

Modern Orthodoxy in America: Possibilities for a Movement under Siege

William B. Helmreich and Reuel Shinnar

*Defining Modern Orthodoxy / The Rise of the Right Wing / Growing Tensions /
Modern Orthodoxy Fights Back / Prospects for Success*

"Will the last modern Orthodox Jew please turn out the light?," quipped a more right-wing co-religionist not long ago. Given the shrinking size of the modern Orthodox community in the last two decades, he might have had a point. For many in his community, modern Orthodoxy seems to be a movement which, they acknowledge, albeit grudgingly, served a useful function in its time, namely as a bridge to more punctilious observance of *halakhah*, or Jewish law.

Perhaps, but in the last few years several developments in the modern Orthodox community suggest that reports of its death may be, to quote Mark Twain, "highly exaggerated." The creation of new organizations, a spate of articles that have appeared in Jewish journals and newspapers, and a palpable sense of unease and even anger among the modern Orthodox rank-and-file indicate that this group has realized that it is on the verge of extinction and is fighting back. The outcome could well play a critical role in shaping the nature of religious identity in the twenty-first century for all Jews. It should be noted at the onset that all of the observations made here are about the Jewish world outside of Israel. The Israeli modern Orthodox, or "kippah srugah" community, still awaits its chronicler.

Defining Modern Orthodoxy

What is modern Orthodoxy? Those who would simplify see it as a movement made up of people who are "just less religious," but that is hardly the case. In reality, it is a movement that seeks to harmonize the secular and the religious in ways that are compatible with both. Books have been written by authorities

such as Norman Lamm, eminent philosopher and President of Yeshiva University, and by Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of England, that explain its philosophy in clear and compelling terms. A journal, *Torah U'maddah*, is devoted to the subject and articles appear regularly on the subject in *Tradition*, *Ten Da'at*, *Religious Zionism* and elsewhere. Modern Orthodoxy does try to respond to the needs of modern times, but only within the boundaries of *halakhah*.

All Orthodox Jews are committed to observance of *mitzvot* such as Shabbat and *kashrut*, the giving of charity, respect for one's parents, etc., but modern Orthodoxy has certain core beliefs that distinguish it from Orthodoxy generally. These are a recognition of the value and importance of secular studies; a belief in Zionism, or in the establishment of the State of Israel as an act of religious significance; a commitment to equality of education for both men and women; and a full acceptance of the importance of being able to financially support oneself and one's family.

Far more important than these specifics, however, is the overall approach of modern Orthodoxy, a belief that one can and should be a full member of modern society, accepting the risks to remaining observant, because the benefits outweigh those risks. What it means is that a Jew can study the writings of Christian philosophy, learn any scientific theory he or she wants to, attend a concert at which women sing (accepting the view of some *halakhic* authorities that it is permitted), interact with non-Jews, and do pretty much what others do, even while leading a fully observant life.

In short, modern Orthodoxy encourages engagement with the secular world. As opposed to the right-wing Orthodox, it does not counsel retreat, isolationism, and blind obedience to rabbinical leaders in order to preserve its way of life. It respects and listens to its own modern Orthodox rabbis in matters of *halakhah*. However, like earlier generations of Sephardim in America who were compelled to rely on Ashkenazi rabbis, it recognizes that many of its rabbis, even those trained at Yeshiva University, do not share its values, and that their decisions may be based on a different *halakhic* and intellectual tradition. Therefore, if a local rabbi tells a modern Orthodox Jew that he should not attend a Broadway play where women sing, he may decide to go anyway, simply because other rabbinical leaders, including Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, did not forbid it.

The Rise of the Right Wing

Historically, the modern Orthodox *weltanschauung* predominated in America from the early twentieth century until the end of the 1960s. The reasons for the rise to pre-eminence of the "right-wing" Orthodox are many and need to be understood. (The term "right wing" is preferred to "haredi" because "haredi" in the diaspora is often equated exclusively with hasidic Jews and not the Lithuanian yeshiva community.) These reasons include the postwar migration to the U.S. of the more right-wing elements in the community, their higher birth rate, the emergence of charismatic leaders in that community (namely, many of their rosh yeshivas), tolerance for ethnic tribalism in the larger society, economic prosperity, superior political organization, and fear of cultural contamination from the larger society.

