

The Future of American Orthodoxy
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“In the struggle for the soul of American Jewry, the Orthodox model has triumphed,” Samuel G. Freedman announced in his widely-discussed volume entitled *Jew vs. Jew*. Freedman, himself raised as a secularist, is far from alone in his analysis. In the thirty-five years that have passed since Charles Liebman, writing in the *American Jewish Year Book*, first pronounced Orthodoxy to be “on the upsurge” and concluded that it was “the only group which today contains within it a strength and will to live that may yet nourish all the Jewish world,” Orthodoxy has emerged as the great success story of late twentieth-century American Judaism. Some of its leaders proudly proclaim themselves the winners in the race to save American Judaism, and insist that non-Orthodox Jews, with their high rate of intermarriage, will have no Jewish grandchildren and no Jewish future.

History warns against triumphalistic claims of this sort. Reform Jews, in the post-Civil War era, believed that they would define American Judaism. The architect of American Reform Judaism, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, called his prayer book *Minhag Amerika*, and given the number of synagogues that moved into the Reform camp in his day, his vision did not seem farfetched. Many in the mid 1870s believed as he did that Reform would in time become “the custom of American Jews.” Of course, with mass East European Jewish immigration that did not happen and within half-a-century, Reform Judaism had stagnated. Conservative Judaism, meanwhile, became the fastest growing movement on the American Jewish scene and it too enjoyed its moment of triumphalism, especially in the immediate post-World War II era. But its success proved no more long lasting. In recent decades, its numbers have declined both absolutely and relatively.

The question now is whether Orthodoxy will follow the same trajectory. History, of course, does not always repeat itself, but insiders in the Orthodox world know that their movement too suffers from many “dilemmas and vulnerabilities.” Indeed a symposium organized by the Orthodox Union in 1998 spoke of “a sense of triumph mixed with trepidation.” Here I want to focus on six reasons for this trepidation. Without discounting any of American Orthodoxy’s obvious strengths, these issues are ones that anyone seriously interested in the future of American Orthodoxy needs to confront.

First of all, Orthodox Judaism in America has had trouble retaining its members. Indeed, according to a demographic study by Sergio Della Pergola and Uzi Rebhun, published in the Orthodox flagship publication, *Jewish Action*, Orthodoxy loses more of its members over time than does any other Jewish

religious movement. Even among the younger and supposedly more committed Orthodox (born 1950-1970), according to the survey, Orthodoxy retained only 42 percent of those born into its fold. To be sure, some of these losses are compensated for by gains of new followers, and Orthodox Jews also enjoy a higher birthrate than their non-Orthodox counterparts. Figures from the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey, one suspects, will show an improved rate of Orthodox retention. Notwithstanding all of these factors, however, the demographers concluded that, "overall, the size of Orthodoxy does not seem to be bound to dramatic growth." Considering that not even ten percent of American Jews are currently Orthodox, this represents a significant problem.

Second, Orthodoxy in America is suffering from a severe leadership crisis. The greatest of its 20th century leaders -- Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Rabbi Moses Feinstein and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson -- have all passed from the scene, and no worthy successors have emerged. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, Rabbi Soloveitchik's son-in-law and now the *Rosh Yeshivah* of Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel, has recently acknowledged and bemoaned "the current dearth of first-rank *gedolim* [giants]" in America. "One can think," he writes, "of no indigenous American *gadol* certain to be remembered with wistful awe a century hence...of no giant majestically bestriding the contemporary scene and securely moving American Orthodoxy into the future." Perhaps for this reason, American Orthodox Jews increasingly look to Israeli rabbis and *yeshivah* heads for direction. When a young American Orthodox Jew speaks of "my rebbe" chances are that he is referring to someone in Israel. One cannot but wonder, however, whether Israeli Orthodox leaders really understand the American Jewish scene well enough to exercise leadership here. Historically, at least, religious movements that cannot count on indigenous leadership to direct them have not fared well in America -- at least, not for long.

