

American Modern Orthodoxy: Confronting Cultural Challenges

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Abstract: American Modern Orthodoxy is considerably more prevalent and stronger than many assume. This article presents data indicating its strength and analyzes reasons for its institutional decline and emerging comeback during the second half of the twentieth and onset of the twenty-first centuries.

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For the past two decades or so, a number of social scientists including, among others, Charles Liebman,¹ Haym Soloveitchik,² Sam Heilman,³ William Helmreich and Reuell Shinnar,⁴ and me,⁵ have pointed to a turning to the right in American Orthodoxy. Be that as it may, it does not spell the end of Modern Orthodoxy. Indeed, there are indications that Modern Orthodoxy is quite strong in the United States.

One tentative indicator of the viability of Modern Orthodoxy emerged from an internet search which found that there are more than 500 communities which explicitly define their synagogues as "Modern Orthodox synagogue"; several hundred more identify themselves as a "Modern Orthodox community"; and more than 200 say that they are or have a "Modern Orthodox shul." That means that there are about 1,000 congregations that proclaim themselves on the web as Modern Orthodox.

Secondly, approximately two years ago, an unpublished survey was conducted by Milton Heumann and David Rabinowitz in a Young Israel synagogue in the New York-New Jersey area. Of the 270 questionnaires sent out, 116 were returned, a 43% return rate.

Respondents ranged in age from 25 to 65 and older, with the vast majority being between 35-54 years.

One indication of the synagogue's Modern Orthodox character is in the finding that, whereas 58% said they were raised Orthodox (or Traditional), 42% replied that they not. There was some difference according to gender, with a slightly higher percentage of males than females responding that they were not raised Orthodox.

The survey focused on eight issues: pluralism/tolerance; the religious meaning of Israel; attitudes toward and behavior between Jews and non-Jews; rabbinic authority, including "*Da`at Torah*"; Torah and secular study ("*Torah u-madda*"); religious stringency (*humra*); women and *halakhah*; and religious outreach. For each issue, respondents were asked to select among different responses within the boundaries of Orthodoxy, ranging from those reflecting a very conservative to those reflecting a very modern perspective. Across the board, on all of the eight issues, the majority, two-thirds or more of the respondents, selected statements that reflected modern to very modern perspectives.

¹Charles S. Liebman, "Extremism as a Religious Norm," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 22, 1 (March 1983): 75-86. A slightly revised version appears in Charles S. Liebman, *Deceptive Images: Toward a Redefinition of American Judaism* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1988), pp. 25-42.

²Haym Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Tradition*, 28, 4 (Summer 1994): 64-130; reprinted in Roberta Rosenberg Farber and Chaim I. Waxman, eds., *Jews in America: A Contemporary Reader*. (Hanover: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 1999), pp. 320-376.

³Samuel C. Heilman, "How Did Fundamentalism Manage to Infiltrate Modern Orthodoxy?" Marshall Sklare Memorial Lecture, 35th Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, Boston, December 21, 2003. See also his forthcoming book, *The Rise and Fall of Modern Orthodoxy* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

⁴William B. Helmreich and Reuel Shinnar, "Modern Orthodoxy in America: Possibilities for a Movement Under Siege," *Jerusalem Letters/Viewpoints*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, June 1, 1998.

⁵"The Haredization of American Orthodox Jewry," *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, February 15, 1998. Mahzor Vitri 500.

There is no evidence in this synagogue of a haredization of the community. Its rabbi graduated from Yeshiva University's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) in the 1970s and has been in his present position for several decades. Presumably, just as "*leka ketubba del bah tigra*," "there is no wedding ceremony that does not entail some friction,"⁶ there is no synagogue in which there is unqualified love between the rabbi and the congregants. There are, however, no overt indications of any serious issues between the rabbi and the membership. The rabbi is to the right of most of his congregants and probably goes along with some of the "modern" drift of the congregation with great reluctance.⁷ But he is firmly entrenched there, his congregants appear to view his role as very important, and their relations appear to be quite amicable.

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Nor does this congregation appear to be unique. According to the 2001 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), about 10% of those who identify as Jewish by religion are Orthodox. Of those, 41% had at least a bachelor's degree, 16% had a Master's, and 5% had a Ph.D., M.D., or Doctor of Law degree. Almost three-quarters (72.7%) of the Orthodox strongly believe that "Jews in the US and Jews elsewhere around the world share a common destiny"; 79.7% believe that "Israel is the spiritual center of the Jewish People"; 70.4% stated that "caring about Israel" is a very important part of

being Jewish; 87.8% stated that "leading an ethical and moral life" is a very important part of being Jewish; 72.7% stated that "making the world a better place" is a very important part of being Jewish; 77% stated that "having a rich spiritual life" is a very important part of being Jewish; 72.9% stated that "being part of a Jewish community" is a very important part of being Jewish; and 62.7% stated that "supporting Jewish organizations" is a very important part of being Jewish.

