were upon him. The show was his.

The same common element can be discerned with many of the zealots involved in attacking Rabbi Slifkin's books:

- The initiator was a former convicted criminal who shortly afterwards had an investigation open against him for another major fraud;
- The chief engineer of the campaign is the grandson of a famous Rosh Yeshivah and Holocaust hero, and the son of a Rosh Yeshivah, yet he himself has failed to acquire any sort of career;
- The hard work of accumulating signatures in the US was done by a young person whose father was an important figure in a prominent yeshivah, but who himself suffers an unpleasant job as a teacher in a low-ranking yeshivah;
- Vitriolic written and oral attacks on Rabbi Slifkin, in the name of defending Rabbi Moshe Shapiro, were carried out by an educator in whose circles the ultimate accolade is to be a disciple of Rabbi Shapiro, but who has never earned that title himself.

It seems likely that all these people possess a deep insecurity relating to their failure to accomplish that which was expected of them in life (or which they perceived as being expected of them). But by becoming Guardians of the Faith, Defenders of the Realm, and Knights of The Gedolim, they were able to feel that they had made something of themselves. When someone who has never filled his father's shoes can announce to the Gedolim in America, "I am a *sheliach* of Rav Moshe Shapiro, being *lochem milchemes Hashem*?" there is an empowerment that makes him feel important.

The Redemption of Zealotry

It was striking that after the ban was publicized, some of Rabbi Slifkin's most zealous new critics were those who, in one way or another, had previously been in his camp:

- A certain American Rosh Yeshivah spent months trying to prevent and defuse the ban. Yet, after a prolonged visit to Israel, he then dramatically changed his stance and wrote a lengthy justification of the ban.

- One of the signatories to the ban had previously delivered an assurance to Rabbi Slifkin that he would not sign it, and was known to be sympathetic to those in such predicaments. Not only did he later sign it, but he even condemned Rabbi Slifkin (albeit not by name) at the Siyum HaShas in Madison Square Garden, when he condemned those who disgrace the memory of Holocaust martyrs by seeking “makeshift solutions” to problems in the Talmud rather than unquestioningly accepting it.
- A rabbi who delivered a vicious and sweeping attack on Rabbi Slifkin’s approach to science had previously dealt with some Ask-the-Rabbi questions in which he had personally recommended Rabbi Slifkin’s books – and these were still hosted on his website while he was delivering his attack!

One can understand, and even commend, somebody changing their mind – but why go to the other extreme so drastically?

There are two potential themes at play here. One is that, as Bigsby explains regarding Salem, those who feel guilty for their deeds, words or thoughts can find atonement in condemning others for those very same things:

The witch-hunt was not, however, a mere repression. It was also, and as importantly, a long overdue opportunity for everyone so inclined to express publicly his guilt and sins, under the cover of accusations against the victims.

But perhaps another dynamic is more relevant; the desire to align oneself with The Gedolim, to eagerly show that one is part of the team.

What replaces the sense of natural community... is a sense of participating in a ritual, of conformity to a ruling orthodoxy and hence a hostility to those who threaten it. The purity of one’s religious principles is confirmed by collaborating, at least by proxy, in the punishment of those who reject them. (Bigsby)

This explains other curious outbursts that took place this year:

- One of the most distinguished rabbinic authorities in Jerusalem penned an extreme letter in which he denounced scientists as evil heretics and belief in an old universe as sacrilege. This occurred after it became publicized, to his dismay, that in a *din Torah* of many years previously he had (albeit reluctantly) permitted a certain Orthodox Jewish scientist to teach a reconciliation of Genesis with science.
- An entire series of lectures denouncing Rabbi Slifkin and his books was delivered by a certain Rosh Yeshivah. This person has for many years been trying to disassociate himself from his Modern Orthodox past, and was, to put it in his own words, “placed in an awkward position” when it became known that his name appeared in the acknowledgments to one of Rabbi Slifkin’s books.

In these and other cases, it was very necessary for people to go to extremes in order to prove to others their purity and allegiance to the system.

