

In Gods We Trust

New Patterns of Religious Pluralism
in America

Edited by

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Transaction Books
New Brunswick (U.S.A.) and London (U.K.)

ספרית הר הצופים
לסדעי הרוח והחברה

Constructing Orthodoxy

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“There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces” (Esther 3:8). Often unnoticed and unexotic, calling themselves both contemporary and traditional, modern and orthodox, they live in the tension between past and present, the secular and the parochial, the particular and the universal—and accept that painful double existence. Modern Orthodox Jews, those who identify themselves through their commitment to adhere faithfully to the beliefs, principles, and traditions of Jewish law and observance without being either remote from or untouched by life in the contemporary secular world, are by no means the only but perhaps the paradigmatic practitioners of this desperate dialectic.

More operationally, these Jews may be defined as those who are affiliated with Orthodox institutions (synagogue, school, voluntary associations, etc.), who strictly observe Jewish dietary laws (keep kosher) and laws of family purity (use a *mikveh* or ritual bath), who religiously observe the holy days and the Sabbath, and who have made some active public expression of a commitment to a synthesis of Jewish and secular values and education. Because of these joint commitments (particularly their strict observance of the ban of travel other than by foot on the Sabbath) these people also necessarily live together in Orthodox Jewish communities. As such, they remain “locals,” bonded to a

relatively uniform and parochial home community. Insofar as they identify with the beliefs and practices of that place, they confirm and maintain one another's Orthodox expression of Jewishness. In the insider Yiddish vernacular, such a Jewish lifestyle and social circle is *heimisch*, homey, offering both a retreat from the outside world and a group feeling. Among these Orthodox Jews, the repeated patterns of religious life make for an inertial Orthodoxy operating on the strength of local community custom.

In addition to these parochial commitments, modern Orthodox Jews maintain an active and regular involvement in and attachment to the secular, pluralistic, cosmopolitan world, brought about by their extended secular educational training, business pursuits, or profession. This attachment has grown markedly in the last quarter century, a period which at once has seen an increase in Orthodox day school and yeshiva (academy of higher Jewish study) education as well as an increase in involvement in the outside world.

For example, a recent survey of students registered at Queens College, the academic jewel of the City University of New York, reveals that between 1962 and 1977 registration of students coming from Orthodox day schools and yeshivas increased tenfold. Moreover, since 1968 when enrollments at colleges began to decline, Orthodox Jewish students at Queens tripled in number to 6 percent of the total registrants in 1977 (the figures rose a full 0.5 percent between fall 1976 and spring 1977). Even taking into account the residential migration patterns in New York and such factors as "open enrollment" by which admissions requirements were eased, the figures indicate a growing involvement with secular education and the broadened perspectives it portends—perspectives which Wade Roof, in a *American Sociological Review* article, has convincingly shown to undermine the plausibility of traditional religious beliefs and practices. As Roof documents, when education levels rise, religious orthodoxy declines.

There is further demonstration of the cosmopolitanization—the move out of the ghetto—of the Orthodox parochial. For example, the number of those affiliated with the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists has more than doubled in the last decade. There is now a newly organized Association of Orthodox Jewish Faculty and Personnel. Kosher food is offered at such elite campuses as Amherst and Oberlin as well as the large state universities where in the past Orthodox students never appeared. Kosher restaurants are now more than ethnic delicatessens but offer as well gourmet French, Chinese, Italian, and other continental cuisine. And airlines flying to even the most obscure and remote locales carry kosher food. The Orthodox Jew has clearly plunged into the modern world.

In spite of this immersion in the contemporary secular world, those who would characterize themselves as modern Orthodox Jews have not given up their distinctive Orthodox practice and belief. For these people, "Orthodoxy," as one of my informants in the community once put it, "is the bottom line."

Modernity with its alternative outlooks, nontraditional lifestyles, and aggressive individuality, may be pursued only as long as it does not annihilate a fundamental attachment to a strict observance of Torah (the corpus of Jewish law, lore, and rabbinic commentary which is the central organizing element of Jewish religion and tradition considered by believers to be divinely inspired and revealed). Modern Orthodoxy does not consist of a coequal mix of the modern and Orthodox. Rather it recognizes the legitimacy of modernity insofar as it does not destroy Orthodoxy; it admits to a vacuum in Jewish thinking and practice that leaves room for accommodation with contemporaneity. Always, however, that modernity remains restrained. How much of an alternative lifestyle or aggressive individuality is possible, after all, if one is committed to eating only kosher food and regularly praying with a *minyán* (quorum) of other Orthodox Jews? For all of the growing availability of kosher food in far-off places and the increasing number of Orthodox Jews there (a presence admittedly abetted by the Modern Orthodox element), the ritual demands—to say nothing of social and emotional ones—of Orthodoxy constrain the rush toward modernity.