There may be some question as how precisely to define the distinction between Modern Orthodoxy and "ultra," "right wing," "sectarian," or "*haredi*" Orthodoxy, but there seems to be a basic agreement that they may be distinguished on the basis of three major characteristics: The first involves the *haredi* stance toward the larger society in general and the larger Jewish community, which is essentially an attitude of isolation, as opposed to the inclusive attitude of the Modern Orthodox. The second is in reference to modernity, general scholarship and science, with the *haredim* being antagonistic and Modern Orthodoxy being accommodating, if not welcoming. The third entails a basic difference in perspective toward Israel and Zionism, with Modern Orthodoxy being much more receptive to and supportive of the State of Israel as having inherent Jewish significance and the Zionist goal of Israel as the spiritual center.⁸ The data which I just reported demonstrated conclusively that a clear majority, approximately three quarters, of American Orthodox Jews have higher education, are committed to the larger Jewish community, affirm the value of *tiqqun olam*, and strongly believe that Israel is the spiritual center of the Jewish People. In other words, they are Modern Orthodox!

⁶ *Mahzor Vitri* 500.

⁷ This may, in part, help explain the perception of the "move to the right." It may well be that Modern Orthodox rabbis, including those ordained at RIETS in the latter part of the twentieth century, were considerably more to the right than were their predecessors. In other words, the move to the right may have been within the RIETS *semikhah* (ordination) program, under the influence of a revisionist approach to the thinking of its revered head, the late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik ("the Rav"), rather than within Orthodoxy as a whole, but is so glaring because rabbis are much more visible than the laity. On revisionism with respect to the Rav, see Lawrence Kaplan, "Revisionism and the Rav: The Struggle for the Soul of Modern Orthodoxy," *Judaism* 48,3 (Summer 1999): 290-311.

⁸ Tovah Lichtenstein, in a personal communication, has suggested a fourth factor, and one that has become increasingly decisive— the attitudes toward women as manifest in patterns of women's education, especially Jewish education.

The leadership of Orthodox Jewry during the first half of the twentieth century was, apparently, not quite equipped to overcome the challenges of the open American society, and there is much evidence of widespread defection from both Orthodox observance and affiliation. As Marshall Sklare put it at mid-century, "Orthodox adherents have succeeded in achieving the goal of institutional perpetuation only to a limited extent; the history of their movement in this country can be written in terms of a case study of institutional decay."⁹ Nor was it solely institutional decline. The available evidence suggested that the Orthodox were declining in numbers as well and, indeed, even in the mid-1970s, it appeared that they would continue to decline.¹⁰

The Holocaust changed much of this. Although many Orthodox Jews had resisted coming to the United States in earlier years, there was now no choice for them, and they decided to come and transplant their religious culture in America. The available evidence suggests that Orthodox Jews were disproportionately represented among Holocaust refugees who immigrated to the United States. In his study of Holocaust survivors, William Helmreich conducted in-depth interviews with 170 survivors and found approximately 41% identified as Orthodox, as compared to the 10% or less in the larger American Jewish population.¹¹

Lest it be argued that Helmreich's interviewees may not be representative, my own analysis of data from the national survey of America's Jews, the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, indicated similar patterns. Looking at respondents who stated that their current religion is Jewish, among those who were born elsewhere and arrived in the US during the years 1937-1948, 20% identified their current denomination as Orthodox and 45% identified the denomination in which they were raised as Orthodox. Among respondents of those ages

who were born in the United States, 6% identified their current denomination as Orthodox and 19% identified the denomination in which they were raised as Orthodox.

Included among the new arrivals were a number of Orthodox leaders who had been heads of advanced rabbinical seminaries, *yeshivot gedolot*, in Eastern Europe. Almost immediately upon their arrival in the United States, they set about to reconstruct those yeshivas on American soil. Such leaders as Rabbi Aaron Kotler, Rabbi Abraham Kalmanowitz, and Rabbis Eliyahu Meir Bloch and Mordechai Katz reestablished their advanced yeshivas in Lakewood, Brooklyn, Cleveland, and elsewhere, in the Eastern European mold, and helped spawn a generation of knowledgeable and ideologically committed Orthodox Jews, many of whom were to subsequently establish other advanced yeshivas in dozens of American cities.