The Absurdity of Confession

A key feature of the campaign to denounce Rabbi Slifkin's books was the claim that the *haskamot* (rabbinic approbations) had been retracted. It is difficult to clarify the precise facts of the situation, but they seem to be as follows:

The letter of condemnation stated that the *haskamot* were retracted. When this was written, none of the eight *haskamot* had been retracted and most of the rabbinic authorities who endorsed the book had not even heard that there were any objections. After the hysteria erupted, the more senior of them attested that they still stand by their endorsements, but some of the less senior rabbis involved who are disciples of Rabbi Moshe Shapiro and Rabbi Elya Weintraub (two of the most forceful opponents of the books) did issue retractions of their *haskamot*.

But how can an approbation be retracted? In theory, it could mean that the rabbi had rethought his approach to the topic and decided that his first understanding of it was mistaken. But a *haskamah* on books as clearly controversial as these is not written on a whim – it is granted after serious thought. Thus, even if the rabbi writing the *haskamah* subsequently changes his mind, there clearly was a good case for writing a *haskamah* to the book. And this is all the more true if a book receives numerous *haskamot*, as Rabbi Slifkin's books did.

To avoid this implication (and/or perhaps for other reasons), Rabbi Shapiro apparently instructed his disciples to write that they had not actually read the books in the first place and were merely relying on the author's reputation and the undisputed value of his previous works; and that when they were shown what the books actually say, they realized their error. Yet this is clearly fallacious. These books were obviously at least potentially controversial, and the rabbis who wrote *haskamot* must have known exactly what they were signing to. Even if they did not read every word, it is ludicrous to suggest that they did not know that the books stated that the world is billions of years old and that Chazal's science can be questioned.

In any case, not only had the rabbis indeed read the books that they endorsed, but their subsequent "retraction" clearly had nothing to do with any real change of mind on their part. The rabbis who wrote *haskamot* are highly unlikely to have suddenly decided that an approach which they warmly endorsed, and which has been used amongst the secularly educated for decades, is actually absolute and utter heresy.

No; there is a much simpler, indeed a blindingly obvious, explanation. They retracted their *haskamot* out of deference to their *rebbe* and/or out of fear for their reputation. Arthur Miller, despite having written *The Crucible* as a protest to McCarthyism, admitted how difficult it was to maintain one's integrity when summoned before the Committee:

We were all going slightly crazy trying to be honest and trying to see straight and trying to be safe. Sometimes there are conflicts in these three urges.

And Bigsby, describing how witch-hunts still occur today:

...groundless accusations are still granted credence, hysteria still claims its victims, persecution still masquerades as virtue and prejudice as piety... The witch-finder is ever vigilant, and who would not rather direct his attention to others than stand, in the heat of the day, and challenge his authority?

This is all fairly obvious to most people. The idea of the *haskamot* on these books being retracted is bizarre and further highlights the strangeness of the situation. In *The Crucible*, John Proctor, who is defending those accused of devilry, tries to make a similar point to Reverend Hale, who has given expert opinion as to their guilt:

PROCTOR: I never knew until tonight that the world is gone daft with this nonsense.

HALE: “Nonsense”?! Mister, I have myself examined Tituba, Sarah Good, and numerous others that have confessed to dealing with the Devil. They have *confessed* it.

PROCTOR: And why not, if they must hang for denyin’ it? There are them that will swear to anything before they’ll hang; have you never thought of that?

Yet the retractions of the *haskamot*, despite their obvious transparency, were nonetheless a critical part of the ban on the books. This is related to another theme which we shall now explore: public confession.

The Importance of Public Confession

In his autobiography, Arthur Miller writes about an important aspect that was identical in both the McCarthy hearings and the Salem witch-hunt:

The main point of the hearings precisely as in seventeenth-century Salem, was that the accused make public confession... the same spiritual nugget lay folded within both procedures – an act of contrition done not in solemn privacy but out in the public air.

