

Jerusalem Letters

No. 376 19 Shevat 5758 / 15 February 1998

The Haredization of American Orthodox Jewry

Chaim I. Waxman

Differences Between Modern and Haredi Orthodoxy / Demographics / Stringency / The Decline of the Generations / The Impact of Modernity / A Yearning for Rigidity / Patterns in the Larger Society / The Outcome of Yeshiva Education

Almost every observer of contemporary American Orthodoxy has been struck by its move to the right. Some bemoan this trend while others are elated by it. In any case, there are a number of basic sociological factors which render it inevitable that Orthodoxy in modern society will adopt a stance of greater isolation and especially of ritualistic stringency.

Differences Between Modern and Haredi Orthodoxy

There are three major differences between modern Orthodoxy and traditional *haredi* Orthodoxy. The first involves the *haredi* stance toward the larger society in general and the larger Jewish community, which is essentially an attitude of isolation, as opposed to the inclusive attitude of the modern Orthodox. The second is in reference to modernity, general scholarship and science, with the *haredim* being antagonistic and modern Orthodoxy being accommodating, if not welcoming. Here it should be emphasized that the *haredi* opposition to modernity is to the cultural components of modernity, not to the

technological. In contrast to the Amish and others, *haredim* do not reject technological innovations but adopt and adapt them to their ends of social and cultural isolation. Third, there is a basic difference between the two in their attitudes toward Zionism and active involvement in the rebirth and development of Israel, with the *haredim* being antagonistic and the modern Orthodox welcoming Zionism as a religious value.

Demographics

According to the 1990 Jewish Population Survey, the Orthodox birth rate is 3.3 percent, more than double the rate for Conservative (1.4 percent) and Reform (1.3 percent). While there are no firm data, it is widely believed that *haredim* have a much higher birth rate than the modern Orthodox and there are a number of indicators to support that impression. A 1997 article in the *Jerusalem Report* quoted the chief midwife at Sha'are Zedek Hospital in Jerusalem claiming that "today 10 children appears to the norm" for *haredi* families, and the assertion that the *haredi* birth rate is increasing is supported by others who work in the field. There appears to be fierce competition among *haredim* over having more children.

If this is the case in Jerusalem, it is probably also the case in Bnei Brak and other *haredi* communities in Israel and it will inevitably spread, if it has not already done so, to the United States as well. Indeed, the birth rates at Kimbal Hospital in Lakewood, New Jersey, and Maimonides Hospital in Boro Park are reported to be significantly higher than in other similar hospitals. Modern Orthodox families, by contrast, probably have a mean birth rate of no higher than four.

Stringency

Haredization involves a tendency to view stringency as more religious. This tendency toward increasing stringency is not restricted to *haredim*; it is a pattern which has become characteristic of modern Orthodoxy as well. To take an example, a prominent synagogue in

Lawrence, Long Island, a citadel of modern Orthodoxy, recently replaced all its copies of the Hertz Humash with the Artscroll translation, and not because the pages were worn or the binding was worn. Another example is that of a synagogue at which the new rabbi, a young recent graduate of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University, banned the Hertz Humash on the grounds that it was heretical.

In another example, a few months ago this writer came across the weekly Torah commentary "Divrei Hemed," published by the Kollel of Rabbi Avraham Blumenkranz in Far Rockaway, NY. It began: "In one of the previous *parshiyos* we read of how the Nation, except for the righteous ones, desired excessive amounts of meat, a lust which angered *hash-m*." Since the term "*hashem*" is in itself a substitute for the word "God," I understood the writing of the word with a hyphen as a sign of *haredist*ringency, which did not surprise me because that is a publication of a *haredi* institution. A few weeks later, at a meeting of a committee of the Orthodox Union, which was until recently the major synagogue organization of centrist or modern Orthodoxy, I noticed that a proposal for a project being presented for consideration included a reference to "*hash-m*." Although this is clearly just one manifestation, it appears to represent a pattern which manifests in greater stringency today than ever before in the Orthodox Union, the Young Israel movement, and other major bastions of modern Orthodoxy.

The phenomenon of *humra* - religious stringency - is not a new one. It has been prevalent for centuries and is probably endemic to the social psychology of the religious person. Following the sociology of religion of Emile Durkheim and Peter Berger, among others, we know that religion strives toward man's relative self-denial and that asceticism is inherent to the religious sphere. Despite Max Weber, asceticism has long had its place within Judaism and provides a basic rationale for stringency within the religious sphere.