As a first step, the National Society for Hebrew Day Schools, Torah Umesorah, was formed with the objective of encouraging and assisting in the founding of Jewish day schools—elementary and high schools that would provide intensive Jewish education along with a quality secular curriculum in cities and neighborhoods across the country. The number of day schools grew from 35 to 323 and enrollments grew from 7,700 to 63,500 between the years 1940 and 1965. By 1975, there were a total of 425 day schools and 138 high schools, with an enrollment of 82,200. These schools were located not only in the New York metropolitan area, but in 33 states across the country. By 1975, every city in the United States with a Jewish population of 7,500 had at least one day school, as did four out of five of the cities with a Jewish population of between 5,000 and 7,500. Among cities with smaller Jewish populations, one out of four with a population of

⁹ Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1955), p. 43.

¹⁰ "Modern Jewish Orthodoxy in America—Toward the Year 2000" (with E. Mayer), *Tradition*, 16, 3 (Spring 1977): 101.

¹¹ William B. Helmreich, *Against All Odds: Holocaust Survivors and the Successful Lives They Made in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), pp. 78-79.

1,000 Jews had a Jewish day school.¹²

It should be noted that instituting this type of day school was in itself an adaptation to modernity. Many of the very same rabbinic leaders who inspired the day school movement, especially Rabbi Aaron Kotler, had been adamantly opposed to this type of school, which combined both sacred and secular education. Although a number of day schools had been founded early in the twentieth century, their numbers and, hence, their impact were relatively small. With the efforts of the leadership of the new immigration, the picture changed dramatically. As indicated, there was a virtual boom in the growth of the day school movement from World War II to the mid-1970s and, since then, day schools have become recognized as valued institutions within Conservative and Reform Judaism as well. Indeed, by the 1990s, non-Orthodox day schools were the fastest growing phenomenon in the American Jewish community.¹³ As indicated in a 1994 study by the Avi Chai Foundation which analyzed the self-identified denominational affiliation of day schools in the United States, of a total of 221 schools surveyed in New York State, 204 were Orthodox, 11 Solomon Schechter, 5 community (i.e., not identified with any movement) and 1 Reform. In the rest of the country a total of 280 schools were surveyed: 170 were Orthodox, 55 community, 43 Solomon Schechter and 12 Reform.¹⁴ Thus, in New York State, the Orthodox schools represented 92% of the total number of day schools, but the picture was very different outside of New York State.

There, although Orthodox Schools were still a majority,

¹² Chaim I. Waxman, *America's Jews in Transition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), pp. 125-126.

¹³ Hanan Alexander, "Literacy, Education and the Good Life," paper delivered at the Workshop on Language, Culture, and Jewish Identity, Tel-Aviv University, School of Education, Dec. 28, 1998.

¹⁴ *Jewish Day Schools in the United States* (New York: Avi Chai Foundation, 1994), p. 4.

¹⁵ Chaim I. Waxman, *Jewish Baby Boomers: A Communal Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 112-114. See also Sylvia Barack Fishman and Alice Goldstein, *When They Are Grown They Will Not Depart: Jewish Education and the Jewish Behavior of American Adults*, Research Report 8, Waltham: Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and the Jewish Education Service of North America, (March 1993).

¹⁶ This theme is captured in the 1997 award-winning documentary film by Menachem Daum and Oren Rudavsky, "A Life Apart: Hasidim in America." See also Jerome Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1998.

¹⁷ Chaim I. Waxman, "The Haredization of American Orthodox Jewry"; Samuel G. Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000).

they represented only 60% of the total.

As for impact of day schools on Jewish identity, analysis of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) data on baby boomers indicates that day school education correlates with almost all measures of Jewish identity and identification, and for many of those measures, the correlation is much higher than it is with other types of Jewish education.¹⁵

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Also among the refugees were many members and some leaders of Hasidic sects, such as: Belz, Bobov, Chernobel, Lisk, Munkatch, Novominsk, Satmar, Skver, Stolin, Talin, Tarel, Tash, Trisk, and Zanz, to name some of the more prominent ones. The *hasidim*, perhaps even more than others, were determined to retain their traditional way of life even within the modern metropolis and they were largely successful in achieving that goal.¹⁶

This new infusion of ideologically committed Orthodox provided the numbers and the manpower for the renaissance that was to manifest itself more than a quarter of century later. It also played a role in the intensification of religious belief and practice among the Orthodox, as well as in the increasing rift between them and the non-Orthodox.¹⁷

Interestingly, in contrast to the assertion by several critics of this phenomenon, the increased religious zealotry and the growing rift between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox denominations within American Judaism do not represent a distancing of Orthodox Jews from American society. Quite the contrary. Indications are that they are increasingly attached to the larger society and view living their Orthodox lifestyle as a right within the larger society rather than as set apart from it.