The modern Orthodox Jew implicitly tests the pluralistic tolerance of contemporary American society by demanding, first that it not question his right to oscillate between the two inconsistent worlds he inhabits, and second that it accept and adapt to his stubborn and unfashionable Orthodoxy even as he moves into the modern milieu. Thus, for example, the modern Orthodox Jew who wears his *yarmulke* on his head while smoking pot or who works as a physician in an ultramodern research hospital but takes Friday evenings and Saturdays off to observe his Sabbath does not want to be asked why he has not either given up his archaic Orthodoxies in favor of his modernity (as have his reformist brethren) or retreated completely to the ghetto (as have his more traditionalist counterparts). At first he was satisfied with the civil inattention with which America reacted to his public modern Orthodoxy—it was preferable to the exclusions of earlier Jewish history. Only recently (and this point I shall examine later) in an age of militant ethnicity and a growing national religious consciousness, the modern Orthodox Jew has begun to expect American society to accept and confirm the legitimacy, the “Americanism,” of his organized dualism and distinctive Orthodoxy.

Initially, the move into the modern American world was not easy; nor was it one-way. In the process, such Jews discovered that the sectarian and traditionalist character of their Orthodoxy clashed with the pluralism and chronic change dominating American society. Committed by inertia, circumstance, and desire to being integrated in these two fundamentally antithetical worlds, modern Orthodox Jews in the past spent a great deal of their energies organizing their lives so as to minimize the conflicts inherent in their dualism. This often meant living what one insider has called “a schizoid life—full-fledged Orthodox Jew and at the same time full-fledged American.” Never-

theless, these *homini duplex* evolved ways to ease their alternation between the timeless sacred orthodoxies of yesterday and the timely secular demands of today.

The purpose of this article is to examine a critical dimension of the mechanisms by which modern Orthodox Jews have carried out their cosmological oscillations: reinterpretation. The increased mobility, education, and accompanying general involvement of Orthodox Jews in contemporary America, along with what some students of this community have called a “contraacculturative” trend toward flamboyant and aggressive assertions of ethnic Orthodoxy, placed such reinterpretation of past and present and the continuity it allows among perhaps the most crucial ideological tasks for the traditionalist moderns. To be true to the old-time religion while remaining equal to the demands of the day was and is a difficult task.

Contemporization and Traditioning

The interpretive reconstruction of the past in terms of the present and vice versa may be generally said to have two components: contemporization and traditioning. Essentially cognitive in character, they are constituted by an interpretive fusion of traditional and contemporary cultural elements. In contemporization, the past is seen as framing and explaining the present, providing both its context and syntax. In the case of modern Orthodox Jews, this signifies the effort to make Torah a part of and relevant to the modern world. The dimension of reinterpretation being one in which, as Herskovits once put it, “old meanings are ascribed to new elements,” this effort explains, exemplifies, and elaborates Torah and Orthodox Jewish life and observance (what insiders call “Torah-true” Judaism) in terms such that even the most archaic-sounding and obscure references are supplied with modern parallels. It injects the overriding presence of the past into the world of the present. Thus, for example, a recent rabbinic responsum applies talmudic laws regarding the ransome of captive slaves to the situation of contemporary airplane hijack victims. The point, not lost upon those who read, hear, or abide by the rabbinic decision, is that even the apparently archaic traditions of slavery offer insights into guides for the vagaries and terrors of contemporary life.

Correlative with this process of reinterpretation is its complement, traditioning. Defined originally by Philip Rieff (1970) as a recognition of the “authority of the old,” it is the thinking wherein new elements are associated with old meanings, where modern realities are reconsidered in light of the cultural significance of old forms, where the present intrudes upon the past. Unlike its counterfeit, traditionalism, which leaves the past inert and operates on the principle of credulity and a reliance upon an unquestioned past, traditioning requires a reassessment of the past with a concomitant reaffirmation of its authority. It establishes rationally what faith postulates a priori, so that in

place of what Durkheim referred to as “passive resignation” to tradition there is instead an “enlightened allegiance.” Again, in the case of modern Orthodox Jews, this describes a situation where the Torah with its old meanings is left intact as new elements of present-day life are adapted to it. Against the backdrop of the contemporary world, the old Torah is seen as revealing new truths. Thus, for example, the ancient and sacred menstrual prohibitions and injunctions are reinterpreted as a period of psychological and physical regeneration. What, without such reinterpretation, might seem as a restrictive period, defined by archaic demands becomes—once traditioned—a symbol of the human effort to reestablish equilibrium.

Together, contemporization and traditioning, although indigenous to modern Orthodoxy, define an overlapping program of reinterpretation which is the essence of civilization. In another sense, they are part of the ever-present competition between the *authoritative* (often consecrated) official doctrine and the *interpretable*, those matters over which there are permissible differences of explanation. In the modern Orthodox Jewish milieu this process is supported by an ethos which prescribes that, as Grand Rabbi Kook once put it, “the old must be made new; the new must be made holy.”