The Decline of the Generations

It is a centuries-old tradition in Judaism to measure one's religious

status, both intellectual and behavioral, as inversely related to distance from Sinai. There is a traditional tendency to see earlier generations as smarter and truer. Professor Menachem Kellner is the author of a fascinating book showing how Maimonides, the Rambam, differed in terms of his perspective on the decline of the generations; but the thesis of the decline of the generations is a very prevalent one within Jewish tradition. Although for some this tendency would preclude adopting unprecedented stringencies, for others this attitude may be the very source of such stringencies. They believe that later generations must be more stringent if they are to aspire to be considered religiously observant and worthy.

The Impact of Modernity

In his analysis "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy" (*Tradition*, Summer 1994), Haym Soloveitchik pinpointed the unique role of printed texts in the development of many of the patterns which characterize contemporary Orthodoxy. He indicated how the technology of modern publishing has transformed much of traditional religious practice, particularly in the enclaves of the *haredim*. The condition of modernity has transformed a traditional religious society and culture into a voluntary Orthodox sub-society and sub-culture in which what had been recipes for living which were transmitted by custom are transformed into ritualistic beliefs, objects, and practices which require accuracy. Although somewhat differently from Menachem Friedman who sees the practice of increasing stringency as rooted in structural factors, especially since the emergence of the Eastern European-type yeshiva, Soloveitchik also sees the process as of rather recent vintage, predominantly post-World War II, and by the mid-1970s becoming the dominant mode of religiosity.

There are also certain structural conditions of modernity itself which inevitably lead to stringency. In large measure this is a consequence of the process of religious pluralization which accompanies modernity. Religious pluralization manifests itself in the emergence of denominations, each of which claims legitimacy and authenticity. Accordingly, there is a need for each to develop techniques of

boundary maintenance, to clearly distinguish itself from other denominations. Religious orthodoxies in particular, as James Davidson Hunter points out, have a special interest in establishing and maintaining a valid boundary.

At least since the time of Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch, the sectarian *haredi* community, through its overt separation from the larger Jewish community, achieved a very high level of self-consciousness as a distinct community. It developed a highly honed sense of itself as the true bearer of a very special tradition. It is this type of traditional sectarian Orthodoxy which has been successful in maintaining and even strengthening itself as a movement and as a community. In contrast, although there may be many individuals who define themselves as modern Orthodox, modern Orthodoxy has not established itself as a movement in the way that *haredi* Orthodoxy has, nor is it likely to.

There are a number of basic sociological factors for this. One of the characteristics of traditional Orthodoxy, indeed of all religious orthodoxies, is submission to the authority of the tradition as espoused by the experts of the tradition. Authority and tradition are a prerequisite for religious orthodoxy. Within an orthodoxy the individual is expected to so internalize tradition as to perceive himself as not having any choice but to conform to all of its dictates. The notion that the individual has the ability to choose is heretical, as Peter Berger elucidates. As he points out, the English word "heresy" comes from the Greek verb which means "to choose." From the perspective of religious orthodoxy, one has no choice, and from the perspective of traditional Jewish Orthodoxy the actions of choice included the inevitable submission to the ultimate authority of the rabbinic scholarly elite.

The majority of those who considered themselves modern Orthodox are, apparently, modern Orthodox behaviorally but not philosophically. They do not define themselves as modern because of an ideological commitment to worldly knowledge or any of the other values of modernity. As the empirical evidence indicates, it is through their very selectivity in observance that most modern Orthodox manifest their modernity. However, for them that selectivity is almost solely a matter of personal choice. They usually do not seek to legitimate their behavior ideologically or *halakhically*, nor do they feel a need to

legitimate it. So although they feel free to choose, they do not challenge the authority of the sectarian scholarly elite, and since they are not a challenge to that authority, they are tolerated by that elite and can still feel themselves part of the Orthodox community.

As a result, the sectarians have a virtual monopoly on authority. Indeed, it may be argued that the deviance of Reform and Conservative as defined by Orthodoxy is not so much that they do not behaviorally conform to the norms as prescribed by Orthodoxy, but that they reject the authority of the Orthodox. Orthodoxy can tolerate deviance which is so recognized by the actor. What it cannot tolerate is the legitimation of what it considers to be deviance through the rejection of the authority of the rabbi.