One indication of their emotional attachments to the larger society may be reflected in the widespread display of American flags on homes and businesses in heavily Orthodox neighborhoods following the World Trade Center disaster of September 11, 2001. The national office of Agudath Israel, a prominent *haredi* organization, sent out strongly-worded letters imploring its members to contribute to the fund for families of firefighters and police victims of the disaster. These actions appear to indicate a deep sense of identification with the tragedy as Americans.

As Diamond points out in his study of the Orthodox Jewish community in suburban Toronto,¹⁸ a series of vibrant Orthodox Jewish suburban communities have developed across North America, and the key to their success is the combination of the socio-economic affluence of their constituents as well as their religious commitments that require them to live within a single neighborhood—Orthodox religious law prohibits driving on the Sabbath, setting the framework for a communal structure in which its members are in close physical proximity with each other.

Some Orthodox Jews who were sufficiently modern as to have achieved relatively high educational and economic status and who internalized modern conceptions of aesthetics and social organization moved to the suburbs and built small communities that later, once the communal foundations had been established, attracted larger numbers of Orthodox Jews. In contrast to the stereotype of Orthodox Jews as being concentrated in the lower socio-economic strata, many of them are fairly affluent. It should be noted, however, that, according to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, as a group, the Orthodox continued to have annual family incomes lower than Conservative and Reform Jews; but, compared to the North American population, even they have above-average incomes.¹⁹

Some find it ironic that many of the new Orthodox communities, which were developed by Modern Orthodox Jews and reflected Modern Orthodox norms and values, are now abandoning many of those norms and are becoming much more *haredi*.²⁰ In part, this is a result of the fact that, with Orthodox communal development, increasing numbers of *haredim* feel free to move there. This pattern manifests itself in a range of Orthodox communities, such as Boro Park and Flatbush, in Brooklyn, the Five Towns in Nassau County, Monsey in Rockland County, Baltimore, Toronto, and others. But there is much more to the pattern.

¹⁸ Etan Diamond, *And I Will Dwell in Their Midst; Orthodox Jews in Suburbia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Chaim I. Waxman, *Jewish Baby Boomers*.

²⁰ Etan Diamond, *And I will Dwell in Their Midst*; Samuel G. Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew*; Chaim I. Waxman, "The Haredization of American Orthodox Jewry."

the United States as a whole.

As I interpreted the "haredization" of American Orthodoxy, it was due to a number of sociological, ideological and institutional factors, including the higher birth rate among *haredim*, the more highly organized character of *haredi* communities, which have clear lines of authority with high degrees of social control; the reactionary tendency of *haredim*; the *haredi* dominance over day schools; and the weaker institutional base of Modern Orthodoxy.²¹

They also have a strong sense of ideological self-assuredness; that is, they have no doubts about the correctness of their approaches.

Part of the haredization of American Orthodoxy was more illusory than real.

Two important developments emerged during the late 1970s and 1980s to significantly affect American Modern Orthodoxy. The first was a socio-cultural development in

As I am wont to point out in a variety of contexts, the statement attributed to the German apostate and poet, Heinrich Heine,²² " *Wie es sich christelt, so judelt es sich*" ("As Christianity goes, so goes Judaism"), is actually a variation of a similar statement asserted centuries earlier by Rabbi Judah he-Hasid,²³ in his well-known work, *Sefer ha-Hasidim*. "It is known that as is the Gentile custom in most places so is the Jewish custom."

With respect to the "turn to the right" in American Orthodoxy, it was, in large measure, a reflection of the broader turn to the right and rise of fundamentalism in a variety of different countries and continents.

If, in mid-century United States, secularization appeared to be the wave of the future, an inevitable consequence of modernity—so much so that sociologist Peter Berger predicted that by the year 2000, "religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture"²⁴—by the closing decades of the century, Berger had recanted and averred