Generating Reinterpretation

Both contemporization and traditioning presume some contact between the modern and traditional worlds. Without such encounter, there can be no sensation of the need to reconcile the two; the citizens of the one world would know nothing of the other. Instead, the traditional world would remain in the eternal yesterday, with its habituated activity and unswerving attachment to age-old authorities. Such a “life for the sake of culture,” as Ortega y Gasset once described it, eschews the antitraditional escape of the individual—though it does not see itself as “anti” anything for it ignorantly dismisses all other realities. For generations this has been the attitude of strict, traditional Jewish Orthodoxy, for whom tradition is a virtue and the past a cherished entity. These traditionalist Jews, espousing isolation from the non-Orthodox, modern world, have, to all extents possible, “attempted,” as one insider put it recently in *Tradition*, a journal of Orthodox Jewish thought, “to fence in their members or to fence out the secular.” The greater their success, the less do contemporization and traditioning remain part of the program of their lives. One such radical traditionalist, Rabbi Moshe Meiselman, who has given up an academic career in mathematics to become a dean of a major American yeshiva, expresses this isolationist point of view most explicitly when he writes in a rejoinder to a modernist article in *Tradition*: “To view Judaism within a foreign [read: secular] context is to strip Judaism of its vital force, if not completely to castrate it.”

On the other hand, for moderns, dedicated to the interminable opening of

possibility, "public opinion," as Park once put it, "sets itself up as an authority as over against tradition and custom," and they feel no need to reconcile past and present. Here one discovers a mentality that sets modern society in opposition both to its own history and to those societies of the present that are premodern, while it also makes the novel the source of interest and curiosity about the self and the touchstone of judgment. Such radical individualism has consistently shaped the attitudes of modern reformers of Judaism whose prime directive has been to appreciate the qualities of the times in which one lives and whose first principle is, in the words of one reformist rabbi, "Be true to yourself . . . Be true to your own [contemporary] standards." For these moderns whose "old gods are growing old or already dead and others are not yet born"—to cite Durkheim's old slogan about the dawn of a new moral order—there are few perceived needs for bringing the Jewish past and present into any sort of mutual relationship.

There are pockets of traditional society on the modern scene and outposts of modernity in the most remote contexts, and therefore a complete isolation of one from the other is practically impossible. Among even the most modern, one discovers efforts to find some meaning in the past—even if it is little more than a contemporary nostalgia for a return to roots, for a reality and authenticity thought to be in purer, simpler lifestyles of bygone days. With Jews such efforts may, for example, take the form of inserting old Yiddishisms into contemporary speech, eating in the "kosher style" without a strict allegiance to Jewish dietary law, or lighting a Sabbath candle while one goes on with the profane business of everyday life. Although such blending of past and present borders on being dismissive of the former, making of it a museum piece to be used for ornamentation but not to be taken seriously, it nevertheless indicates at least a rudimentary consciousness of the past within the contemporary context.

Similarly among the most traditional quarters of society, modernity seeps in. For example, even among the most isolationist traditionals, there are instrumental and technological tokens of modernity, while contemporary language intrudes itself even among those who think they speak only their own ancient tongue. Among the most insulated of Orthodox Jews, the Chassidim, one hears members characterize one or another of their fold as "too modern," as well as concern about the creeping "fruits of modernism." A reporter and editor of the *New York Times* offers a description of a Chassidic commuter bus as part of the fare of the daily metropolitan column "Around New York." Even more startling, the Chassidim are pleased to be featured! While such Orthodox Jews remain primarily bound to their insular, traditional universe, they, for example, vote in national and local elections, learn English or read newspapers—all the while making compromises with modernity.

The Modern Orthodox Case

To say that those at the extremes are not immune from contemporization and traditioning is not to say that they represent the paradigms of the process. For extremist moderns, tradition remains embedded in modernity in a position of servitude and destined for annihilation while for their traditional counterparts, the opposite is the case. Those groups in the middle, by choice wedded neither to a reified, authoritative tradition nor to an eternally interpretable one, are the ones who find themselves locked into a constant process of reinterpretation.

Unlike the conservative Jews who have negotiated themselves out of the conflict through gradual but inexorable revisions and deletions of tradition, modern Orthodox Jews live with the tentativeness of reinterpretation. They are, in the words of one of their spokesmen, Immanuel Jakobovits, once rabbi of a prominent American Orthodox synagogue and now British chief rabbi, dedicated to demonstrating in their lives “the capacity of traditional Judaism to harmonize its timeless teachings with modern conditions,” a harmony that accepts, as I shall later elaborate, dissonance.