The very same phenomenon occurred here. According to Rabbi Slifkin, when he was contacted by those that orchestrated the ban, they did not merely demand that he pull his books from the shelves. They firmly insisted that he also publicly recant his views. Now, this clearly shows that their desire was not to suppress heresy. After all, the best way to prevent people from reading the books is to quietly remove them from the market. Instead, there was an importance in confession – of Rabbi Slifkin not merely being condemned, but of personally admitting the error of his ways in public.

The same occurred with the rabbis who had endorsed Slifkin’s work. It was vital to the zealots that these scholars publicly admit that they made a mistake. Nobody should be so naïve as to think that the zealots were acting out of concern for the dignity of these scholars. Nor was it to maintain the façade of unity in the Orthodox world. Rather, the zealots wanted to grant *themselves* dignity, to feel vindicated in their campaign.

Grasping at Straws

In *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller tells of how in the hunt to convict Proctor's wife of witchcraft, his servant-girl Mary Warren was found to possess a "poppet" (dolls that could be used for voodoo). Deputy Governor Danforth and Reverend Parris began to smell victory:

DANFORTH: While you worked for Mr. Proctor, did you see poppets in the house?

ABIGAIL: Goody Proctor always kept poppets.

PROCTOR: Your Honor, my wife never kept no poppets. Mary Warren confesses it was her poppet.

CHEEVER: Your Excellency.

DANFORTH: Mr. Cheever.

CHEEVER: When I spoke with Goody Proctor in that house, she said she never kept no poppets. But she said that she did keep poppets when she were a girl.

HATHORNE: But a poppet will keep fifteen years, will it not?

PROCTOR: It will keep if it is kept, but Mary Warren swears she never saw no poppets in my house, nor anyone else.

PARRIS: Why could there not have been poppets hid where no one ever saw them?

PROCTOR, *furious*: There might also be a dragon with five legs in my house, but no one has ever seen it.

PARRIS: We are here, Your Honor, precisely to discover what no one has ever seen.

In a witch-hunt, nothing is too far-fetched to be used as damning evidence. Nothing is too insignificant. This is because the goal is not to perform a sincere investigation, but to produce the desired verdict.

This helps explain some of the strange activity that took place after the ban. Supporters of these Gedolim scoured all Rabbi Slifkin's writings for anything that would help support the verdict that had already been proclaimed upon his books. Of course, since Rabbi Slifkin is an extremely prolific writer and deals with difficult topics, and has also been involved in Internet discussion groups where all kinds of ideas are tossed out for debate, it was not too difficult to use Google to find material to use against him. Yet since these Gedolim had ruled that Rambam's approach to Chazal is (nowadays) *kefirah*, and Rabbi Slifkin freely admitted to using Rambam's approach, then that is all that need be charged regarding Rabbi Slifkin. However, what we find instead is a desperate attempt to find additional things in Rabbi Slifkin's writings upon which to hang the charge of heresy. Some even sought to discredit Rabbi Slifkin on a personal level, as though attacking his personality or his reaction to the ban somehow explains why Rambam's approach to Chazal is *kefirah*. This seems to reflect a

lack of confidence in the position of these Gedolim even on the part of their supporters, and an overwhelming desire to reinforce the verdict using any means possible.

The Siege Mentality

PROCTOR, *handing Danforth a paper*: Will you read this first, sir? It's a sort of testament. The people signing it declare their good opinion of Rebecca, and my wife, and Martha Corey...

PARRIS, *sweating*: These people should be summoned. *Danforth looks up at him questioningly*. For questioning.

FRANCIS, *trembling with anger*: Mr. Danforth, I gave them all my word no harm would come to them for signing this.

PARRIS: This is a clear attack upon the court!

HALE, *to Parris, trying to contain himself*: Is every defense an attack upon the court?