²¹These are discussed in detail in Chaim I. Waxman, "The Haredization of American Orthodox Jewry." It should be emphasized, however, that the close-knit character of *haredi* communities and the concomitant strong social controls do not necessarily mean that the rabbis have complete control. On the contrary, there is more than good reason to suggest that *haredi* communities are not impervious and are not immune to many of the same forces at work in the larger society. They, too, have experienced consequences of modernity and, even among them, the authority of rabbis has declined. If nothing else, there is now a much greater heterogeneity even among *haredi* rabbis. Consequently, it is frequently "independent" zealots with little or no formal authority who are able to instigate "witch hunts" and incite significant sectors of the *haredi* masses to enforce their desired ends. Accordingly, the authority of rabbis in these communities is significantly weaker than is typically perceived, even as the zealots legitimate their actions under the banners of " *Da'as Torah*." On the politics of the concept, see Gershon C. Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition: Agudat Yisrael in Poland, 1916-1939* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996); Lawrence Kaplan, "Daas Torah: A Modern Conception of Rabbinic Authority," in Moshe Sokol, ed., *Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992), pp. 1-60; Binyamin Brown, " *Mei-Hitbadlut Politit le-Hitbazrut Tarbutit: Ha-Hazon Ish u-Qevi'at Darkah shel ha-Yahadut ha-Haredit be-Erez Yisra'el* (5693-5714)," in Mordechai Bar-On and Zvi Zameret, eds., *Shenei Evrei ha-Gesher: Dat u-Medinah be-Reishit Darkah shel Yisra'el* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 2002), pp. 364-413.

²² 1797-1856.

²³ Rabbi Judah ben Samuel, "the Pious"; c. 1150-1217.

²⁴ "A Bleak Outlook is Seen for Religion," *The New York Times*, February 25, 1968.

that the world today "is as furiously religious as it ever was."²⁵

Moreover "On the international religious scene, it is conservative or orthodox or traditionalist movements that are on the rise almost everywhere."²⁶

The forces of moderation have widely been replaced by fundamentalism and it has become fashionable to reject the culture—although not the technology—of modernity in favor of "strong religion."²⁷ It should, therefore, be no surprise that American Orthodoxy moved to the right; it was reflecting a pattern in the larger society and culture.

As suggested above, the move to the right in the larger Orthodox community was present within the walls of RIETS as well, and a "Rav revisionism," which often manifested itself as in opposition to one or more components of Modern Orthodoxy, emerged.²⁸ Modern Orthodoxy was not yet sufficiently equipped to withstand this onslaught.

It should be emphasized, however, that part of the haredization of American Orthodoxy was more illusory than real. American Orthodoxy appeared to have been haredized because the *haredi* element is much more visible than are the Modern Orthodox. Most obviously, the *haredim* stand out with their unique patterns of dress. The Modern Orthodox, by contrast, look like everyone else. In addition, American *haredim*, as opposed to their counterparts in Israel, are much more involved with the larger society, and they have not been immune to the impact of American culture—they have a much greater visible presence in every occupational field than do Israeli *haredim*. They appear to have a particular attraction to the technological areas of computers and communications,

precisely the areas that burgeoned during the 1980s and 1990s. As such, increasing numbers of non-*haredim* became aware of them and came into contact with them, and they appeared to dominate Orthodoxy.

In addition, the very modernity of the Modern Orthodox meant that they were less likely to be affiliated and actively involved with Orthodox communal organizations than are the *haredim*. Again, this is a phenomenon characteristic of the larger American society and culture, and not unique to Orthodoxy. The political scientist Robert Putnam amassed considerable data indicating that Americans are increasingly detached from social groups such as community, are increasingly less likely to join parent-teacher associations, unions, political parties, as well as host of other social groups.²⁹

Orthodox American Jews are not immune from this cultural pattern and, although they clearly have much stronger community bonds than do the non-Orthodox, they are also affected by the move away from formal organizations. To some extent, the phenomenon of "shtibelization," of increasing reluctance to join formal synagogues, may be a manifestation of the larger pattern Putnam analyzes. Be that as it may, the Modern Orthodox are more affected by the larger cultural pattern than are the *haredim* and, therefore, the *haredim* may be more visible because of their greater presence in the organizational spheres.

It was not until the 1990s that Modern Orthodoxy began to recoup some of its position with Orthodoxy. To some extent, it has been strengthened by developments in Modern Orthodoxy in Israel. As the late Charles Liebman observed, "contrary to all expectations, a new Modern Orthodox elite has emerged in the past few

²⁵ Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 2.

²⁶ *Id.*, p. 6.

²⁷ Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms Around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

²⁸ Lawrence Kaplan, "Revisionism and the Rav."

²⁹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

years."³⁰ The close connections between the American Modern Orthodox and their counterparts in Israel have been documented.³¹ There can be no question, therefore, that the strength of Israeli Modern Orthodoxy feeds its counterpart in the United States.³²

Although the forces of the larger culture probably depleted the Modern Orthodox population in recent decades, those same forces strengthened that population by their impact on the *haredi* community. This is obvious in the areas of music, dress, and leisure-time activity, as is obvious from the pages of the variety of weekly and monthly publications, "newspapers," that have developed in *haredi* neighborhoods, and is part of what Alan Wolfe sees as the influence of American culture on religions in all of its variation in the United States.³³

As a result, Modern Orthodoxy has benefited from the growth and acculturation of the *haredi* community. That is, much as it may not wish to admit it, the *haredi* community is not immune to the forces of the larger society and culture and there have been defections from it to Modern Orthodoxy. In fact, the increases in the size of the *haredi* community may also have resulted in greater numbers of those leaving haredism and becoming part of

the Modern Orthodox community.

