

THOUGHTS ON THE STUDY OF THE ORTHODOX COMMUNITY: AFTER THIRTY-FIVE YEARS

Samuel Heilman

For the last thirty-five years I have been researching and writing about Orthodox Jews. I began by looking at what was then called “modern Orthodoxy,” and in particular its synagogue life, which I found reflective of what I then called “shifting involvements.” I suggested that the various levels of interaction that I found in the synagogue were symbolic of these Jews’ multiple concerns, their

engagement in what Peter Berger has called “plural life-worlds.”

These were Jews not unlike those I had grown up among during the 1950s and 1960s. But when I published a book on this subject, in the mid-1970s, I did not realize that what I had observed was the beginning of the decline of this style of

Orthodoxy. Indeed, the very synagogue on which my study was based, lacking a pulpit rabbi and torn by conflict over who and what was properly Orthodox, represented in some ways a microcosm of what was happening to Orthodoxy in general.

Twenty-five years ago I dealt with these broader trends in a piece I

wrote for *Modern Judaism* in which I tried to analyze and characterize what I called “The Many Faces of Orthodoxy.” I did so by means of a consideration of rabbis (most of them from nineteenth-century Europe) who served for me as iconic representations of these various perspectives. In the article, I made reference to the desires of some of them to “bring the present and past together in a *dynamic synthesis*.” These people were, I argued, in some sense the models

also argued that in their efforts to deal with plural life-worlds and their contrapuntal demands, today’s modern Orthodox Jews often discover that existing syntheses, often created in ad hoc ways, are highly complex, not always fully consistent, and perhaps not even synthetic. Since the rabbis whom they might once have seen as role models or from whom they might have sought guidance about how to live contrapuntally have largely turned away from dynamic

synthesis, those who want to live in plural life-worlds find themselves compelled to make autonomous choices about how to do that.

The contemporary Orthodox rabbinate has been increasingly inclined to curb, control, and deny the legitimacy of change that

embraces the complex realities of contemporary culture. I have traced this tendency to the yeshiva training, both in Israel and the Diaspora, which strives to deny the significance or value of change and chooses to see Judaism as something carved in stone and difficult or impossible to still reinterpret in light of changing



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for what would come to be called “modern Orthodoxy.” (Marc Shapiro’s subsequent study of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg accomplished this far more fluently.)

Two years ago, in my book *Sliding to the Right*, I suggested that the modern Orthodox dynamic represented an ability not only to

conditions. In the Orthodox rabbinate that has emerged over the last two decades, the assumption appears to be that all the legitimate interpretations have already been formulated by the immortals of the past, and there is nothing significantly new under the sun that requires new answers. Anyone who wants to countermand or challenge these interpretations of what Jewish law and tradition demand does so, they imply, at his or her spiritual and religious peril. Those who try to create new syntheses and embrace change, particularly when it includes a valuation of the culture outside the boundaries of the Jewish enclave, are accused of doing so out of ignorance of halakah.

The model of the rabbi who also has advanced university degrees has been in decline. It is perhaps for this reason that the late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik continues to be treated as a living model in the community of the contrapuntalists seeking dynamic synthesis. His works and ideas are plumbed for ongoing guidance almost as much as the writings of the late Menachem Mendel Schneerson are consulted by *his* followers, who also feel a need for a Rebbe's guidance in the complex present and lack a living rabbinic authority with sufficient stature to guide them through their plural life-worlds.

Unlike those who tried to fit plural life-worlds together, many of today's Orthodox rabbis celebrate their parochialism and ability to remain within Jewish enclaves where the tradition is narrowly defined and the halakah is strictly interpreted. They are proud that they are able to turn away voluntarily from what are perceived as the unhealthy seductions of contemporary society and therefore need not reinterpret tradition and halakah to meet its requirements.

They celebrate their literacy and expertise in internal Jewish texts; their ability to navigate even the most recondite Talmudic, rabbinic, and similarly parochial literature is the source of their prestige. Almost vanished is the rabbi/doctor who wore his secular learning as badge of pride and a source of his *rabbinic* authority, who leavened his Torah with the insights that came from what many rabbis today would dismiss as *chochmat hagoyim*. Lay Jews who choose to remain in touch with contemporary culture thus find themselves stymied or

proudly parochial in their interests. I found the makeshift language of "Yinglish" overtaking the more cosmopolitan university English and all that it symbolized. Finally, I found myself drawn to the Haredi world, which had awakened from its post-Holocaust catatonic survivor guilt and rebuilt itself in the new worlds of America and Israel with a vigor rivaling anything it had ever displayed in the past.

As a university-trained social anthropologist, I had access into that world of Jews who saw

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forced to improvise, basing themselves on their own abilities to interpret halakah and to apply it to the needs of their plural life-worlds.

