Sliding to the Right
The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy

Samuel C. Heilman
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Sliding to the Right

The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy

Samuel C. Heilman

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For Yoni and Gabrielle upon the occasion of their building a new orthodox home
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Jerusalem, Shvat 5765/January 2005
Introduction

What the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember.
Marcus Hansen, “The Third Generation in America”

Although once characterized as a “residual category” by one sociologist and a “case study in institutional decay” by another, who considered it likely to disappear in contemporary secular society and the American “melting pot,” Orthodox Judaism at the dawn of the twenty-first century has decidedly not melted completely away.¹ As Marshall Sklare, who had predicted its demise in the mid-1950s, admitted by the early 1970s, “Orthodoxy has refused to assume the role of invalid. Rather, it has transformed itself into a growing force in American Jewish life.”²

But what exactly is American Orthodoxy? In their end-of-the-twentieth-century study of American Jewry, and in particular the large segment of it that they characterize as the “moderately affiliated,” Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen describe a population who consider their faith a private matter, shy away from Jewish institutional and organizational life, and see Judaism as offering “no final answers, no irrevocable commitments.” These are Jews who are ready to revise and amend their Judaism, to “decide week by week, year by year, which rituals they will observe and how they will observe them.” With what Cohen and Eisen call a “profound individualism,” these exquisitely American Jews, whose “principal authority” has become “the sovereign self,” chart their own personal paths “to Jewish attitudes and behaviors with which they feel comfortable,” utterly
convincing “that one need not take on any rituals with which one is uncomfortable” or that one does not find meaningful. Moreover, even the most religiously observant and active among them express “discomfort with the idea of commandment, all the more so with the notion of particular commandments issued by God to Jews alone,” what Jewish tradition defines as the “Torah covenant at Sinai.”

Compared to these people, who Cohen and Eisen claim “make up the bulk” of contemporary Jewish America, Orthodox Jews, who number only at most about 12 percent of that same population and with whom this book is concerned, stand in sharpest contrast. They are highly affiliated to all things Jewish. For them, Judaism is not primarily a personal matter. On the contrary, it is a series of mandates: requirements whose origins are considered to be part of a venerated tradition that sets definite criteria for how each person must act and live, regardless of personal wishes and inclinations. Moreover, for the Orthodox, Judaism’s authority is in principle not situated in the self but remains determined by law and tradition and is situated in the community, through shared patterns and standards of behavior as well as powerful attachments to institutions that these Jews have been assiduous in building during the last half of the twentieth century. This is a life with people who are rooted in obligations to what some of them have come to call “Torah-true Judaism,” a Judaism linked inextricably to a way of life defined by the Halacha (Jewish law) and in common parlance referred to as frum. Elsewhere I have written that “frum or frumkeit (the state of being frum) is a Yiddish expression referring both to the actual practice of Halachic [Judeo-legal] Judaism and to the religious outlook associated with it.” In practice it is simply what the Orthodox use to define what they consider an acceptable “Jewish way of behaving.” This is a path and way of life whose followers claim begins with divine revelation at Sinai and leads to final answers and demands, irrevocable commitments to rules, codes, and a series of ultimate rabbinic authorities both dead and living whose interpretations of the sacred obligations of the Torah carry the weight of law and the ultimate authority of the normative. In fact, frum has come to mean acting in conformity with other like-minded Orthodox Jews in one’s community. But the Orthodox do not live in an undifferentiated community. Frum now confronts frummer (more frum).

Two Types of Orthodoxy

From nearly its beginnings as a movement in nineteenth-century Europe to its present manifestations in America, Orthodox Judaism has been ac-
cused of asserting that there was only one way to be a Jew and that this way was the Orthodox one. Yet if that was the view from the outside, within the world of the Orthodox there was by no means unanimity as to what was legitimately Orthodox. When we examine American Orthodoxy today, we discover that still there is no agreement on this point. While there are internal Orthodox debates over a variety of details—from how Jews should dress to what they can properly eat, the rightful demands of ritual, the appropriate style of life, and even religious ideology and leadership—all these can be subsumed under the two essential and often oppositional orientations that have evolved in American Orthodoxy and that are now engaged in a struggle to define the essence of the movement authoritatively. That contest is the starting point for this book.