Perhaps the strongest indicator of the madness that took over was in the descriptions that certain people gave of events. Some Jerusalem educators spoke in horrified terms of how Rabbi Slifkin was “attacking” The Gedolim. This was an extraordinary way of perceiving the situation. These Gedolim effectively declared Rabbi Slifkin to be a heretic, banned his books, prohibited him from teaching, and probably permanently ruined his life in the Charedi world. Rabbi Slifkin responded with an extremely mild, respectful and concise defense on his website. Yet this was described as an “attack on the Gedolim”! Some people actually explicitly stated that any refusal to abide by the ruling of The Gedolim is by definition “an attack”!

Others went even further. “Torah Community Under Attack Again” was the title of one essay defending these Gedolim. This was perverse in two ways. First, as discussed, it was the so-called Torah community's side that launched the attack, declaring the beliefs of vast numbers of Orthodox Jews to be heretical. Second, as noted earlier, major segments of the Torah community itself were critical of the ban. (This itself is likely to have contributed to the hysteria of the ban's supporters; they must have panicked upon discovering that they were not enjoying widespread support.)

Such talk of “attacks” belies a deep paranoia, a siege mentality where “we” are constantly under attack by “them.” This is a general feature of Charedi society as a whole, but it came into particularly sharp focus here.

The Power of the Internet

[*The Crucible*] is a study of a society that believes in its unique virtues and seeks to sustain that dream of perfection by denying all possibility of its imperfection. (Bigsby)

Although Rabbi Slifkin's response was only a mild defense, its very existence was enough to plunge the supporters of these Gedolim into a panic. For it was something that theoretically was not supposed to exist. Rabbi Slifkin's refusal to obey the Daas Torah of The Gedolim was an even greater heresy than his questioning the science of Chazal. Those who subscribe to the myth of the infallibility of The Gedolim support themselves with the idea that nobody ever disputes their ruling. Charedi newspapers never print dissenting views.

Rabbi Slifkin's refusal to accept the ban on his writings (along with his own rabbinic advisors, a fact that was conveniently overlooked) became far more problematic by the posting of his defense on his website. With previous persecutions, there had never been any way for the defendant to make his position known. The newspapers certainly would never give voice to his side. But in this instance the Internet made it possible for the defendant's case to reach thousands of people.

Nor was this defense solely presented by Rabbi Slifkin. This was the year when the word "blog" was the most looked-up word in the dictionary. Dozens of these internet journals discussed the Slifkin Affair at great length, and for at least three it seems to have been their *raison d'être*.² Some contained respectful and restrained discussion of the issues, while others delivered sharp criticism, stinging insults and biting satire.

The followers of The Gedolim didn't know what to do with themselves. For the first time there were dissenting voices making themselves heard within their own camp (many Charedi homes have access to the Internet). The European *Yated Ne'eman*, which printed the condemnation of Rabbi Slifkin and also has a website, suddenly found that thousands of people were becoming aware of its slanderous lies and distortions – there was even a blog entitled *Pravda Ne'eman* that solely focused on this task. Incredibly, not only did the *Yated* not ignore it – it produced *several* editorials attempting to defend its policies from the scathing attacks of the anonymous bloggers.

Like Salem, Charedi society believes in its unique virtues and seeks to sustain that dream of perfection by denying all possibility of its imperfection. It cannot cope with the dissemination of criticism enabled by the Internet.

The Impossibility of Resolution

Many messy details about the ban became known shortly after it was issued. Some of the signatories to the condemnation had not actually signed that text at all, but rather a far milder version which they had been told would only be shown to the publisher. Others had been told that Rabbi Slifkin refused to meet The Gedolim – the exact opposite of the truth. Many had been fed a story about students that had dropped out of Judaism after reading Rabbi Slifkin's books, a story that was subsequently proved to be fictional. In light of these

² A small number of websites/blogs took it upon themselves to defend The Gedolim. Tellingly, however, they did not permit comments to be posted, thereby negating the free speech that is the hallmark of the internet and reflecting their insecurity.

and other revelations, there was an assumption that the ban would be retracted, or at least modified (for example to state that the books were only forbidden for a certain audience).