Today, when I reread my early work, I see that the efforts of those who were trying in the 1970s dialectically to merge the modern and the orthodox were already marked by signs of desperation. As Orthodoxy became more self-assured in America (and in Israel), and as modern western society went through its antinomian stage of the 1960s and 1970s, the sociological center of gravity was shifting. The Orthodox elements in the dynamic synthesis were increasingly overshadowing the elements and attractions of modernity. Not surprisingly, my continuing research into Orthodoxy therefore took me increasingly into the inner enclaves of Orthodoxy and away from the margins where I had found the modernists. I looked at the intensely closed enclave of Talmud study groups—most of which were

themselves as "defenders of the faith," despite many of its inhabitants' explicit or implicit denial of the legitimacy of my profession. This access was in part facilitated by this world's inhabitants' and leaders' growing conviction that they represented the future of Judaism and that I could be used to document their success and contributions. Behind every bit of information provided to me by what was now being called "Haredi Jewry" was the assumption that I myself, as a modern Orthodox Jew, was learning how much better and culturally richer this variant of Orthodoxy was than my own, or any other version of the religion.

I was, I must admit, fascinated by the vitality, the commitment, and in many cases the attractiveness of this world, especially in the eyes of the young Orthodox, who were more and more convinced that the previous generation's effort to live in plural life-worlds was based on ignorance, duplicity, and

convenience. The commitments here were powerful, deeply felt, and enthusiastic. The inspiring rabbis were Haredi ones. Except for those caught up in Israeli religious Zionist settlement politics, everyone else was looking toward rabbis who made Eastern Europe and yesterday more appealing than modern civilization and today. As a social anthropologist and student of Orthodoxy, I could not help but be drawn to documenting their efforts to recreate the past.

I was not alone. William Helmreich described the world of the contemporary yeshiva. Solomon Poll, Jerome Mintz, and others produced studies of the Hasidim, and of course Menachem Friedman analyzed Haredi life in Israel. These writers have been followed by an array of younger scholars, like Tamar El-Or, Kimmy Caplan, Maya Katz, and others too numerous to mention, whose work on these Orthodox Jews has been remarkable both in its intelligence and detail. While all these scholars' aims were ethnographic, analytic, and documentary, an unintended consequence, perhaps, of their approach was to enhance the sense that these Jews increasingly defined contemporary Orthodoxy. The modern Orthodox were simply no longer where the action was.

To be sure, there has of late been a new flurry of activity among the latter. Worthy of note is the emergence of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in New York, a new rabbinical school seeking to produce a new kind of rabbi who does represent the model of one who embraces the idea of dynamic synthesis and plural life-worlds. A number of these rabbis have again embraced the idea of obtaining doctorates in addition to their rabbinical ordination. At Yeshiva University, through the work of its new president (the first non-rabbi to head the institution), and rabbis

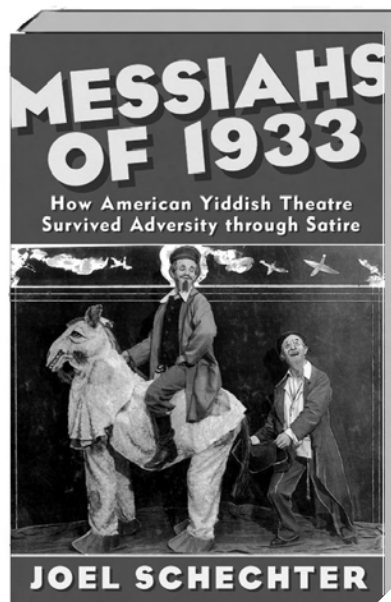
IN THE YEARS AHEAD, PERHAPS, THESE SORTS OF ANALYSES AND ETHNOGRAPHIES MAY SHOW US WHETHER ORTHODOXY WILL SUSTAIN ITS DYNAMIC SYNTHESIS OR WHETHER IT WILL CONTINUE ITS SLIDE TOWARD THE PAROCHIAL CONFINES OF ITS HEAVILY TRADITIONALIST ENCLAVES WHERE CHANGE IS KEPT AT BAY.

in its Center for the Jewish Future and its rabbinic enrichment initiative, there are efforts to resurrect the Torah and Maddah (science) ideal whose combination was once the university's symbolic goal. The many initiatives of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance to embrace a dynamic synthesis that recognizes the growing role of women in Judaism also suggest that there may be action in the non-Haredi world that will draw scholars once again to study it. *You Are Hereby Renewed Unto Me: Orthodox Women Challenge the Wedding Ritual*, a forthcoming book by Irit

Koren that explores the efforts of young Orthodox women who want to reinterpret Jewish marriage law in light of changing gender roles and marital behavior, indicates that there is a renewed interest in the contrapuntalist elements of Orthodoxy. In the years ahead, perhaps, these sorts of analyses and ethnographies may show us whether Orthodoxy will sustain its dynamic synthesis or whether it will continue its slide

toward the parochial confines of its heavily traditionalist enclaves where change is kept at bay.

Samuel Heilman is the Harold Proshansky Chair in Jewish Studies at the Graduate Center and is Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Queens College of the City University of New York, and author of Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy (University of California Press, 2006).



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