These features have been accompanied by certain other factors. Chief among them is that modern Orthodox leaders told their adherents that they were free to live and work in the outside world as physicians, attorneys, corporate executives, professors, accountants, or whatever. Compared to being a rebbe, these occupations were far more attractive in terms of the relative prestige and financial remuneration offered, especially with the advent of civil rights laws that protected them from discrimination in terms of religious observance. Why being a rebbe is not prestigious in many segments of the Orthodox community in general would make an interesting article in and of itself.

As a result, the Jewish educational (*hinuch*) community suffered a brain drain, with fewer and fewer modern Orthodox teachers and principals entering the field. The right-wing Orthodox, seeking employment and a meaningful livelihood for their non-college-trained and isolationist followers, eagerly stepped into this breach. The result was and is a preponderance of right-wing rebbes and principals who are largely out of sync with the lifestyles of the modern Orthodox parents whose children they teach.

This has created a situation where modern Orthodox practices and beliefs are challenged by children who question their parents about discrepancies between what they are taught at school and what is done or not done within their own families. Students are taught that truly Orthodox women cover their hair, refrain from mixed swimming and most movies, etc. At best, usually, modern Orthodox parents end up feeling vaguely guilty about doing things that they were brought up to believe are totally acceptable.

In reality, however, it is well known and beyond question that Rabbi Soloveitchik endorsed and encouraged co-ed classes through high school at the Maimonides School in Boston that was under his guidance. And his wife

did not cover her hair. Neither, of course, did thousands of devout women in Lithuania, among them the wives of more than a few right-wing rosh yeshivas (in most cases before they emigrated to America). This last fact has never been successfully explained by anyone in the right-wing community, to my knowledge. In fact, the head of a prominent right-wing publishing house told me (he requested anonymity) that when his company began producing books about their community, it was necessary to color in *sheitels* (wigs) in some of the family photos of their past rabbinic leaders.

At the yeshiva board level other difficulties arise. The principal may decide to end co-ed classes or not allow girls above the age of twelve to sing solos in the school play. He may deemphasize the teaching of Zionism or discourage children from attending modern Orthodox high schools. Often, the values are transmitted in a casual but nonetheless definitive way. Take, for instance, the modern Orthodox school where a young child asked the teacher: "Morah Rivkah, why do you cover your hair?" "Because I'm Orthodox" (not right-wing Orthodox or frum) was the reply.

The growth in the Ba'al Teshuvah movement has certainly fueled the rightward shift. New to the faith, such individuals often need constant reassurance that they are genuinely doing God's will and *humrahs* (strictures) provide that reassurance. *Humrahs* serve a different, yet equally functional, purpose for the rabbinic establishment. The volume and complexity of minutiae regarding Orthodox observance give greater respect and authority to the rabbis because it is they who decide what the new *humrahs* are and how they are to be observed. The more *humrahs* and the more widely observed they are, the more important the role of the rabbis. They also serve to delegitimize the *halakhic* views of modern Orthodoxy. The latest *humrah* reportedly is an edict that one may not have a carpet in one's home that is made of wool and linen (referring to the biblical prohibition known as *shaatnes* of mixing natural fibers), a restriction that has historically been applied only to clothing that is worn.

Finally, there are two aspects inherent within modern Orthodoxy that limit its attractiveness to the young - its deliberate lack of definitiveness and its cerebral emphasis. Adolescents, as opposed to adults, are uncomfortable with ambiguity. The latter have come to terms with a world filled with shades of gray, whereas for the young, accepting that reality implies an abandonment of the idealism of youth, an idealism in which purity of goals and vision means tolerating no compromises. They see modern Orthodoxy's location in the middle of the spectrum as a lack of true commitment. The right wing, on the other hand, is seen as representing truth. For those in search of something to

believe in, it offers the ultimate - charismatic leaders and a clear-cut philosophy that states: "We know the answers because all of the answers are in the Torah which we follow completely. We don't pick and choose our *mitzvahs*."

