

American Orthodoxy: Where Are We, Who Are We, and Where Are We Going?

Samuel C. Heilman

Abstract: This paper sketches some of the elements that account for the gradual sliding towards the religious right within American Orthodoxy during the last three decades. It is a brief excerpt from a longer analysis contained in the forthcoming book: *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of Orthodox Judaism in America* (University of California Press).

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In a little more than fifty years, American Orthodoxy has gone from being a “marginal phenomenon,” whose survival seemed to be in question and whose adherents tried to camouflage their presence and blend into the melting pot of this country, to a religious option comfortably at home, proudly visible, and firmly established in the salad bowl of a multi-cultural America. Once predominantly working-class or immigrant and located within the poorest neighborhoods of the inner cities, Orthodox Jews have by now become overwhelmingly native-born and relocated in large numbers to the suburbs.

Indeed, even among the Hasidim, so many of whom made their way to the United States just before and after the Holocaust, a majority are now native born.¹ Although overwhelmingly found in and around the cities of the Northeast, and particularly New York, Orthodox Jews have established significant presences in parts of the South, Midwest, and West. About nine in ten of them are married to Jews, and of the relative few who have intermarried, a quarter have spouses who converted to Judaism. In their family life they maintain a high degree of stability, with a divorce rate that, although rising, remains far lower than the rate of approximately 30% among other Jews and the even higher rate in much of the rest of America. Their birthrate remains somewhere between three to eight children per family. In other words, barring a far-reaching and rapid exodus from Orthodoxy (or of Orthodox Jews from America), there are concrete factors that will lead

to its demographic growth that may offset generations of decline.²

The Orthodox commonly live in areas of highest Jewish density. Even when they have moved to the periphery of the Jewish community, however, they have managed to do something that few other Jews have done: they have changed the communities into which they have moved rather becoming changed by them. Because Orthodox Jews cannot or will not acquiesce to a diminished level of Jewish life, no matter where they live, their entry into small Jewish communities has frequently promoted greater religious and ethnic participation in these places—this is most vividly demonstrated in the transformation of their suburbs to shtetls, as the late Egon Mayer put it, with a variety of Orthodox institutions concentrated in a small area. Simply put: American Orthodox Jews have been able to make areas of Jewish scarcity flourish.

In the political domain, Orthodox Jews have risen to unprecedented levels of political power and influence in both local and national government, all without hiding their Jewish and religious commitments. The Democrats’ nomination in 2000 of Joseph Lieberman, an openly observant member of an Orthodox synagogue, for Vice-President of the United States (and his serious bid for the Presidential nomination four years later) and the role that a *kippah*-clad, Jewishly observant Ari Weiss played as House Speaker Tip O’Neill’s chief legislative aide in the ninety-fifth through the ninety-ninth Congresses are among the most

¹ The 2000 U.S. Census, for example, reports that in Kaser village, an all-Vizhnitz Hasidic enclave in suburban New York, almost 88% of the population is native born. In the Satmar Hasidic village of Kiryas Joel, the figure is an even higher 91%.

² Steven M. Cohen, *Ethnic Stability, Religious Decline* (New York: Florence G. Heller/JCCA Research Center, 1998).

dramatic examples of American national political involvement by individual Orthodox Jews. The ascension of the Orthodox Jewish Sheldon Silver to the high-ranking position of Speaker in the New York State Assembly, making him perhaps the most powerful Democrat in the State, is no less impressive.

On the level of group involvement, the Orthodox know their way around a variety of political institutions and corridors of power, exerting political influence both within the Jewish community and in all levels of government where they have interests at stake. Lobbying in Congress by Orthodox groups, including such organizations as the National Council of Young Israel, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, the Lubavitcher Hasidim or the Agudath Israel is today routine. At the local and state levels, this activity is even more pronounced, particularly in and around metropolitan New York, where Orthodox Jews constitute approximately a fifth of the Jewish population. Lubavitcher Hasidim have been in the oval office in every administration since Jimmy Carter's. Moreover, it is not surprising to see politicians courting the American Jewish vote having their pictures taken with some Hasidic rebbe or donning a *kippah*, as if Orthodoxy were emblematic of American Jewry. While the Orthodox in America are not as broadly engaged in the political life of the nation as they are in Israel, their engagement in the politics and government of the United States is quite remarkable when one considers that America is not a Jewish state or one where there is a Jewish majority but rather one in which the Jews constitute between 2% and 3% of the population and the Orthodox somewhere around 10% to 12% of that tiny fraction.