For the behavioral modern Orthodox, this arrangement works well. They tolerate it because they can be identified with Orthodoxy and feel righteous even when they do not live up to their religious obligations. For the philosophical modern Orthodox, matters are much more complex. First of all, even if they do not challenge the *halakhic* authority of the sectarian elite, there are those specific areas in which they overtly challenge them philosophically. The modern Orthodox are therefore vilified and shunned by the sectarian community.

For example, at the most recent convention of Agudat Israel in America, a member of the Aguda's Moetzet Gedolei HaTorah (Council of Torah Sages) vilified Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, President of Yeshiva University, as a "hater of God" - one who is observant and who has perverted ideas. Among the alleged perverted ideas were two in particular: the assertion by Lamm that Orthodoxy should not and cannot remain aloof from the world-at-large, and Lamm's tacit support for the Neeman Commission.

Above and beyond the specific issues on which they challenge the sectarian, the modern Orthodox, being modern, are at least suspicious of the very notion of human beings with virtually complete authority. In addition, their study of *halakhah* reinforces modern Orthodox Judaism's rationalist priority of truth over authority. This further inhibits modern Orthodoxy from becoming a real movement because a movement would entail organization and authority to a

degree which goes against the very grain of philosophical moderns.

There is evidence from a number of different studies that since World War II, in the West there is a decline of belonging to organizations, and organizational loyalties have declined in numerous spheres because part of modernity is that the individual becomes more important than the organization per se. The idea of commitment to an organization because somebody has authority is just alien to the modern mind. Modern Orthodoxy, being philosophically modern, emphasizes a level of personal autonomy as well as rationalist truth. The modern Orthodox reject oligarchy just as they are skeptical of all human authority, which may be one reason why they have no Moetzet Gedolei HaTorah as sectarians do.

On the other hand, some modern Orthodox rabbis experience a need for acceptance by the world of the yeshiva which is the core of the traditional sectarian community. Since stringency, punctiliousness, and zealousness in ritual observance are the prescribed norm in that world, those modern Orthodox rabbis who seek the approval of the yeshiva world may likewise adopt stringent stances and in the process lose the support of that modern Orthodox group which they seek to lead.

Finally, the ability of modern Orthodoxy to attract a large following and become a movement is inherently inhibited by the fact that it is highly rational and intellectual. This alone would limit its attraction since it has built-in tensions and frequently requires conscious living within consistency. As Sol Roth writes with respect to synthesis, "The task of realizing synthesis in personality is a very difficult affair primarily because it requires the development of an attitude that enables an individual to adopt different perspectives." The very fact that it is much more open severely limits its attractiveness for most people. For better or for worse, most people prefer, if not demand, very specific, black or white concepts which can easily be differentiated from others. If an analogy may be permitted, they prefer either meat or dairy to *parve* (neutral or grey areas). The fact that you do not need a third set of dishes for *parve* is something that many people find it difficult to live with. Although there is absolutely no basis for it in *halakhah*, they feel that you have to have a clear set of *parve* dishes because there you know exactly where the boundaries are.

A Yearning for Rigidity

As Mary Douglas suggests, the yearning for rigidity is in all of us. It is part of the human condition to yearn for hardline and clear concepts. Modern Orthodoxy in both its content and structure does not have the hard lines and clear concepts. Moreover, being largely rationalist rather than romanticist, modern Orthodoxy has limited potential for attracting the masses. Social movements in general and religious movements even more so are built on emotional, passionate commitment and an ability to radiate a strong sense of family-like communal warmth. The somewhat distant intellectual coolness of philosophical modern Orthodoxy is much less amenable to being translated into a movement which generates warmth and devotion. For the same reasons, it is difficult to establish primary and secondary schools capable of socializing children to this type of modern Orthodoxy in the United States.

What we are left with therefore is an iron law of stringency. The Italian political theorist Robert Michels argued that "he who says 'organization' says 'oligarchy'"; we may add that he who says "organization" says "*humra*," because organization requires boundaries, commitment, and submission to authority.

The denominational conflict we are witnessing will probably accelerate *haredism* because *haredism* is in large measure a reactionary impulse. As the non-Orthodox deviate further from tradition, the Orthodox will become more *haredi*. As noted above, modern Orthodox synagogue organizations such as Young Israel and the Orthodox Union increasingly take more *haredi*-like positions and the gap between them and the larger Jewish community is increasing.