Glaringly absent as well from modern Orthodoxy is *ruach* or "soul." How many modern Orthodox Jews spontaneously raise their voices in prayer in their synagogues? How many will sway wildly back and forth in the course of the service? There is a movement for the rationally persuaded that also reflects the norms of the dominant culture. But enter a right-wing yeshiva and you will observe most of the participants engaged in emotionally unselfconscious behavior - rocking back and forth as they implore the Lord to accept their heartfelt offerings. For the young this is a powerful selling point. The only emotional area in which the modern Orthodox can begin to compete with the right wing is identification with Israel as a proud and independent nation. But Israel is 6,000 miles away, has lost much of its unadulterated ideological luster, even to the Orthodox, and can best be appreciated only when one is actually there.

Growing Tensions

All indications are that the fault-lines between the modern and right-wing Orthodox are deepening. Today, while all modern Orthodox yeshivas participate in the annual Israel Day Parade in New York City, almost no yeshivas on the right do so. The Orthodox Union, long seen as a centrist organization, expressed joy when the interdenominational Synagogue Council of America folded. Criticism of the denominationally mixed New York Board of Rabbis is also fiercely strident these days. Leaf through an issue of the *Young Israel Viewpoint*, especially the photographs, and the change becomes obvious.

The year-in-Israel programs, started by the modern Orthodox, have come under the influence of the right who, at best, can claim only nominal membership in the modern Orthodox camp, most often by sporting a knitted yarmulke. These individuals encourage students to reject the modern Orthodox lifestyles of their parents as unauthentic and to stay on for two or three years of study instead of one. Ultimately, the hope of many Israeli rosh yeshivas is that their devotees from America will reject college altogether and, indeed, quite a few have. Of course, there are still quite a few yeshivas, such

as Yeshivat Har Etzion, that are decidedly modern Orthodox, but the trend seems to be to the right.

Most significantly, both sides are increasingly willing to attack each other. The latest, most public, such salvo was issued by Rabbi Elya Svei, a prominent member of Agudat Israel's Mo'etzet Gedolei HaTorah. In a speech before several thousand listeners at Agudat Israel's annual convention, Rav Svei called Rabbi Norman Lamm "an enemy of God." He later refused to retract his charge.

This last development is all the more ironic because many rabbis in Yeshiva University have steadily moved rightward over the past twenty years. While the school still approves of secular education, many (though by no means all) of its rosh yeshivas approve of it only as it facilitates the earning of a living, but not, as was the case in the past, for the purpose of developing a culturally and intellectually informed individual. However, it is likely to always be seen by the right as simply a paler shade of black so long as it permits college, maintains its graduate programs, includes sports activities, and has a sizeable number of modern Orthodox students in its ranks.

In fact, Y.U. reflects more than anything else the ambivalence felt by the modern Orthodox. On the one hand, quite a few of the rebbes or rosh yeshivas have become, for the most part, indistinguishable from their counterparts in the mainstream yeshiva world, except for the fact, buried in their bios, that they have a college education, one acquired in the days when they themselves felt differently about these things. When Edah, an organization dedicated to promoting modern Orthodoxy, was founded several years ago, it was attacked by a good number of rabbinical faculty members and numerous religiously observant administrators.

Yet Edah's most prominent leaders, Rabbis Saul Berman and Avi Weiss, also teach at Y.U., albeit at Stern College. To this day, Y.U. sponsors operas and other such events for its supporters. Emphasis continues to be placed on providing a first-rate college education and its undergraduate program's national ranking has risen throughout the decades.

Without Yeshiva University, led by an embattled but courageous and still modern Orthodox Rabbi Norman Lamm, the movement has no institutional mechanism for transmitting its traditions and no place for ordaining its rabbis. That is why what happens there is so critical to its future.