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The Orthodox have been successful in building institutions. According to one survey, almost 40% of the synagogues in America are Orthodox, and in the New York metropolitan area that proportion

rises to 57%.³ They have several national rabbinic organizations, nationwide synagogue associations, day school and yeshiva organizations representing a growing network of such institutions, lay and professional organizations, advocacy groups, youth associations, a plethora of *kashrut* certifying associations, groups built around coordinated Jewish study—the list seems endless. Moreover, the Orthodox increasingly have taken positions of leadership in many of the major Jewish organizations and serve as executives or in primary staff positions in such varied organizations as the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, the American Jewish Committee, the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, the Association for Jewish Studies, and a number of large federations—to name just a few. The Orthodox are at the hub of activity in Jewish organizations and federations, and their share of leadership positions is growing (in part of course because other Jews have abandoned these positions in favor of ones in the world outside the Jewish one).

Throughout the final decades of the twentieth century, Orthodox Jews, although still the Jewish group with the lowest per capita average income and the highest Jewish expenses (a result of their greater involvement in Jewish life, including most prominently full time, private Jewish education for their children) have become wealthier and far better educated than during most of their past. More careful scrutiny and analysis reveal that those commonly referred to as *haredim* account for much of the lower income and higher Jewish costs (and as well most of the greater fertility) and tend to be less likely to have a college education.

The Orthodox overwhelmingly provide their offspring with full time religious education in day schools and yeshivas, which they view as key to continuity. In the last five years, these schools grew by about 12%, with about a quarter of those enrolled in schools under Hasidic auspices and about 6% in those identified as Modern Orthodox⁴ What was once viewed as optional is now a *sine qua*

³ James Schwartz, Jeffery Scheckner and Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz in the *American Jewish Yearbook 2002*, p. 136, report that of the 3727 synagogues in the United States in 2001, 40% are Orthodox.

⁴ Marvin Schick, *A Census of Day Schools in the United States 2003-2004* (New York: Avi Chai Foundation, 2005), pp. 1-2.

non for those who would call themselves members of the movement. Orthodox females have now universally joined the ranks of Jews who are given a solid Jewish education from the primary grades through high school age, and the last twenty years has seen an explosion of advanced Torah learning institutions and study circles that serve Orthodox women, many of whom now consider such study as an obligatory element of their lives. In some neighborhoods, yeshivas—especially those that cater to adult married males—are not only educating but also sustaining whole communities (made up of large families), often at enormous expense.

The library of the Orthodox Jew today rivals or exceeds the books available in the renowned yeshivas of Europe.

Not altogether unrelated to these developments, the Orthodox today publish (and own) more sacred Jewish books (many in translation as well as the original) than ever before in their history. The Mesorah Foundation has just marked the completion of its Schottenstein Babylonian Talmud with its English translation and commentary. The private library of the average Orthodox Jew today probably rivals or even exceeds the books that were available in some of the renowned yeshivas of Europe. Increasingly, even those Jews who do not pursue Torah learning as a vocation are reviewing these books, whether in the context of a national movement of Jewish study—the *daf yomi* being perhaps the best known—or in the plethora of study circles in synagogues, boardrooms, private homes and other places where Orthodox Jews gather. The idea of every Jew—male and female alike—having a *havruta* (study partners) is an increasingly popular feature in the web of relationships that tie Orthodox Jews to one another.

In popular culture, Orthodoxy no longer remains in the shadows. On television, in the theatre, and movies Orthodox Jews figure in plots, and not

always in the classic guise of immigrants, old Jews, or some other stereotype. In newspapers and magazines, stories about Orthodox Jews are far from rare.