Perhaps most importantly, American Modern Orthodoxy has begun to develop the institutional structure it previously lacked. In large measure, Yeshiva University (YU), under the leadership of the late Rabbi Dr. Samuel Belkin, served as the major institutional base for Modern Orthodoxy during the 1950s and 1960s.³⁴ As a result of a variety of factors, including YU's growing financial hardships and the severely declining health of its widely revered spiritual leader, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, that institution's involvement in the larger community declined sharply and, from the mid-1970s through the 1980s, Modern Orthodoxy suffered from both an institutional and intellectual leadership vacuum.

YU's next president, Dr. Norman Lamm, was very busy in those years reestablishing the university's financial base; when he took over, it was on the verge of bankruptcy. But, by the end of the 1980s, he was able to realize an idea which he had developed some time earlier and, in September 1989, he formally convened the first Orthodox Forum, a now annual meeting of Jewish scholars, educators, and communal professionals, who serve as a think tank for the Modern Orthodox community. Dr.

³⁰Charles S. Liebman, "Modern Orthodoxy in Israel," *Judaism* 47, 4 (Fall 1998): 406; see also Yair Sheleg, *The New Religious Jews: Recent Developments Among Observant Jews in Israel* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2000) (Hebrew).

³¹ For evidence that Orthodox Jews in the United States have much more extensive and intensive ties with Israel than do the non-Orthodox, see Chaim I. Waxman, *American Aliya: Portrait of an Innovative Migration Movement* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 111; Chaim I. Waxman, "Weakening Ties: The Changing Relationship of American Jewish Baby Boomers and Israel," in Allon Gal, ed., *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jewry* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press and Detroit, Wayne State University Press), 1996, pp. 374-396, esp. pp. 385-386.

³² Prof. Menachem Friedman, of Bar-Ilan University's Sociology Department, has suggested to me that the connections between the Orthodox in the U. S. and Israel could appropriately be analyzed within the context of such concepts as the "*haredi* global village" and "Modern Orthodox global village." For a perspective on the role of digital communications technology in the formation of a "*haredi* virtual community" and "Jewish global village," see Orly Tsarfaty and Dotan Blais, "Haredi Society and the Digital Media," <http://www.tau.ac.il/institutes/bronfman/contents32.html>. On the influence of American Orthodoxy on Israeli Orthodoxy, see Yair Sheleg, *The North American Impact on Israeli Orthodoxy* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, Argov Center for the Study of Israel and the Jewish People, 1999).

³³ Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

³⁴ Victor B. Geller, *Orthodoxy Awakens: The Belkin Era and Yeshiva University* (Jerusalem and New York: Urim, 2003).

Lamm likewise played a central role in the founding of the Orthodox Caucus, another group that serves as a catalyst for discussing and encouraging the implementation of new strategies for dealing with issues confronting Modern Orthodoxy and Jewry in contemporary society.

In addition to these YU-fostered projects, a number of other Modern Orthodox educational institutions emerged during the 1980s and 1990s. These would include the growing number of Torah Mitzion Religious Zionist *kolelim*, post-graduate schools, of which there are now 14 throughout the United States.

Another Modern Orthodox institution that has witnessed growth is the Drisha Institute for Jewish education, a women's center for higher Jewish learning. And, in 1999, Rabbi Avi Weiss founded Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a Modern Orthodox rabbinical school that describes itself as an "open Orthodox institution that views Orthodox Judaism as an intellectually rich, questioning, spiritual and inclusive Jewish movement" It is a new institution, and it is too early to tell whether and to what extent it will succeed. There are even questions as to whether those it ordains will be recognized by the established Orthodox rabbinic organizations.

In 1996, a grassroots movement of Jews specifically committed to Modern Orthodoxy was founded. Led by Rabbi Saul Berman under the motto, "The courage to be modern and Orthodox," Edah held its first conference in New York City in 1997, and it was attended by more than 1,500 people. Subsequently, it has held conferences every two years, in New York and in Jerusalem, all of which have been very well attended. Although there are no for-

mal empirical measures of its success, the interest in the movement suggests that there is a rather broad population out there that views itself as Modern Orthodox and is seeking legitimacy and direction.