Since Y.U. still defines itself as the home of centrist or modern Orthodoxy, any group that tries to compete with it on the left is fought and rejected. That has been the fate of the Union for Traditional Judaism, led by Rabbis David Weiss Halivni and Ronald Price. The group is reportedly snubbed by the Rabbinical Council of America, the organization that in many ways sets the standards for modern Orthodoxy. True, Avi Weiss has hired one of its graduates to work in his Orthodox synagogue, but Weiss is viewed as a maverick by the Orthodox establishment. For all intents and purposes, the UTJ, notwithstanding the fact that its members are fully observant and adhere to a philosophy which closely resembles modern Orthodoxy, has been marginalized as nothing more than a group of "right-wing Conservative rabbis." (In point of fact, UTJ was started by rabbis from the Conservative movement.) That being the case, only Y.U., or a new institution, is likely to be able to rescue modern Orthodoxy.

Modern Orthodoxy Fights Back

Sociologists have developed theoretical models to chart the potential and success of social movements. One of the best and most enduring has been that of Berkeley sociologist Neil Smelser. The six determinants Smelser outlines as necessary for a movement to succeed all appear to be present today within the modern Orthodox community.

1. *Structural Conduciveness*: Organizations like Edah have formed to give voice to the frustration felt by the modern Orthodox over the perceived threat to their way of life. Edah has been supported by the visionary entrepreneur Michael Steinhardt, who understands that without innovative initiatives in Jewish education, world Jewry as a whole is doomed. The modern Orthodox, led by rabbis such as Emmanuel Rackman, are forming groups to deal with the problems of *agunot* (women unable to obtain a Jewish divorce). Others have responded to the needs of women by increasing their visibility in religious matters. Thus, two rabbis, Adam Mintz and Avi Weiss, have appointed women to serve as interns in their synagogues.

There have been militant responses by local day school and synagogue boards to the right wing. For example, in one New York area yeshiva with more than 1,000 students, the board, after a year-long search, hired as its religious school principal a modern Orthodox Jew with excellent academic credentials who is, nonetheless, not an ordained rabbi. Among the reasons cited was the lack of availability of a truly modern Orthodox principal with *semicha* (ordination). In another school, the board reversed the

prohibition against *kol isha* (men hearing women sing), and in a Chicago-area school, a recently-hired high school principal who spoke out against college attendance for young women was summarily dismissed.

2. *Structural Strain*: Parents increasingly experience disharmony in their families as children, especially those returning from Israel study programs, "rebel" against them by becoming more observant. What many actually fear is that their sons will decide to devote their lives exclusively to Torah study and not become productive citizens in society, or that their daughters will be forced to become the sole breadwinners in the family because they are married to such individuals.

As rabbinic leaders increase their criticisms of their congregants' lifestyles, the modern Orthodox feel more and more under siege. As the presumably modern Orthodox yeshivas in their communities become less so, they feel similarly constricted. The strains are exacerbated as they feel that things which they have long been accustomed to doing - mixed swimming, mixed dancing, uncovered hair for women after marriage, not wearing a yarmulke at work, etc., are more and more openly frowned upon.

3. *Growth of a Generalized Belief*: In the past ten years it has become quite apparent to its proponents that modern Orthodoxy as a movement is under siege. As its members discuss with each other "how different things were when we grew up," the sense of malaise grows and with it the belief that something needs to be done. These beliefs are given greater cogency by panels and conferences convened to debate these issues and by the publications of the Orthodox which analyze changing trends in the community. Examples abound: A June 1997 piece in the *Detroit Jewish News* by Mark E. Schlüssel titled "What Has Happened to My Orthodoxy?"; a *New Jersey Jewish Standard* article by Gilbert Kahn called "It's Time for Orthodoxy to Stop Running Scared"; and an editorial in the *Standard* by Elizabeth Applebaum "On Money, Lobster, and Yeshiva Students."

4. *Social Control*: It is clear that right-wing leaders with ideological agendas have grown bolder in their attempts to impose their brand of religious observance on the modern Orthodox, be it in terms of *halakhic* rulings of all sorts, separation of the sexes, or cultural lifestyles. The efforts to impose sanctions range from not allowing recalcitrant members of the community to sit on various boards, to walking out on affairs they deem inappropriate, to socially shunning those who refuse to go along with their edicts. An intensification of this trend may ultimately force the modern Orthodox to formally separate from the right-wing Orthodox.