The desire to confront the experiences of the twentieth century with Orthodox Judaism and vice versa is representative of the modern Orthodox ideal expressed in the maxim of Jewish emancipation: *Torah im derekh erez*—the blending of Torah-true Judaism with the demands of the secular host culture. Such an ideal has been a Jewish aspiration since at least Moses Mendelssohn’s day when Jews, in their exodus from the ghetto and the *numerus clausus*, were charged to “Comply with the customs and the civil constitutions of the countries in which you are transplanted, but, at the same time, be constant to the faith of your forefathers.”

While some translated this injunction into the maxim of Jewish bifurcation—“Be a man in the street and a Jew in your own house”—others sought to fuse the two, hoping that acculturation without secularization was possible. They remained convinced, as Rabbi Leo Jung, a pioneer of American modern Orthodoxy once put it, that their way of life was “not to be identified with ghetto conditions,” nor was it inconsistent with the practical and intellectual demands of the day.

Viewing themselves as interpreters of an authoritative order rather than prophets of a new one, such Jews moved cautiously out of the ghetto. Once outside, they discovered that even the most “enlightened” Gentiles required, as a prerequisite for acceptance into their society, that the “Jew free himself first of his hateful Jewish superstitions and prejudices,” as Voltaire put it. The Jew would, in short, have to undergo resocialization. This was true not only for those prepared to totally excise their Jewishness from their character but even

more intensely for those who sought to retain their religion and peoplehood in an atmosphere hostile to it.

America, no less than other countries—Spain, France, Poland, Germany, and others where Jews once lived in conspicuous numbers—has required the resocialization of what Bruno Bauer once called “the Sabbath Jew,” the visible exemplar of a separate society. Those who did not transform themselves into the white American Protestant ideal were initially relegated to the status of outcast or oddity. As Nathan Glazer in his study of American Judaism, Marshall Sklare in his pioneering research on America’s Jews, and Will Herberg in his popular essays on American religion suggested: “Jewishness,” unrefined and an obtrusive ethnicity, was to be transformed into “Judaism,” a civil American religion, essentially indistinguishable from the other “major faiths,” and Jews—*Yidn*—were to be made into “citizens.”

For Reform Judaism, which stood ready to remodel both the symbols and practice of faith so as to make them appropriate to secular culture, such demands were in order. Conservative Jews “conserved” Jewish tradition by giving up all that defied the merger of “Americanism and Judaism.” But while the Reform Jew threw away his *yarmulke* and the Conservative Jew carried it in his pocket—to be worn only within the boundaries of the Jewish community—the modern Orthodox Jew took to wearing it, maintaining all the trappings of his Orthodoxy, even as he moved into modern American society.

In doing so, this Jew tested not only his capacity to maintain his obtrusive Orthodoxy in the modern world but also the tolerance of that world toward him. At first America responded to the growing number of such Jews with curiosity and a measure of discomfort, expressed, for example, in the roster of court challenges of such matters as the legality of kosher butchering of meat or the right of an Orthodox Jew to build a synagogue where zoning ordinances prohibited it. Later, America learned to react to modern Orthodoxy with civil inattention, a studied ignorance toward what seemed unchangeable.

Once the Orthodox Jew stepped into that modern secular world, he found that unless he was content to be at best studiously ignored, he would have to either adapt his Orthodoxy to America or change America. The first alternative, prevalent before the very recent religious awakening of America, seemed the most plausible: to be taken seriously and embraced by secular society, this Sabbath Jew had to become resocialized.

Socialization and the Ideology of Reinterpretation

Socialization, be it primary, secondary, or repeated, denotes the process of transmitting a group’s culture to newcomers. From the point of view of those newcomers—be they children, immigrants, converts, or the like—socialization represents the development of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values useful for carrying on like a native. The development of an ideology or creed which

integrates the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values becomes as well a part of the process.

Although all socialization requires those undergoing it to periodically reevaluate their present behavior and beliefs in light of their past and vice versa, this program becomes particularly difficult when one is not only learning new patterns but also trying to hold on to what Redfield called previous and discrepant "ideas of the good life." In this case, one feels impelled to include in the socialization process an ideology which integrates the old and the new. Interpretation, or more precisely reinterpretation, becomes crucial to this effort.

Accordingly, in secondary socialization, as Berger and Luckman (1966) in their study of the *Social Construction of Reality* put it, "the present is interpreted so as to stand in a continuous relationship with the past, with a tendency to minimize such transformations as have actually taken place." The present is perceived as a continuity of the past. Similarly in resocialization, the past is reinterpreted to conform to present reality, with the tendency to retroject into the past various elements that were subjectively unavailable at the time. The past becomes understandable in terms of the present. These two complementary processes define the context in which the impulse toward the pyrotechnic interpretations of traditioning and contemporization make sense.