Kosher food, the staple of the Orthodox diet, is no longer an unusual item on the American scene. Once a dietary mandate that served to circumscribe the Jews' ability to move freely outside the tribal domains of their parochial universe, the restrictions of a kosher diet are now far less limiting than at any time in American Jewish history. Orthodox Jewish institutions, both non-profit and those in it for the business, have made kosher food widely available. The kosher food industry is booming. Kosher food specialty firms now constitute a quickly growing \$200-million industry.⁵ There are today over 41,000 kosher-certified products in the U.S. retail food market, including everything from Oreo Cookies and M&M's to fake bacon and gourmet foods and wines.⁶ By the last decade of the twentieth century over 180,000 cases of kosher wines were sold annually in the United States; five years later this number had more than doubled, to 365,000.⁷ Strict standards of dietary law observance are taken increasingly for granted. Indeed, even so-called "glatt kosher," originally a more stringent and rarely invoked standard of kosher meat but today generally misused to refer to all manner of foods subject to greater supervisory costs, is now almost as widely available as any other kosher food standard. There is, moreover, no airline flight leaving from or destined for anywhere in North America on which one cannot order a kosher meal in lieu of the standard refreshment.⁸

The emergence of a rich cultural life among Orthodox Jews is another aspect of a triumphalist contemporary American Jewish scene. This is an Orthodoxy that has a contemporary literature in English, some of it in common with American literature of the day and some of it particularistic, religiously inspirational, and quite distinct. It is an Orthodoxy that makes use of music and arts to

⁵ J.J. Goldberg, "America's Vanishing Jews," *The Jerusalem Report* 1992, November 5, 2005, p. 28.

⁶ <http://www.preparedfoods.com/archives/236.htm>

⁷ Diamond, *And I Will Dwell in their Midst: Orthodox Jews in Suburbia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 121 and Howard G. Goldberg, "Slaves No More to Sweet Wine," *Jerusalem Report*, April 20, 1995, pp. 56-57.

⁸ Actually, the kosher traveler can choose in many cases between "kosher" and "glatt kosher" meals and snacks.

further its way of life. It has its own cultural heroes and even a growing array of distinctively Jewish leisure activities and venues, including fast food and fancy restaurants as well as indigenous “vacation villages” in which all the occupants are Orthodox. Even such relatively exotic trips as a luxury cruise to Alaska can be done under the auspices of a group calling itself “Kosherica Tours,” and excursions deep inside China, Japan, and other “exotic” destinations are available to and increasingly taken by the well-to-do Orthodox and other kosher-food-eating fellow travelers.

In cyberspace, the Orthodox are well represented. In chat rooms and weblogs as well on the World Wide Web, the Orthodox are easily found. From sites that assist romance to those that help find apartments and those that provide religious instruction, locations of synagogues and communities, advice about the Messiah--there is almost no realm of Orthodox existence that is not represented on the Internet.

There is an on-going struggle for the heart of Orthodoxy in America.

All this has led to an infusion of confidence and assertiveness in American Orthodoxy, in contrast to the timidity that often characterized it in the past. And it has led to a conviction that the rest of American Jewry (whose numbers seem to be shrinking) is not going to be nearly as successful in maintaining itself. Much of this constitutes the triumphalist “big picture” of American Orthodoxy.

And yet, there is as well an on-going struggle for the heart of Orthodoxy in America; a battle, which has become more intense over the last twenty years, to define what sort of Orthodoxy will best ensure Jewish continuity. The Modernists appear still to constitute a numerical majority in that struggle, but the religiously right wing seems to be gaining confidence in its power to represent the movement. It has become clear that this traditionalist right wing, the so-called *haredi* element, has not disappeared as many predicted it would, but has instead been successful in building

institutions, creating schools, enrolling students, training rabbis, and asserting its place in the Orthodox world. This Orthodoxy appreciates American freedom but wishes to remain separate and distinct from its culture and values.

In contrast, the so-called “modern” or “centrist” Orthodox, who once tried to stand with one foot in the world of strict observance and loyal faith and the other in the world outside the Jewish—viewing both as valuable and believing that this double engagement was the best way for Orthodoxy to thrive and survive into the future--have begun to retreat from this culturally pluralist stance and move in sectarian or parochial directions. At the same time, people who once called themselves “Orthodox,” because the synagogue they did *not* go to regularly was an Orthodox one, have stopped identifying themselves as such, in part because the ante for being called “Orthodox” has risen too high for them during the last few decades.