Repression at the intellectual level is another manifestation of social control. Rabbis who do not support the party line are ridiculed and history itself is either revised or suppressed. Students of Rabbi Soloveitchik who have moved to the right make all sorts of claims about his rulings that support their positions without presenting any evidence of their authenticity. One glaring instance of an attempt at "thought control" is the recall by the right wing of a book about one of its icons, the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin), because the biographer noted that the great sage enjoyed reading secular newspapers, even on the Sabbath, and discussing current events at the Sabbath table. Refunds were offered for returned copies but there were, apparently, few takers.

5. *Precipitating Factors*: The best known example of this phenomenon was the decision, a little over two years ago, by the Rabbinical Council of Queens, New York, to condemn and ban women's prayer groups. It should be understood, however, that similar precipitating events have taken place in many communities throughout the U.S. but have not received national attention.

6. *Mobilization for Action*: The Council's decision prompted a huge outcry in the modern Orthodox community. It galvanized modern Orthodox women and, as a result, tremendously increased support for those dedicated to promoting their greater participation in Orthodox religious life. Attendance at the Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy in New York was so directly affected by this action that one of the participants publicly thanked the Council for its role in enhancing awareness of these issues by its ban.

In 1997, the Conference drew a record 2,000 participants. There is a sense of urgency to the movement today, a feeling that unless something is done, modern Orthodoxy will be marginalized out of existence. Edah is garnering financial contributions from rank-and-file modern Orthodox Jews for the same reason. At the grass-roots level, mounting concern is being translated into action as a backlash grows among some parents who are refusing to send their children to year-in-Israel programs because they see the institutions as vehicles for indoctrinating their children into a right-wing lifestyle.

Prospects for Success

Modern Orthodoxy has clearly become aware of the challenge to its existence, but the hour is very late. If it is to survive, effective leadership will

be a critical factor. There is a clearly identified group of rabbis who consider themselves modern Orthodox. These include, but are not limited to, Norman Lamm, Maurice Lamm, Haskel Lookstein, Saul Berman, Avi Weiss, Yitz Greenberg, Shmuel Goldin, Jacob J. Schachter, Adam Mintz, Jonathan Rosenblatt, Kenneth Hain, Basil Herring, Abner Weiss, Allen Schwartz, and Jeremiah Wohlberg.

Nevertheless, there are problems. A good number of these people do not agree with each other on the philosophical parameters of modern Orthodoxy, which limits their potency as a force for change. Second, their lack of broad institutional power (most are pulpit rabbis) makes them reluctant to take bold positions that could ignite the sparks needed for meaningful change. After all, much as their followers may urge them to take on the right, it is they who will bear the brunt of the fighting. Given the deep inroads made into modern Orthodoxy by the right, a conflict of this sort will leave the modern Orthodox leadership quite bloodied.

Modern Orthodoxy will have to develop a clearer focus. It must take its core principles as defined at the beginning of this piece and hammer them home repeatedly to its adherents and without apologies. Doing so will, in and of itself, respond to the facile assertions from unfriendly quarters that to be modern Orthodox is to be nothing more than less observant. It also needs to become more visionary and passionate.

The movement must also put much more pressure, financially and in terms of a public relations battle, upon Yeshiva University to reassert itself as the flagship of modern Orthodoxy. In particular, the movement must make certain that the institution's Azrieli Graduate School of Education, which produces many of today's yeshiva principals, properly trains its students in the values of modern Orthodoxy. Those at Y.U. who are modern Orthodox, and there are many, will find the courage to speak out only if they are convinced that modern Orthodox lay leaders and their followers are truly willing to back them. Parallel to this effort, modern Orthodox leaders will also have to literally pour millions of dollars into dramatically raising salaries of day school teachers so that this profession will not remain the almost exclusive province of right wingers. They will also have to insure that the Israeli yeshivas which service American-Jewish youth remain Zionist and tolerant in their outlook.