To close the emotional gap between things as they were and as one would have them be, the Jews who sought to retain their Jewish identity while becoming native to a Gentile (secular) world emphasized an ideology which prescribed interpretation and reinterpretation as—again to quote Rabbi Jung—"not only a privilege but a duty." For many who stood fast with the faith, the ability to demonstrate that the Torah offered a program for the modern world which in turn was not inimical to Torah became a "historical duty."

Writing recently for an audience of his modern Orthodox peers, Rabbi David Hartman nicely articulates this ideology. It requires, he suggests, training young Orthodox modernists to believe—as one learns Maimonides did (always invoking the parochial and traditional authority)—"that experiential and intellectual encounter with modern values and insights can help deepen and illuminate one's commitment to the tradition."

Such contemporization and traditioning became for many the key defense of a modern yet Orthodox Jewry to the cultured among its despisers, a defense by the intellect. Born out of *pilpul*, the dialectic of talmudic rationalization and argument whose aim was the maintenance of the time-hallowed while demonstrating the relevance of the unnoticed sentence of the tradition to a problem currently under consideration, these reinterpretations became central to the new socialization.

Life in both secular and parochial societies and such secondary socialization as it required was sustained in part by the Jewish communal reliance upon rabbinic responsa. These are Judaic legal opinions which, steeped in tradition,

seek to resolve the confrontation between the fixed, normative world of sacred law and the fluid social condition. As Orthodox immersion into modern life intensifies, so responsa increase. Among the most discussed new books in modern Orthodox circles is Rabbi David Bleich's English summary (for the "modern reader") of responsa literature. And a quick survey of Jewish bookstores along New York's Lower East Side reveals as well a flourishing responsa literature.

Doubling

In the resocialization of the modern Orthodox Jew the result has often been a feeling of living in two worlds with a desire to be native to both. Put differently, the ideology of interpretation and reinterpretation has led to a kind of doubling—a bicultural situation of stabilized dualism.

As a psychological mechanism, the invention of doubling has been explained by Freud as "an [unconscious] insurance against destruction . . . a preservation against extinction." A similar survival mentality seems at work among groups which want to ensure their continued pluralist existence. Here the layering of behavior and thought becomes explicit, actual, necessary in an immediately practical way. It becomes ideology rather than unconscious impulse. Accordingly, those groups, like modern Orthodox Jews, which try to harmonize sometimes antithetical worlds, evolve a bivalent posture in which one may hedge all possibilities. What the traditional world lacks, the modern one offers and vice versa; the doubler remains nourished and sustained by both. He survives. Hardened by a realization that all social arrangements are, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz puts it, "riddled with insoluble antinomies," this doubler—although trying his best to contemporize and tradition—is often resigned to the patterned desperation of his double life. As Lawrence Kaplan, a modern Orthodox Jew writing recently in *Commentary* (1976) put it: "It is possible and necessary, to live with the dissonance and tension between halakhic [i.e., traditional Judaic legal] values and modern ones." The underlying conviction seems to be that out of such conflict growth emerges. And indeed, the ideologues of the movement—from Hirsch and Mendelssohn to Soloveitchick and his contemporaries—have stressed the inevitability of such conflict along with its inherent spiritual promise.

But the dissonances of doubling may be muted; that, in part, is the purpose of contemporization and traditioning. Generally, such muting may take two forms: synthesis or nihilation. In the former the emphasis is on blending while in the latter on blocking out contradiction. Considered analytically, contemporization and traditioning contain elements of synthesis and nihilation. That is, they refer to reinterpretations where on the one hand a reciprocal fusion between past and present dialectically generates a third path—either a traditioned modernity or a contemporized tradition. On the other hand, both

imply to some extent a conceptual liquidation of that which does not fit smoothly into the reinterpetive process. Put differently, doubling consists of both interchange and division.

Synthesis

Attached to synthetic and nihilistic elements of reinterpretation are particular attitudes. With the former, the underlying attitude supports the notion that past and present have something to offer each other; relevance becomes transtemporal. Transformation seems to be a motif of all such synthesis of past and present. Three possibilities may be considered: transformation of time, symbols, and behavior.

Temporal Transformation

Contemporization and its counterpart represent a transformation wherein time becomes subservient to perceived social necessity. The past, no longer immune to change, must constantly come to terms with the present just as the present cannot ignore the past. At the very least, each becomes a prologue to the other. Each with its own particular logic and aesthetic reframes the other. This framing, as Goffman has suggested as true of all frameworks, organizes more than meaning; it also organizes involvement and defines action.

Engrossed in their reinterpretations and supporting activities, people may free themselves from sensing the competing demands of their bitemporal and bicultural existence. The social and cultural order which makes anachronism the first principle of order breaks, reconstructs, and constrains time, repressing its governance. People live now and then. (Of course they may also appear “unrealistic” or “lost in their own worlds”—an indictment often aimed at the committed modern Orthodox.)

