

BOOK REVIEW

***Strictly Kosher Reading: Popular Literature and the Condition of Contemporary Orthodoxy* by Yoel Finkelman**

Reviewed by Rose Waldman

Biography: Rose Waldman is an author whose works have appeared in *Ami Magazine*, *Horizons*, *Pakn Treger*, *The MacGuffin* and elsewhere. Currently an MFA candidate in fiction and literary translation at Columbia University, Ms. Waldman's translation of an I. L. Peretz work was published by Back Pages Books in September 2012.



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***Strictly Kosher Reading: Popular Literature and the Condition of Contemporary Orthodoxy*, by Yoel Finkelman (Academic Studies Press, 2011)**

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“All is flux. Nothing endures but change,” said Heraclitus. But in the *Haredi* community, the position has traditionally been the reverse. *Haredim* pride themselves on their resistance to change and claim an ideology staunchly unswerving of ancient traditions. They profess to observing a lifestyle based on long-established religious and ethical tenets carried over from generation to generation.

Certainly, there are recognizable signs that appear to support the *Haredi* claim. Their distinct style of dress, the mode of study in their schools, their resistance to secular education, their focus on prayer, their consideration of *halakhab* in every aspect of their lives—all seem indicative of a conservative lifestyle that is ageless and immutable.

Yet in *Strictly Kosher Reading* (SKR), Yoel Finkelman argues that despite the *Haredi* assertion of abiding by “a medieval tradition transplanted into the present,” the Heraclitus theory of change is actually true of them, too. Finkelman isn’t the first to claim this. Beginning with Jacob Katz’s eminent article on the subject, in which he asserted that *Haredim* are not the “pure Judaism of old,”¹ the *Haredi* absolutist notion of traditional stasis, which had for so long appeared self-evident, was challenged. Later scholars built upon this approach, so that today Katz’s claim vis-à-vis *Haredim* is the acknowledged stance. In fact, sociologist Israel Rubin who studied the *Hasidic* Satmar sect found that even within the Satmar community, which is one of the most fundamentalist groups among *Haredim*, “[religious] life, there, as anywhere else, is constantly evolving.”²

But where Finkelman differs from these scholars is his choice of popular literature as a means of analysis. He is among the first to study not halakhic treatises or academic texts, but literature created by and for the *Haredi hoi polloi*. As far back as 1958, the noted Yiddish writer Chaim Grade already underscored the idea that popular literature is the lens of reality. In a speech he delivered in Montreal, he asserted that despite the comprehensiveness of historian Heinrich Graetz’s work, Graetz could not write the history of the “simple Jew,” because this reality is not found in rabbinic responsa or canonical texts. The reality of the simple Jew’s life, Grade explained, can only be discovered in literature of the times.³ So, too, Finkelman seeks understanding of the concrete lives of *Haredim*—how they think, how they speak, and how they justify their actions—through the lens of popular literature.

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And therein lies the breakthrough. Because unlike “elite” literature, which tends to portray a lofty ideal, the more “mundane” literature that Finkelman analyzes reflects reality, actual lives lived. Take, for example, the conclusion he draws regarding the existent harmony of American *Haredi* Judaism’s “popular and elite literature.” Though Finkelman admits that part of the reason for this harmony is because *Haredi*

rabbis oversee—and occasionally give “*baskamot*” (approvals) to popular literature, another part is due to the masses’ power over the rabbis. *Haredi* leaders are personally invested in maintaining a positive relationship with the masses, aware that refusal to cooperate with popular opinion will result in their own alienation. Consequently, elite and popular literature is *made* to fit, and popular literature brands like *Artscroll-Mesorah* are able to claim ideological purity. The analysis that Finkelman makes here would be impossible based on elite texts alone, since according to those works, religious leadership bases decisions on Torah alone and it ignores subjective preferences or personal advantage.

SKR’s thesis is that *Haredi* popular literature serves to galvanize and unite the community in significant ways, to illuminate their distinctiveness, and ironically and unintentionally, to demonstrate their acculturation. *Haredim*, Finkelman claims, do not operate under a chain of continuity that leads back to the giving of Torah on Sinai, but in fact, they borrow heavily from the norms of Western society. Regardless of their official ideology, *Haredim* have been deeply acculturated and influenced by their host countries.