With the disappearance of the nominally Orthodox, those who were once in the movement’s middle ground have found themselves defining its outer extreme, an uncomfortable position for them. Simultaneously, these Jews faced an increasingly confident and visible right wing warning them that they were now too far on the margins and more likely to fall prey to the defilements of the outside world to which they were powerfully drawn. In the past, the Modern Orthodox ignored these warnings and continued to embrace the pluralism of being at the intersection of multiple worlds, but now they increasingly became influenced by their *haredi* co-religionists and began retreating toward the right wing. Now, remaining modern and Orthodox required, as the Edah slogan puts it, “courage,” and fewer people who were ready to call themselves “Orthodox” retained that courage. As the Orthodox road turned to the right, walking in what was once the middle now seemed more a formula for getting knocked off the path, the *halakhab*, than a recipe for robust Jewish survival.

This shrinking of (or perhaps *from*) the middle is not unique to American Orthodoxy. It is a feature

of American life in general during the last twenty years, when this country has become polarized – with the right wing become ever more conservative and the left ever more liberal. It is a feature of American Jewry, with the Conservative movement losing numbers (and institutions) and differences among non-Orthodox movements declining, post-denominationalization increasing, and Orthodoxy on the right become ever more assertive.

There are essentially four factors that account for this trend: [1] the perceived decline of American culture, [2] the complete handover by the family of the responsibility for education to the day schools and yeshivas, [3] the decline of modernists in the ranks of the Orthodox rabbinate and Jewish educators, and [4] the emergence of study in Israeli yeshivas and women’s seminaries as an essential experience in Orthodox education and a tool of continuity. Let me briefly elucidate these four factors.

As long as American society and culture represented a positive model, the Modern Orthodox ideal of engagement with it could be safely endorsed. In the late 1960’s, however, the sexual revolution and the emergence of the a radical counterculture aroused doubts among many conservative elements in the population—including many who called themselves “Orthodox Jews”—about the advantages of Western liberal culture, and the attractiveness of making it into America began to wear thin in some Orthodox circles. In recent years, increasing moral relativism and tolerance of non-traditional lifestyles, from unmarried heterosexuals living together to gays wanting to get married, have only increased these doubts about American culture and what it can contribute positively to Orthodox Jewish survival.

At the same time, the American Orthodox were becoming more self-confident about their ability to maintain rigorous standards of conduct and religious behavior without calling into question their status as citizens. One could belong without blending in. As a result, there emerged a backlash not only against some of the cherished acculturative ideals of Modern Orthodoxy, but even against the very name. In a post-modern,

multicultural America, one could be far more conservative. Now, the quest for modernity was increasingly viewed as a step down the slippery slope of compromise.

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When the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey and the resulting debate within American Jewry about continuity exposed the high rate of Jewish intermarriage and confirmed the continuing assimilation of American Jewry, demonstrating in particular that younger college graduates were among the most assimilated and prone to intermarriage, Modern Orthodox Jews became even more concerned about the cultural costs of modernity and the unintended consequences of getting a college degree, an accomplishment and experience that was once so central to their ideological stance.

They began to look for more “Jewish insurance” that would allow for acculturation without assimilation. This led to the quest for an “inoculation” against the disease of assimilation and intermarriage. To many, that inoculation was to be found in a more intensive and parochial Jewish education. This led to the growth of day schools and yeshivas and to the Orthodox family handing over the Jewish education of their young to those schools. “The school will keep my children *frum* and guarantee the future; I will work to pay for it.” Moreover, once Orthodox parents, engaged in careers outside the Jewish world but committed to Jewish continuity, gave up a significant personal role in the education of their children, they became increasingly dependent upon the educators. These were teachers who had control of the children throughout the entire day, from the earliest primary grades and through the end of high school. Orthodox parents gave these teachers, into whose hands they deposited their children, the right to supersede them.