Yet no such retraction happened, and nor is it likely that any such retraction will occur anytime soon. It took *three hundred years* for the Massachusetts General Court to acknowledge its guilt for all those that had died in the Salem witch hunt. Bigsby explains:

Why should it have taken so long to acknowledge error? ...Perhaps because the needs of justice and the necessity for sustaining the authority of the court have not always been coincident and because there will always be those who defend the latter, believing that by doing so they sustain the possibility of the former. Perhaps because there are those who believe that authority is all of a piece and that to challenge it anywhere is to threaten it everywhere.

The ban on Rabbi Slifkin's books was prompted by the fear that to challenge the authority of the Sages anywhere is to threaten it everywhere. The desperation for defending the ban, even in light of its obvious wrongs in both content and procedure, is due to the belief that to challenge the authority of The Gedolim anywhere is to threaten it everywhere.

The Fundamental Dynamics

Miller explains the fundamental societal dynamics that made the Salem witch-hunt possible:

The Salem tragedy... developed from a paradox. It is a paradox in whose grip we still live, and there is no prospect yet that we will discover its resolution. Simply, it was this: for good purposes, even high purposes, the people of Salem developed a theocracy, a combine of state and religious power whose function was to keep the community together, and to prevent any kind of disunity that might open it to destruction by material or ideological enemies. It was forged for a necessary purpose and accomplished that purpose.

But all organization is and must be grounded on the idea of exclusion and prohibition, just as two objects cannot occupy the same space. Evidently the time came in New England when the repressions of order were heavier than seem warranted by the dangers against which the order was organized. The witch-hunt was a perverse manifestation of the panic which set in among all classes when the balance began to turn toward greater personal freedom.

Rabbi Slifkin apparently believed that he was merely collecting some little-known approaches of various Rishonim and Acharonim. He and his defenders seem to have missed the true "heresy" of his books. It is not in his belief of the great age of the universe, or the fallibility of Chazal's scientific pronouncements; though apparently that was all Rav Elyashiv needed for his verdict. Rather, his "heresy" is in his fundamental approach.

Maimonides considered his *Guide for the Perplexed* to be a life-saver, but it was truly lethal for many Jews in Europe. Hirsch genuinely rated his approach to Chazal and to life as the ideal

that all should strive towards, but others were simply not equipped to handle it. Rabbi Slifkin was correct in detecting that there are many people in the Charedi world that need a Maimonidean/ Hirschian approach, but he and his mentors erred in believing that he would get away with it. There is no official room for a rational approach in a society that depends upon irrationalism for its very survival. Rabbi Slifkin's mistake is understandable; after all, Rambam and Hirsch are venerated in that society. But this is only lip-service; in practice, their approach is considered unacceptable.

One of the many ramifications of the Slifkin Affair is that many thousands of people who were ostensibly part of Charedi society – even rabbis – suddenly woke up to the fact that their attitudes and beliefs are not consistent with the vocal leadership of that society. As *The New York Times* reported:

Rabbi Adlerstein of Loyola said: “I know rabbis, I know teens in yeshivas who were on the verge of quitting” when the letter first came out. “They look at themselves in the mirror and they say, ‘What have I been representing?’”

It is not just their beliefs regarding dinosaurs and spontaneous generation that have no place, but even their more general approach to Judaism and society. This does not necessarily mean that they should leave Charedi society, but rather that they should appreciate the trade-off that rests at its core and decide if they are able to live with such a compromise.

Charedi society has meticulously and sometimes intentionally rewritten Torah in its image.³ Nachmanides has been recast as a mystic, despite his undoubtedly rational leanings;⁴ the philosophy of Maimonides has been swept under the carpet; and Hirsch has been excused as only acting for outreach purposes. Inconvenient writings of other Rishonim and Acharonim have been deliberately left unpublished, censored, or denounced as forgeries. The very real disputes within Torah Judaism have been edited out of history, and the façade of a single Daas Torah is presented.⁵ Historical portrayals of Torah scholars are whitewashed to avoid any indication that they might have possessed ordinary human failings or views that diverged from accepted Charedi positions.⁶ Newspapers openly admit that their business is not journalistic objectivity, but rather being a mouthpiece for a single Daas Torah. Rationalism is dead; intellectual honesty is feared and despised.