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Unlike many scholars who use the term *Haredi* as a blanket description of the entire Orthodox Jewish demographic, Finkelman separates Orthodoxy into three discrete sub-groups: Modern Orthodox, *Haredi*, and *Hasidic*. He focuses on the group he refers to as “*Haredim*,” generally known within Orthodox circles as “Yeshivish.” Not quite as isolationist as *Hasidim*, not as Americanized as the Modern Orthodox, *Haredim* are the middle ground on whom *SKR* is concentrated. It has become common in

academic studies to separate Modern Orthodoxy from its more right wing co-religionists, but the Yeshivish and *Hasidic* groups are often lumped together under the term, “*Haredi*.” Finkelman’s omission in this study of the *Hasidic* community allows for more specificity and accuracy, as *Hasidic* norms differ from the less right wing Yeshivish camp in a number of areas. But in certain spots, the omission of *Hasidism* creates a lost opportunity for richer analysis.

One instance is the discussion of *Haredi* couples’ courtships and subsequent engagements. In pre-modern *Ashkenaz*, marriages were often an economic agreement, with romance playing little or no role. If *Haredim* were, indeed, an unchanged continuation of ancient norms, today’s marriages would have been socio-economic transactions, contracted by the young boy’s and girl’s parents. But by analyzing *Haredi* popular literature, which includes dating guidebooks intended to teach girls and boys how to determine “if their personalities will enable the couple to get along with each other,” Finkelman concludes that there is great concern about a couple’s emotional compatibility in the *Haredi* community, a concept that has more in common with contemporary Western mores than with ancient Judaic sensibilities. Although this determination is noteworthy—it demonstrates *Haredi* acculturation in one of the most important aspects of their lives—the analysis would have been decidedly more comprehensive if *Hasidim* were included in this discussion.

Unlike *Haredim*, *Hasidim* don’t date and don’t produce books that inform girls and boys how to choose their partners. Parents play a categorically greater role in the selection of their children’s spouses. To what degree, one wonders, do *Hasidic* engagements/marriages correlate with the pre-modern *Ashkenaz* model? Including at least a mention of *Hasidic* norms, simply as a basis for comparison, would have considerably advanced the analysis.

On this topic, David Lehmann and Batia Siebzehner have conducted an impressive study of *Haredi* marriage norms. They define “*Haredi*” as most scholars do, to encompass *Hasidim* and “Lithuanians,” but they do differentiate between the two in specific examples in their findings. They relate that the Lithuanian leader Rav Schach offered a figurative take on the talmudic dictum in *Kidushin* 41a, by saying, “It is prohibited to complete a *shidduch* (marriage arrangement) unless the couple has walked together.” He elaborated on that, explaining that walking is a fluid motion, making for “chemistry.” Such a comment, Lehmann and Siebzehner posit, would be unheard of among *Hasidim* “where parents play a more proactive, if not dominant role [in marriages].”⁴

A running theme throughout *SKR* is the irrefutability of *Haredi* acculturation to Western mores. In light of this, Finkelman seeks to understand how *Haredi* authors frame these secular norms within the confines of Judaic doctrine and values. In other words, how do they defend their legitimacy as Orthodox Jewish writers? Finkelman argues that authors do this chiefly in three ways: denial, acknowledgement, and admitting the “superiority of secular approaches.”

Denial is straightforward. The authors simply claim that their ideas represent Torah. This is easier to do than one might imagine because first, popular literature doesn’t require citations, so one need not back up her/his claims, and second, the Judaic canon is so extensive—and often contradictory—that it is easy to find quotes to support nearly every opinion, especially if one de-contextualizes the quotes. Much like pseudo-scholars who decide on a thesis and then pick and choose only the sources that support their claim, *Haredi* authors, Finkelman argues, find Torah quotes that are “compatible with their concerns.”

A more common approach than denial is acknowledgement. Most authors take this route. They acknowledge that they fuse the Jewish and

the secular; in fact, they laud the ability to find the good in outside traditions and make them work within the Torah framework. Naturally, this coalescence of the Jewish and Gentile opens the author to potential criticism. Because the outside world is perceived as an overall negative influence, bringing it into Jewish literature may be seen as a sort of contamination.