Increasingly, however, the educators who staffed these schools and served as the instruments of Jewish learning and continuity were decidedly not Modern Orthodox Jews. Why? Because even

though Modern Orthodox Jews were committed to full time, intensive Jewish education, their own worldview and education, marked by degrees from some of the best universities, did not lead them to become Jewish educators. Jewish school heads often admitted that harder than finding students to fill their classrooms was the critical quest for teachers who would provide instruction in Judaica and who shared the Modern Orthodox ideological outlook. Those who had that outlook generally pursued careers in the world outside the Jewish one. Accordingly, the Jewish educators to whom the modernists handed over their children were actually *haredim* for who lived both *for* and *off* Jewish education. By one count, nearly two-thirds of today's Judaica teachers in day schools come from the *haredi* world.

In effect, these teachers were “*agents-provocateurs*” who inevitably undermined many of the Modern Orthodox acculturationist values. The modernists often assumed—wrongly—that they could offset the religious impact of the teachers’ *haredi* outlook by offering their own lives and wisdom as an alternative. But of course most of them had no idea how to act as counter-educators—and the rest were just too busy and otherwise engaged. Moreover, when the teachers pushed their students toward the *haredi* right and away from modernist values, the parents allowed this, since they had no alternative teachers and as, Orthodox Jews, had elevated the teacher to a position of unassailable respect. Had they not themselves argued that these teachers were the guardians of the Jewish future? Many of the rabbi/teachers believed this no less – that was one of the reasons they were willing to step out of their enclaves into the defiled domains of the day school (although, to be sure, some did so because they needed the money).

Much the same happened in the rabbinate. Few modernists chose to be rabbis, leaving the yeshivas who produced them to those on the *haredi* right. As a result, American Orthodox rabbis began expressing *haredi* values and worldviews—those they acquired in their education from *haredi* role models. These rabbis entered the pulpits and the classrooms, serving as the religious authorities to

which all Orthodoxy deferred. Increasingly, they shaped the character of their congregations and students in the image of the yeshiva. As such, they worked to convince the laity to hew to yeshiva standards of behavior and belief, to avoid the pitfalls of modern America, and to provide their young with more powerful religious inoculation that required distance from all that was non-Orthodox.

Religious and spiritual leadership need not be only the province of the rabbinate.

This they believed they would find in Israeli yeshivas and seminaries. The religiously anxious parents bought this argument. These institutions, however, were not simply educational. They were ideological ivory towers, total institutions that took the young away from the family 24/7 for a year or more. The students came to regard their teachers as coaches in life, their fellow students as a substitute community and family. The insiders became convinced that any other kind of Orthodox life was inferior and those who spent more than one year in them often engaged in casting out all those who did not share their values and lifestyle.

In time, as products of this educational experience matured and returned to America, they inserted these yeshiva values and behaviors (which they saw as defining a higher standard of Orthodoxy) into their communities and institutions. They were supported by an increasingly right-wing, young rabbinate, who especially idealized the world of the yeshiva that was ready to serve them.

Where can Modern Orthodoxy go from here? Firstly, the conclusion that America is defiling and has little of positive value to offer Judaism is based on a mistaken understanding of what American culture stands for. It ignores the benefits of tolerance and pluralism, the insights that one gains from a university liberal arts education, and the way in which life in more than one cultural universe can still enrich Judaism. Second, those who have given away the task of education to teachers and rabbis must recognize that they do so

at their own peril. Parents need to take a greater role in the Jewish and general education of their children. *Ve-shinnantam le-vanecha* is still a Jewish mandate and perhaps the best advice the Torah gives us. Only in this way can one generation's worldview and experience be shared with the next. Moreover, while it is wonderful that the Modern Orthodox value Jewish education and its institutions and defer to the authority of the rabbis, it is a strategic error and a moral weakness for us to eschew both these fields as vocations. We need to train more of our own rabbis and Jewish educators, bringing people who share our values and culture into the domains of the sacred.

Moreover, religious and spiritual leadership need not be only the province of the rabbinate. Finally, our commitment to the Israel experience needs to be matched with a commitment to creating in Israel pluralist and tolerant institutions recognizing and committed to the idea of *shiv'im panim la-Torah* (the Torah lends itself to many modes of interpretation) and to the viewpoint that wisdom can be found beyond the precincts of the yeshiva. All this requires a wider angle of vision and a willingness to take personal responsibility for defining what Orthodox Judaism is and should be. This will not be easy, but no one ever said it would be.