Finally, for our purposes, there is the Jewish Orthodox Feminists' Alliance (JOFA), an organization which held the first of its international conferences in 1997 and will hold its fifth, now biennial, conference in 2004. Among its agenda items is a project that mentors women in positions, such as chaplains and interns, which formerly were solely within the male purview.

All of these ventures are new, and their long-standing impact cannot yet be measured. Nor should it be assumed that they are indications that Modern Orthodoxy is becoming organized as is the *haredi* community. What is widely referred to as "the *haredi* community" is, in reality, not one highly organized community but a series of communities that have many internal conflicts despite their broad identification with general *haredim*. The "Modern Orthodox community" is even less organized. It is a collection of disparate individuals and groups who may be identified by their broad agreement on the three distinguishing characteristics of Modern Orthodoxy indicated at the outset, namely, they relate positively to the establishment and growth of the State of Israel and regard it as religiously significant, they have generally positive orientations toward modern society and culture, and they place great inherent value on all Jews and the corporate character of Jewry. Beyond these, there are wide variations and a general modern (or "post-modern") skepticism of institutionalization as well as a growing sense of insufficient time and resources to

become communally involved on any kind of regular basis. But, should a crisis erupt, they are there and their significance should never be underestimated. They may not quite fit the traditional definition of community, but they are much more than a virtual community.

In recent decades, especially since the death of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, there has been a perceived dearth of rabbinic leadership in the Modern Orthodox community. This is probably a reflection of the broader pattern of fragmentation and detachment from communal organizations discussed above. In addition, there is evidence from numerous studies that, in the United States, individuals increasingly arrive at their own religious beliefs.³⁵ One of the ways in which Modern Orthodox American Jews manifest their modernity is in the realm of self-determination, especially via-a-vis religious beliefs, and this has had consequences for the nature of rabbinic authority in the Modern Orthodox community.³⁶

It is important to emphasize that the sense of a recent decline in rabbinic leadership does not manifest itself in a decline in the status of the rabbi as a profession. Given the patterns of seminary enrollments in the United States, in Christian as well as within non-Orthodox seminaries, one might have expected that enrollments in Orthodox seminaries would have declined as well. The empirical data, however, suggest otherwise. In contrast to seminary enrollment patterns in other American Jewish denominations, there has been no decline in enrollments at the RIETS over the past several decades. Indeed, there has actually been a significant increase.

According to its Administrator, Rabbi Chaim Bronstein, RIETS has experienced significant and steady increases in enrollments since the early 1980s. In addition, there have been significant increases in the percentages of enrollees coming from outside Yeshiva University. Now, approximately 20% come from elsewhere, including Ivy League universities and *ba`alei teshuvah* yeshivas.³⁷

One is tempted to explain these figures as unique to RIETS and the Modern Orthodox community, since the institutional ideology of a synthesis of Torah and worldly knowledge emphasizes the value of learning for its own sake and for enabling every individual, in whatever occupation, to grow in Torah knowledge. Ordination, therefore, may not career-related and thus may not be an indication of the status of the profession of the rabbinite.³⁸

Even in the periods of maximum rabbinic influence, as in sixteenth-century Poland, political leadership was firmly in the hands of laymen.

However, the available data indicate that the rabbinate or a cognate field is indeed the professional choice for most RIETS graduates. For example, an analysis of those ordained between 1998 and 2002 indicates that the only 21% plan to enter totally secular professions. Another 7% plan careers in the Jewish organizational field.

The majority plan to enter the pulpit rabbinate (16%),

³⁵Patrick H. McNamara, *Conscience First, Tradition Second: A Study of Young American Catholics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boomer Generation* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993); Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace. Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within. Self, Community, and Commitment Among the Variety of Moderately Affiliated* (Boston: Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies, 1998); Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within. Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Chaim I. Waxman, *Jewish Baby Boomers*.

³⁶Much of the following is discussed in my paper, "The Role and Authority of the Rabbi in American Society," *Orthodox Forum*, New York, March 2003.

³⁷Rabbi Chaim Bronstein, personal communication, 2003.

³⁸Seth Farber, *An American Orthodox Dreamer: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Boston's Maimonides School* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2003); see also my paper, "Thought, Socioculture and Structure: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik as the Leader of Modern Orthodoxy," presented at the conference, "Studies Exploring the Influence of Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik on Culture, Education and Jewish Thought," Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Dec. 30, 2003.