If initiated by the solitary individual such temporal permutation would be viewed as a pathological loss of orientation. Carried on within a cultural ethos of contemporization and traditioning, this same process becomes the basic ideological structure of modern Orthodoxy. It appears, in the words of one such time traveler, “as part of the nature of things.”

Among Jews such ideological transformation of time is deeply rooted in the hermeneutics of talmudic interpretation. There, among the first principles of biblical exegesis, one finds the statement: “There is no earlier or later in the Torah” (Pesachim 6b). That is, an interpretive understanding of the Torah requires a shredding of chronological order.

In its reflection in the everyday life of modern Orthodox Jews, such temporal transformation turns yesterday into today. For example in contemporization, the timelessness of the Sabbath is conceived as a timely way of regenerating oneself for the challenges of weekly life. Or in modern Orthodox traditioning,

the good fortunes of today are viewed as vindications of and repayment for the strict observances of yesterday. The eternal and the ephemeral are thereby synthesized. Recent research (what little there is) on those newly embracing Orthodoxy while maintaining their links to the secular world, the so-called modern *baal t' shuva* (penitent)—“B.T.” in the vernacular—reveals a deeply felt self-commitment to this sort of synthesis. More about him later.

Symbol Transformation

Contemporization and traditioning also transform symbols. In contemporization, the apparently superannuated symbols of yesterday become revitalized in the present, translated into modern terms. Similarly in traditioning, the symbols of contemporary life become analogues and emblems of a more vital past. In both cases, the original meaning of the symbols is convolved to meaning something else, and the resulting new (synthetic) meaning is held onto with intensity and conviction.

In the Jewish case, this transformation of symbols has often meant a refinement of “coarse” Old Testament symbols, an exercise first begun by biblical commentators. An eye for an eye was to mean, according to the commentators, “If one blinded the eye of his fellow, he pays him the [market] value of his eye.” Or it has resulted in endowing modern devices and practices with the timeless sanctity of religion. For example the modern Orthodox Jew who chooses to employ age-old symbols in a contemporary frame of mind is exhorted, when donning the *tallit*, the time-honored fringed garment which is part of the male’s prayer garb, to—in the words of the *Jewish Catalogue*, the contemporary popular guide for Jewish reinterpretation—“keep [the old] symbols in mind as you put on and wear the tallit. Other associations will probably occur to you. Nurture them.” Or, such Jews look, for example, at the time clock, used to turn on otherwise prohibited lights on the Sabbath, and consider it a semireligious symbol. In the transformation of symbols, “perspective,” as Ortega put it, “becomes one of the component parts of reality.”

Behavioral Transformation

In contemporization, practices based upon custom and tradition are given new expression and added significance. In the case of modern Orthodoxy, an example might be the knotting of *tzitzit*, the ritual of tying of fringes on a four-cornered garment as mandated in the Old Testament (Numbers 15: 37-41). Contemporized, the practice—although not losing its traditional meaning—may become macrame, a contemporary fad. Hence one may tie *tzitzit*, remain true to the old Torah law, and still be involved in a fashionable, modern pursuit.

Correspondingly in traditioning, a new practice is invested with all the

authority and character of an age-old ritual. "The new is made holy" through a perceived nexus with previous holiness. For example, among a growing number of modern Orthodox Jews, the naming of a new-born daughter, originally carried out with little or none of the ceremonial surrounding the ritual of naming a son, is becoming a rite of similar proportions, albeit of different substance. The present is reconceived in terms of the past just as with contemporization the opposite is the case.

Transformations have in the past been rewarded and thereby encouraged by the secular world since they are seen as proof of the latter's ultimate dominance. Jews who manage to successfully reframe their Orthodoxy in modern terms are celebrated as present-day "court Jews," refined and civilized specimens of the real thing. They become one of the many token outsiders that the nominally pluralist America accepts into its midst. Underlying such acceptance has of course been the unstated but clear message that transformation is a propaedeutic to Americanization.

Nihilation

Complementary to the synthesis of past and present is, as already suggested, a certain amount of conceptual liquidation or nihilation. Here one denies the reality of phenomena or interpretations of phenomena that do not fit into an otherwise balanced universe. Certain dimensions of time, symbols, behavior, or belief which seem hopelessly discrepant are either diverted from one's attention or even repudiated. Along with such an attitude comes what Goffman calls a "disinvolvement" or withdrawal from situations where the discrepancy must be confronted.

Because even the most modern of Orthodox Jews view their Judaism as an all-encompassing life form—the "bottom line"—which does not consider the world as ultimately divisible into secular and hallowed sectors, and which demands, as one modern Orthodox spokesman, Bernard Weinberger, writes, "unequivocal, unqualified, and unambiguous acceptance of the *Halakhah*" (i.e., the corpus of Jewish law and associated observance—literally "the way"), a repudiative nihilation of parochial tradition is unthinkable. Moreover, because these Jews seek also to be *of* as well as *in* the contemporary world, modern themes are not easily repudiated. Accordingly, the nihilation implicit in modern Orthodox reinterpretation becomes primarily one of the diversion of attention. Here two possibilities exist: inattention and disattention.