The modern Orthodox will also have to carefully consider the benefits and disadvantages of joining forces with traditional elements of the Conservative movement. Since the modern Orthodox group is relatively small, and this would present an immediate means towards augmenting its numbers, the

temptation to do so is great, but there are considerable pitfalls in formally uniting with non-Orthodox groups.

Such a strategic decision runs the risk of diluting modern Orthodoxy's own message and its identity as a distinct movement. Given Orthodoxy's *halakhic* requirements, it is also questionable whether the two groups can overcome their differences in this area, especially with respect to women's issues and synagogue practices, and the belief of many Conservative theologians that the Oral Law did not originate at Mount Sinai. Finally, taking this course of action would give the right a golden opportunity to paint modern Orthodoxy as nothing more than a stalking horse for Conservative Judaism, thereby relegating it to the fringes of the Orthodox establishment. At the same time, working together with traditional Conservatives on specific issues should be encouraged.

The right has weaknesses that can be exploited in the struggle for the hearts and minds of the Orthodox masses. The proletarianization of the kollel into a place where young men can spend years collecting public support, regardless of talent, has not engendered respect for the institution as a whole, though, to be sure, there are many talented individuals who belong there. The large-scale financial scandals that have rocked the community in recent years, ranging from the laundering of drug profits, to phony work-study programs, to massive cheating of the government, clearly demonstrates that this community is far from perfect.

The amounts of money involved and the relative frequency with which this has been documented by both the Jewish and non-Jewish press in the last two years is beginning to make the right wing's standard rejoinder that these are isolated instances sound more and more hollow. In some cases the right has even tried to justify such behavior by claiming that these are simply attempts to find "legal loopholes" in the law. In other instances they have tried to deflect attention from the misdeeds of their adherents by attributing moral failings to *halakhic* violations that suit their own community's ideological needs. In one case, Rabbi Elya Svei noted that the root cause of financial scandals was due to the fact that modern Orthodox women are now giving public lectures on talmudic and biblical subjects, a view hailed as a great insight by a prominent right-wing magazine.

Modern Orthodoxy will not, however, find its salvation in attacking the right wing. It can only flourish if it has a compelling and positive message to the masses of the unsynagogued, those Jews at loose ends who are searching for meaning in their lives. It is clear that Orthodoxy as a whole in America has

failed to find an audience. For all its self-congratulatory publicity, the Orthodox number no more than 5 percent of the total U.S. Jewish population, hardly grounds for claiming success as a movement.

Modern Orthodoxy's philosophy of synthesizing secular and religious knowledge is not well-known to American Jewry, much of which is highly educated and potentially receptive to such an approach. A view that considers it desirable to study science, philosophy, and literature at the highest levels while at the same time stressing the beauty and meaningfulness of a religious life could, if properly presented, attract hundreds of thousands of Jews who are, if truth be told, dying spiritually. It could also bridge the gap between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox communities, thereby preventing a split between the two - something which the isolationist part of the right wing fervently hopes will happen.

The approach of the modern Orthodox could strike unaffiliated Jews as vastly superior to the framework espoused by the right because, whatever their spiritual needs, most American Jews are unwilling to retreat into a closed off world. If it can fill this vacuum, then modern Orthodoxy will find the role that is essential to its future.

* * *

William Helmreich is Professor of Sociology and Judaic Studies at CUNY Graduate Center and City College of New York. He is the author of ten books including *The World of the Yeshiva: An Intimate Portrait of Orthodox Jewry*. Reuel Shinnar is Distinguished Professor of Chemical Engineering at City College of New York and has written numerous articles on the Jewish community.

The *Jerusalem Letter* and *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* are published by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, Israel; Tel. 972-2-5619281, Fax. 972-2-5619112, Internet: jcpa@netvision.net.il. In U.S.A.: 1515 Locust St., Suite 703, Philadelphia, PA 19102; Tel. (215) 772-0564, Fax. (215) 772-0566. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN: 0792-7304.

The opinions expressed by the authors of Viewpoints do not necessarily reflect those of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.