But Charedi society was never supposed to be about intellectually honest and accurate study of Torah. Rather, it is about preserving dedication to Torah study and observance in the face

³ Rabbi Jacob J. Schachter's *Facing the Truths of History* (published in *The Torah U'Madda Journal* and available online at http://www.yutorah.org/~shiurim/%2FTU8_Schachter.pdf) is a must-read on this topic.

⁴ See Asher Benzion Buchman, “U-Madna Lo Yeresem,” in *Hakira: The Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought* vol. II (available online at <http://www.hakira.org>).

⁵ Marc Shapiro's *The Limits of Orthodox Theology* exposes one of the greatest myths in this department, that of the supposed agreement as to the contents of Maimonides' principles of faith.

⁶ Hence the ban on *Making Of A Godol*. While Rabbi Nathan Kamenetzky's books may have occasionally veered into voyeurism, nothing justified the scale of the vilification that they subsequently suffered.

of immense challenges from the outside world, both material and ideological. The Charedi way of life is a survival strategy – and one that has enjoyed considerable success. Outside of it, one would be hard pressed to find comparable commitment to serving God.

The Charedi way of life is a reaction to the threats of the secular world. Perhaps it can even be justified as a necessary survival tactic for the simple-minded masses. Nevertheless, it is not ultimately authentic, and it can be just as dangerous in its own way for other types of people. The aphorism of “one man’s meat is another man’s poison” has never been more applicable, and it runs both ways in this case. The obscurantism of the Charedi world is harmful to the intellectually curious, and Rabbi Slifkin’s books saved the faith of such people. But, on the other hand, it was precisely the intellectual honesty and rationality of Rabbi Slifkin’s books which raised a red flag for others.

Perhaps the ban on Rabbi Slifkin’s books is best understood in the same light, as several people have already pointed out. Not as a *halachic* ruling based on the legitimacy of a particular approach to Torah, subject to debate on its intellectual merits, but rather as a social policy. There is no distortion of Torah in Rabbi Slifkin’s books; his crime was just the opposite. His books avoided the narrow thought-patterns that are critical to preserving a Charedi way of life. Rabbi Slifkin has worked hard to defend his writings as being fully within the parameters of legitimate Torah discussion. But the point is that they are not within the parameters of legitimate *Charedi* Torah discussion.

Charedi society has made a compromise in order to ensure its survival. The resulting system is, by its very nature, susceptible to the occasional witch-hunt. Such episodes cannot be condemned out of hand without appreciating that they are unfortunate side-effects of a way of life that has much to argue in its favor. Arthur Miller’s verdict on the tragedy of Salem is equally applicable here:

When one rises above the individual villainy displayed, one can only pity them all, just as we shall be pitied someday. It is still impossible for man to organize his social life without repressions, and the balance has yet to be struck between order and freedom.

Postscript

Several months after this essay was written, its thesis has been further confirmed. That which we noted as a fundamental difference between the Slifkin affair and the Salem and McCarthy episodes – its lack of universal support – is disappearing. Other Torah leaders have joined the bandwagon (or perhaps we should say, ban-wagon) by issuing their own letters of condemnation.

It is clear that these new letters are obviously not intended to actually prevent people from reading Rabbi Slifkin's books. They do not contain any actual explanations of what these people object to in the books. Furthermore, they were written a year after the original condemnations by two dozen authorities, when everyone had long since decided whether or not they “follow The Gedolim,” and when the books are not even any longer obtainable.⁷

But it is the wording of their letters that is the most telling. They openly admit that their reason for writing is the inference noted earlier in the essay – that their original refusal to sign the ban meant that they oppose it and support Rabbi Slifkin at least to some degree. In other words, the purpose of the letters was not to warn anyone away from the books, but rather to identify the letter-writers as affiliating with the rest of The Gedolim.

⁷ Particularly ironic was the reference in one letter to the “recently published Slifkin books.” They had been published several *years* earlier.