Third, American Orthodoxy is experiencing a significant brain drain. It sends its best and brightest to Israel for long periods of yeshiva study, and unsurprisingly many of them never return. Even those who do come back and succeed feel a spiritual longing to return to the Holy Land, and count the days until they can do so. Thus, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, one of the most successful American Orthodox rabbis of recent decades, left his congregation in New York in order to make *aliyah* to Efrat. His success at building that community is remarkable, but in the meanwhile his former congregation grievously declined and American Orthodoxy lost one of its most dynamic leaders. One can think of literally dozens of similar examples: remarkable Orthodox men and women who might have transformed American Jewish religious life but preferred to cast their lot with Zion. This may be terrific from an Israeli perspective, but can a movement that sends its most illustrious sons and daughters *there* truly expect to triumph *here*?

Fourth, American Orthodoxy is deeply divided over the issue of how to confront modernity. There is nothing new about this: Jeffrey Gurock has shown that the tension between "accommodators" and "resisters" in Orthodox life dates back to the 19th century. Parallel debates have animated many other American religious movements. Indeed, such debates have also often proved salutary: each side checks and balances the excesses of the other. The problem is that, in the absence of broadly respected leaders, the fault-lines between modern and right-wing Orthodox Jews have deepened. In one particularly vitriolic attack, Rabbi Elya Svei, a prominent member of the right wing Agudat Israel, characterized Yeshiva University's President Norman Lamm as "an enemy of God" - a charge that he subsequently refused to retract. More broadly, Modern Orthodox Jews - including, recently, Senator Joseph Lieberman -- have found themselves written out of Orthodoxy altogether by some right-wing critics. No wonder that Professors William B. Helmreich and Reuel Shinnar, in a recent analysis, depicted Modern Orthodoxy as "a movement under siege." The question, however, is not whether Modern Orthodoxy will survive - in fact, it retains thousands of adherents. The question is whether Orthodoxy itself can survive as a single movement or whether (like so many Protestant denominations that have faced similar challenges) it will ultimately polarize so far as to crack. The fact that Orthodox Judaism, unlike its Conservative and Reform counterparts, does not have any strong institutional ties binding all of its factions together makes the danger of such a schism all the greater.

Fifth, American Orthodoxy faces sweeping challenges from contemporary feminism. *Jewish Action* calls this "perhaps the most explosive issue facing Orthodoxy" and wonders aloud whether it "will estrange feminists and their supporters from the rest of Orthodoxy." In many communities, the answer would seem to be yes. So-called "women's issues" - whether, for example, women may organize separate prayer groups on a regular basis, or dance with the Torah on Simchat Torah, or celebrate ritually the *bat mitzvah* of their daughters, or wear *tallit* and *tefillin* - divide Orthodox synagogues one from another in many of the major communities where Orthodox Jews live, and have divided many synagogues internally as well. Indeed, it can be argued that these issues are to contemporary Orthodoxy what debates over mixed seating and the height of the *mehitzah* were to an earlier generation. Those issues turned out to be defining ones for Orthodox Judaism: in time, synagogues with mixed seating had to stop calling themselves Orthodox. Will the women's issues today prove similarly divisive? The heated rhetoric on both sides hardly hints at the possibility of compromise. The question, as Orthodoxy ponders its future, is whether "the most explosive issue facing Orthodoxy" will ultimately blow up, fragmenting American Orthodoxy in the process.

Finally, American Orthodoxy is currently mired in several ugly scandals that have undermined the credibility of some of its foremost lay and professional leaders. The mystery surrounding missing tape recordings of Rabbi Soloveitchik's lectures has already tarnished several reputations. Meanwhile, the far more serious scandal surrounding the alleged sexual misdeeds of a charismatic figure in the National Council of Synagogue Youth along with the alleged widespread cover-up that allowed him to maintain his job for years, accusations against him notwithstanding, threatens the credibility of the entire Orthodox Union. So far, the impact of these scandals has been circumscribed. The long-term damage to the movement, however, may prove more far-reaching, just as the scandals involving television evangelists did untold damage to the fortunes of Evangelical Protestantism.

Taken together, all of these "dilemmas and vulnerabilities" demonstrate that the Orthodox model has *not* triumphed in America. The question instead is whether Orthodoxy's unexpected rise will be followed by an equally precipitous decline. Such cycles are familiar in religion, just as they are in economics, but they are by no means inevitable. In the end, Orthodoxy's future will actually depend upon its own actions. Will it confront the challenges that it faces, or will it discover only in retrospect that success blinded it to the internal problems that ultimately proved its undoing?

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