Patterns in the Larger Society

It would be a mistake to look solely within Jewry for the move toward greater stringency. American Jews are part of American society and what occurs in the larger society is reflected in Jewish patterns. The

trend toward greater stringency is found not only among Orthodox Jews but among traditionalist Christians and Muslims as well. James Davidson Hunter suggests that modern society is engulfed in culture wars and the similar reactions among religious traditionalists across religious lines is a manifestation of those culture wars. This may help explain why there has developed a new phenomenon of coalitions between Orthodox Jews, Protestant fundamentalists and traditional Catholics, something which had been unheard of until recently. It used to be that the more Orthodox a person was, the further he or she was from the other religions and their representatives. Today there are coalitions between the stringent religious groups.

It is doubtful that many of the contemporary manifestations of modernity and deviations from tradition could even have been imagined until relatively recently. As the larger society and culture deviate from traditional patterns, the Orthodox traditionalists react by becoming more separationist, manifested in a quarantine approach. As someone in the *haredi* community explained, "If there was a biological plague in the larger society, what would we do? We would quarantine ourselves. Since there is a spiritual plague going on in society, we have to quarantine ourselves, to isolate ourselves as thoroughly as possible to protect ourselves from the infectious modern culture."

It may even be that the reactionary phenomenon we are witnessing is not limited to religion. It may be characteristic of inter-group relations in modern pluralistic societies and not very different from the rise of ethnic chauvinism more recently under the guise of extremist multiculturalism which we see in American society.

Indeed, the United States was founded as a religious country, and has in it a strong religious background, albeit with a separation of church and state. American society promotes openness but also enables people to do their own thing even if it involves a kind of particularism. So we see in Protestantism, for example, that it is the evangelicals who are growing, not the mainstream liberal Protestants. America allows for this kind of a trend.

The Outcome of Yeshiva Education

Another aspect of the growing *haredization* are the educational patterns which lead to its growth - namely, the impact of the yeshiva on *haredism*. Who works in Jewish education in the Orthodox world? Increasingly, it is the *haredim*, either because of their commitments or because of their inability to do anything else because they do not have advanced secular training. The modern Orthodox, on the other hand, go into professions outside of the Jewish community, and thus the yeshivot are left to the *haredim*. When modern Orthodox send their children to the yeshiva, no matter how committed they may be to modern Orthodoxy, their children may well become *haredim*.

There are some recent manifestations of attempts to challenge this trend with the start of modern Orthodox yeshivot in the United States, and some seem to be having limited success. In fact, there is a growing community of younger people who are passionate about learning. When this writer was at Yeshiva University in the late 1950s and early 1960s, at night there was hardly anyone around. Tonight the *beit midrash* there will be full of hundreds of young men, some who have learned in *hesder yeshivot* in Israel. They are going to college or they have finished college and they come to study. The same is true at certain synagogue *beit midrash* programs such as the one at Bnei Yeshurun in Teaneck, N.J.

The overall impact of these manifestations is, however, highly questionable. For all of the reasons discussed, it would appear that the probabilities of the modern Orthodox having any significant impact on Orthodoxy as a whole are very weak, to say the least. If anything, it is much more likely that the *haredi* influence on modern Orthodoxy will grow.

My own sense is that the modern Orthodox must make some very hard decisions in the near future. I subscribe to the Talmudic statement that after the destruction of the Temple, prophecy was given to fools and, therefore, avoid clear predictions. I am also an optimist by personality, and do not want to sound like a prophet of doom. However, the increasingly thorny religio-political realities which we are currently confronting present a possibility of a major showdown, if not a complete rupture, between the Orthodox and non-

Orthodox religious movements. If the modern Orthodox are to play any kind of a constructive role, that is, a role in maintaining the basic unity of Jews and Judaism, they may have to seriously consider an overt challenge to and, perhaps, even separation from *haredi* Orthodoxy. That is not a step to be taken lightly. The step itself as well as the critical needs of the hour require its careful consideration and deliberation.

* * *

Dr. Chaim I. Waxman is Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University and author of numerous books and articles on the sociology of Jews and Judaism. This *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* is based on his presentation at the Jerusalem Center Fellows Forum.

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.