Inattention may be defined, after Goffman, as "a kind of dimming of lights," where there is an "appreciation" of matters outside one's immediate focus of attention but no great involvement with it. Disattention on the other hand, represents an *active* withdrawal of attention of anything outside the circle of one's concern. The boundaries of compartmentalization become far more

pronounced in the latter than in the former. In both, however, one extricates oneself and finally becomes disinvolved from the unassimilatable or unpalatable.

For modern Orthodox Jews such compartmentalization makes up the nihilative aspect of their reinterpretations and associated layering of behavior. While the effort is made to bring about a harmonic blend of tradition and the contemporary world, there are nevertheless some areas of strain where no amount of reinterpretation seems able to overcome certain dissonances. In such cases, the discordant matters are either made peripheral, inattended; or they are actively repressed and forgotten, disattended. Such nihilistic correlates of reinterpretation neutralize threats to what are considered appropriate social definitions of reality by assigning, as Berger and Luckman note, "an inferior ontological status, and thereby a not-to-be-taken-seriously cognitive status, to all definitions outside" that social reality. Indeed, there are those who suggest that such segmentation is typical of modern life.

More specifically, in the nihilative aspect of their contemporization, modern Orthodox Jews may either ignore those laws and observances which do not fit into the modern world or actively blot them out. Such action does not presume an ideological repudiation whereby the inappropriate is wiped off the books, as it were—the approach of Conservative and Reform Judaism; it simply means that such matters are left in the background. For example, while the divine revelation of the Torah is considered to be a fundamental article of Jewish faith, reaffirmed by many in their daily prayers, in the modern world where religion is peripheral and personal rather than central and social, little if anything is ever said about this matter except in the stylized fashion of rabbinic sermons.

In a recent essay arguing for a modern approach to Orthodox life, Rabbi David Hartman suggests that the observant Jew be prepared to explain his religious practice to nonobservant outsiders, that he "be trained to speak intelligibly without having to validate the significance of his actions solely by an appeal to faith." In the modern age, the struggle between faith and reason tilts in favor of the latter. Although the matter remains commonly inattended, left as a formalistic pronouncement in prayer, it may, if the believer is pressed to account for his prayers, be disattended. In this case, such questions are routinely assigned to theological virtuosi while the layman disinvolves himself. The dissonant element is put out of the humdrum of everyday life. In the three years of my participant observation in a modern Orthodox synagogue, I never once witnessed the laity discussing the theology which seemed to underlie their entire religious behavior.

The compartmentalizing nihilations of contemporization may occur in Jewish observances as well. Here practices out of tune with the contemporary world simply lapse into neglect. For example, although there is a requirement to recite a benediction upon having successfully evacuated one's bowel or bladder, many modern Orthodox Jews simply fail to recite this prayer when

immersed in the flow of modern secular life. The requirement is not repudiated but simply inattended for the moment. If challenged, the very same Jew will likely admit the omission as a transgression—although he is not likely to belabor the point. (There seems to be a tacit agreement among modern Orthodox Jews to leave inattended matters undiscussed.) Similarly, laws prohibiting one from having intimate physical contact (even without intercourse) with woman other than one's wife (Lev. 18:6) are simply disattended. In the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the global village, the insularity proposed in such laws is actively overlooked. The social graces of pecking kisses, embraces, and handshakes are maintained even while the law is disattended.

There is nihilation implicit in traditioning as well. Here either one mutes or obviates the radical contemporaneity of certain actions in order to make them contiguous with tradition, or one forces meanings on the past which destroy its integrity. For example, among many modern Orthodox women a chic, modern wig is used as a *sheital*, the ritually mandated head cover for married females. No longer the unremarkable peruke originally worn to insure the modesty of the married women, the contemporary *sheital* is now closer to a public celebration of her sensuality, fashion-consciousness, and good looks. Such traditioning fits the contemporary wig into the age-old conception of the *sheital* only by disattending the antithetical character of the chic *sheital*. If one wonders how people can possibly handle the complicated orchestrations of synthesis and nihilation implicit in their contemporization and traditioning, one might simply answer: "All things are possible to him that believes" (Mark 10:27). For the contemporizing and traditioning faithful the time-honored Cartesian maxim which puts cogito before all else is the essence of belief. Believing requires reinterpretive thinking.

As with the previously discussed synthetic transformations by modern Orthodox Jews, America remains very much present behind their nihilations. Making up the bulk of outsiders to whom one's Orthodoxy must be made intelligible, modern America has retained an implicit power to judge the success and adequacy of such reinterpretations. Insufficient or inappropriate efforts were in the past guarantees of exclusion from the modern world; American ignorance of Orthodoxy meant not only unfamiliarity with but also neglect of these would-be moderns.