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To counteract these imputations, *Haredi* authors create what Finkelman calls an “aura of Torah” around the book. He cites the example of author Miriam Adahan who holds a B.A. in psychology from the (entirely secular) University of Michigan, a Masters from Wayne State University, and who did her post-Masters work at the Humanistic Psychology Institute in San Francisco. Adahan’s self-help books and parenting guides borrow freely from secular culture. But she offsets any criticism by emphasizing the Jewishness of her books through the addition of the word *Jewish* in her titles, e.g. “A Jewish Approach to Childrearing.” She calls her program the very Hebrew-sounding EMEIT (acronym for Emotional Maturity Established Through Torah), and uses names, language and examples in the book that are drawn from *Haredi* life and familiar to the *Haredi* reader. Tweaking language in this way is simple, yet effective. It lends legitimacy to many works that are secular in nature but marketed as *Haredi* literature.

Regarding denial vs. acknowledgment, Finkelman offers an interesting observation, namely that *Haredi* female authors always use the acknowledgement and never the denial strategy (as far as he was able to ascertain in the numerous books he’s studied). He suggests that this is because *Haredi* women do not generally receive the rigorous education in the sacred

canon that men do, yet they receive a broader secular education, which means they have less reason to utilize the denial strategy. Since women are not expected (and perhaps wouldn't be taken seriously were they) to speak in the name of Torah, they may as well establish authority by leaning on their superior (vis-à-vis men) secular education. Finkelman does not form a connection to the non-linear form of thinking that often arises out of copious Talmud study, which may also be a factor in men's use of denial. Perhaps that is an influence that should be taken into account as well.

Finally, some authors actually acknowledge the superiority of secular approaches. Such instances are rare, but if published in the right venues and couched in the right language, authors may sometimes show how in certain areas (the example in *SKR* is about public schools' mainstreaming of special-education children), Western society offers a model for *Haredim* to emulate. Using this strategy is risky, but as the mainstreaming example demonstrates, it can be done successfully.

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One of the compelling nuggets in Finkelman's study is his discussion on the pecking order of *Haredi* literature. Though it would make sense to assume that texts on theology would be hierarchically highest, in actuality it is lower in importance than works on Talmud and *halakhab*. Despite theology's paramount influence in *Haredi* life, it is pushed lower on the scale of importance because the *Haredi* ideal is

"simple faith." *Haredim* expect that the default is to believe. Consequently, much of the theology-focused literature is geared toward outsiders and written for outreach purposes. The implicit message is that *Haredim* do not need proofs in order to believe and therefore have no need for such works. Still, books on theology are higher on the pecking order than the "less serious" genres, such as fiction, cookbooks, parenting guides, etc.

There are a number of inherent paradoxes or complications within *Haredi* culture. Chief among them is the contrariety of isolation and acculturation. Although *Haredim* claim to be an isolationist people observing unadulterated Judaism, they have, in fact, adopted many of the standards of contemporary Western society. This paradox is further complicated by the power push-and-pull between the rabbinic leadership and the masses. Though the leadership alleges authoritarian powers, actually they can only exercise as much power as the masses allow them. And finally, the authoritarian/voluntary dichotomy within *Haredim* informs and complicates their stance on most challenges facing the community.

The *Haredi* community operates under what Foucault coined an "ideological state apparatus," which means that remaining within the community is ultimately voluntary.⁵ Thus, the leadership cannot force anyone to follow their orders; rather, their power stems from threats of societal alienation. In light of this, rabbinic leaders must constantly tread a fine line, considering carefully which standards they can uphold and which they must discard. Much like God, *Haredi* rabbis must utilize both the just left hand and the merciful right hand. All of these complications are reflected in *Haredi* popular literature.

NOTES

¹Jacob Katz, "Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 2 (1986): p. 4

²Israel Rubin, *Satmar Two Generations of an Urban Island* (1997): p. 284

³From a lecture held at the Jewish Public Library of Montreal, December 7th, 1958.

⁴Lehmann, David, Siebzeiner Batia, "Power, Boundaries and Institutions: Marriage in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism" *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 50,2 (2009) pp. 273-308

⁵See Louis Althusser's essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster (1971): pp. 13-26