Jewish education at the primary, secondary, or post-high school level (52%) and the chaplaincy in either a hospital or university setting (3%).³⁹

It must be pointed out, however, that only 16% expect to enter the pulpit rabbinate. We have no data on the percentages of previous classes entering the pulpit rabbinate, so it cannot be determined if there has been any change in the patterns, but the available data indicate that only a small percentage of the ordainees plan to become pulpit rabbis.

One other indication of the status of the rabbinate in the Modern Orthodox community is the previously mentioned founding of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and its rabbinic program. Although the school is new and the rabbinic program is limited to only ten students per year, the very fact that the Modern Orthodox community now has another rabbinic seminary and RIETS's enrollment has not correspondingly decreased suggests that, if anything, the desire for ordination in that community is growing.

The new situation presents a serious challenge to the Rabbinical Council of America to redefine its goals and objectives.

As for communal leadership, there appears to be a growing divergence in patterns between the *haredi* and Modern Orthodox. Haredism, accompanied by the notion of the rabbi's all-encompassing and charismatic (in the original sense of that term), developed, in large measure, as a

response to modernization, pluralization, and secularization.⁴⁰

Given the strong sense of community and strong community bonds among *haredim*, the authority and power wielded by rabbis in *haredi* communities far surpasses that in any other, including non-*haredi* Orthodox communities. No other community has the kind of social control commonplace in *haredi* communities and thus, for example, no other community has been witness to the variety of religious bans—public, widely circulated pronouncements of *herem*—that are prevalent in the *haredi* community. In the past year alone, such pronouncements have succeeded in forcing an Orthodox writer from participating in speaking tours with his Reform co-author,⁴¹ in having the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth revise a book that was already in production,⁴² and in banning a book on nineteenth and early twentieth century rabbinic scholars,⁴³ all because they did not conform to the perspectives—not solely halakhic—of some militant *haredi* rabbis. Such power is found only in *haredi* and other, non-Jewish, fundamentalist groups, which are composed of individuals who are much more amenable to submission to authority.⁴⁴

In the non-*haredi* world, by contrast, lay people play much more of a leadership role. This is not anything new. Quite the contrary: From an historical perspective, the *haredi* pattern of rabbinic dominance is the unique one. As Haym Soloveitchik points out, "The lay communal leadership had always reserved political and social areas for itself. Even in the periods of maximum rabbinic

³⁹ Unpublished data supplied by Rabbi Robert Hirt, based on a survey of ordainees in the 2002 *Hag ha-Semikhah*.

⁴⁰ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

⁴¹ Amiel Hirsch and Yosef Reinman, *One People, Two Worlds: An Orthodox Rabbi and a Reform Rabbi Explore the Issues that Divide Them* (New York: Schocken, 2002).

⁴² Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002).

⁴³ Nathan Kamenetsky, *Making of a Godol: A Study of Episodes in the Lives of Great Torah Personalities*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: privately published, 2002).

⁴⁴ Dennis E. Owen, Kenneth D. Wald, and Samuel S. Hill, Jr., "Authoritarian or Authority-Minded? The Cognitive Commitments of Fundamentalists and the Christian Right," *Religion in American Culture* 1 (Winter 1991): pp. 73-100.

influence, as in sixteenth-century Poland, political leadership was firmly in the hands of laymen."⁴⁵

However, even in the Modern Orthodox community and especially in the United States, where denominations in general have been important voluntary organizations, rabbis have played important, if not decisive, roles in communal affairs. In terms of the American Jewish experience, it is not simply coincidence that the among the first efforts at bringing some order to the chaotic religious life were efforts to organize a synagogue association and a rabbinic association.⁴⁶

Although there has apparently not been any decline in the status of the rabbinate as a profession among the Modern Orthodox, it does appear that the scope of rab-

binic authority has undergone changes commensurate with the cultural shifts in the larger society. For the rabbinate, this has resulted in a decreased role for Orthodox national rabbinic groups. For the *haredim* and thof Orthodox Rabbis, the *Agudas Harabanim*, this may not be very significant because their roles have, to a large extent, been taken over by heads of yeshivas, *roshei yeshivah*. For the Modern Orthodox community, however, the new social situation presents a serious challenge to its rabbinic association, the Rabbinical Council of America, to redefine its goals and objectives if it wishes to increase the likelihood that rabbis will continue to play significant roles in the broader communal agenda.

⁴⁵ Haym Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Tradition*, 28, 4 (1994): 64-130; reprinted in Roberta Rosenberg Farber and Chaim I. Waxman, eds., *Jews in America: A Contemporary Reader* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press/ University Press of New England, 1999), pp. 320-376.

⁴⁶ Chaim I. Waxman, *America's Jews in Transition* (Philadelphia,: Temple University Press, 1982), pp. 14-15.