The American Religious Revival and Modern Orthodoxy

The new American religious revival portends a change both in the character of modern Orthodoxy as well as American response to it. Now that conspicuous ethnic religion has not only become respectable but as American as Jimmy Carter, reinterpretation has become far less crucial for the modern. He finds instead that he can be far more blatantly Orthodox and parochial than before without losing his share in the contemporary world. Not surprisingly, therefore,

one finds a recent trend toward a stricter Orthodoxy in modern America. For example, Rabbi Steven Riskin, once the voice of reinterpretation among American modern Orthodox Jews, has now opened a day school which demands of its students a rigorous Orthodox lifestyle. And the Chassidim, notably the Lubavitch sect, are swarming with new recruits whom they aggressively pursue from Harvard Square to Scarsdale and Berkeley.

This turnabout has forced a change in American modern Orthodoxy where, after several generations, reinterpretation had become second nature. Nowhere is the strain of such change seen more clearly than in modern Orthodox reactions to the *baal t' shuva* (B.T.), the neophyte in the community. In the past, and still to a great extent in the present, academies of Jewish learning and their teachers (who have also served as ideologues and spokesmen) have handled neophytes (usually children). In recent years, however, Orthodoxy in general and modern Orthodoxy in particular have experienced the great influx of spiritual newcomers who have begun to inundate all faiths. What some have called the "resouling of Judaism" has yielded increasing numbers of volitional rather than inertial Jews; people who actively choose their religion and its way of observance rather than those who simply fall into the path. More often than not these new Orthodox Jews (the B.T.'s) come unschooled in their religion. Sending them to the yeshiva, a process advocated by many and followed by some, is not always practical or possible, especially for those who remain bonded in some way to the modern world from whence they came. Explanation and education thus occurs within the lay community. Frequently "turned on" by modern Orthodox rabbis and leaders, these B.T.'s often come finally to live in modern Orthodox communities, communities filled with people who do not require a complete renunciation of the B.T.'s' modernist past.

Once there they often strike a discordant note with the inertial modern Orthodoxy they find. In their enthusiasm for their newly found faith, the B.T.'s find it hard to take their Judaism for granted. They demand transcendence in everyday life and practice a conspicuous and aggressive Orthodoxy. They are often struck by the dualism they witness, frequently interpreting it as duplicity. They cannot abide with contradiction and demand explanation. In short, they force the everyday modern Orthodox Jew to conform to the rabbi's description or else account for the difference. They wish to know, for example, how one can separate everyday secular life from religious sensibility. If one is indeed Orthodox in observance, how can one also be a slumlord or dishonest businessman, or how can "permitted" food be eaten in otherwise nonkosher restaurants? Is not the choice all or nothing?

The questions asked defy simplistic answers. The ubiquitousness of the B.T.—hardly any modern Orthodox Jew does not know one, many have married them—makes his questions increasingly part of the everyday life of modern Orthodoxy. These questions pose a challenge to the "business as usual" approach to reinterpretation and in particular to doubling, synthesis, and

nihilation. Ironically, the "success" of modern Orthodoxy in attracting large numbers of converts from less Orthodox backgrounds may bring about fundamental changes in its future character. Moreover, their conspicuousness will test America's sufferance of the Jews—something about which a people used to persecution and pogrom has doubts.

Of course the possibility remains that the newcomers will be made into reinterpreters as well, particularly if the new-found American "religion" turns out to be short lived. There are some signs of this among those in their late thirties and beyond who have established families. In most modern Orthodox communities, the older B.T.'s are indistinguishable from other natives. Yet there are also signs of a move toward a stricter Orthodoxy, one that emphasizes faith over acculturation. There are greater numbers of modernist parents sending their children to traditionalist yeshivas that discourage modernism. This contraacculturative modern Orthodoxy may move the old reinterpreters back to basics or out toward Conservative Judaism. It is too early to tell exactly what will occur.

Conclusion

It is often presumed that the modern world forces upon its inhabitants a radical break with the past and that those who chose to embrace the past necessarily lose their portion in the world of the present. I have tried to suggest that while in the long run that may be the case, there are—as the situation of modern Orthodox Jews illustrates—cognitive processes of interpretation which, at least for a time, may make possible a pattern of life in both past and present.

Via reinterpretation those, like modern Orthodox Jews, who wish to live in two time-worlds are able to layer their behavior, synthesize, transform, or nihilate elements of such worlds and generally shift their attention and involvement so that the dissonances of their lives do not overpower them. That program becomes their practical ideology, their doctrine for survival. To the extent that many of us find ourselves increasingly having to reconcile ever more discrepant pasts with a concomitant rush of compelling presents, contemporization and traditioning, the current preoccupation of modern Orthodox Jews, have become part of our lives.

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