On the one side are Jews for whom the real meaning of Orthodoxy is the ability to live in and be embraced by several cultures and worldviews at once. These are Jews for whom the key to Jewish survival is, borrowing a term from Mary Douglas, “contrapuntal belonging.” In the contrapuntal, pluralist model, competing loyalties to potentially rivalrous institutions and cultures are permitted, even encouraged. This is because the people involved believe that they have much to gain by living in what Peter Berger once called “plural life-worlds.” Contrapuntalism not only allows people to belong to multiple institutions and cultures simultaneously, but also grants them some modicum of autonomy in making and establishing those affiliations. If in contrapuntalism plural life-worlds and associated institutions engender dissonant and competing loyalties, the individual handles them either by redefining the rivalries as substantively insignificant and “merely symbolic” or by treating the loyalties as provisional and situational, subject to modification as the need arises. This accommodationist stance has been the approach of the majority of American Orthodox Jews, those who for most of the twentieth century have been called “modern Orthodox.”

In general, the accommodationist approach allowed Orthodox Jews to feel that they were not all that different from the surrounding society, even while they remained steadfastly loyal to Jewish traditions, law, and custom. An acculturative contrapuntal Orthodoxy was most popular in milieus where features that characterized the surrounding civilization were attractive to religiously observant Jews and where they had some hope of access to that culture. In nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Germany, with its high culture, this often became the case, especially for Jews who lived in the cities. And such an approach was even more conformable to America, with its open culture and beckoning democratic society and meritocratic ethos.
In the last half of the American twentieth century, the cosmopolitan attitudes and desires to illumine and deepen Jewish commitments through the prism of general education that characterized modern Orthodoxy created a population of religiously observant Jews who entered the ranks of the professions and achieved political power and some wealth—all apparently without sacrificing their Orthodoxy. The existence of modern Orthodox physicians, lawyers, politicians, CEOs, successful entrepreneurs, and distinguished university professors is no longer astonishing. By the last decade of the twentieth century, 32 percent of Orthodox Jews were professionals and about 11 percent managers. According to most recent polls, about 52 percent of American Orthodox Jews had at least one to three years of college. Among those Orthodox Jews who came to America after 1950, the number with college training was even higher, a whopping 81 percent.

But these are not the only Orthodox Jews who have thrived in America. A second type, which views the surrounding modern world not as an opportunity but as a threat and seeks instead to keep it at arm’s length, has also emerged and multiplied. I call this type of Orthodoxy contra-acculturative and “enclavist.” In this approach, the emphasis is on the Jewish minority remaining protected within its parochial cultural enclaves. Here the goal is not to fit Orthodoxy to the surrounding culture but rather to ensure that all insiders conform to the religious behavior and worldview that predominate within the enclave culture, no matter how retrograde it may seem. Here the received wisdom is that yesterday is superior to today and that only those who remain totally committed to and enclosed within the “four cubits of Jewish life” are truly Orthodox.

In the enclave the individual does not count as much as the group. Unlike the contrapuntalists, who believe individuals can autonomously divide themselves, their time, and their loyalties and shift among various parochial and cosmopolitan involvements, the enclavists are certain that anything less than complete engagement in and domination by the parochial life of the enclave is culturally destructive. This sectarian stance is the approach of an increasingly visible Orthodox Jewish group, those who have been called Haredi, from the indigenous Hebrew word that means “anxiously and fervently religious.”

The Haredim are divided into at least three groups. The Hasidim, the most enclavist of the lot, are a pietistic movement that traces its origins back to Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov, in the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe. The Mitnagdim, insular but less so than most Hasidim,