

AMERICAN ORTHODOXY

Despite dangerous disunity
it is growing and looks
to future with confidence

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"With the increase in Jewish economic security, newer generations are not as enamored of the materialistic values." Children watch as their young mother recites the prayer over the Friday evening candles.

The present situation of American Jewish Orthodoxy, at first glance, is paradoxical. On the one hand, there appear to be signs of dynamic growth. Rabbis and professional leaders of Orthodox organizations are cheerful and optimistic about their future. The previous fear that Orthodox Jews could not survive in the American milieu has all but disappeared. They are building synagogues in suburban areas, and even if their number does not equal that of Conservative and Reform temples, it is very impressive. The number of Orthodox day schools has likewise increased, and the Orthodox community has gained increasing recognition and respect from the non-Orthodox Jewish world because of its courage in articulating authentic Jewish perspectives on national and international issues.

At the same time, there are a number of community studies which compare the age distribution, social characteristics, and religious affiliation or identification of American Jews. These convey a gloomier picture. In every city studied, the results were the same:

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Orthodox Jews were found on the average to have lower incomes, to be more poorly educated, and most important of all, to be much older than other Jews. Whereas the Orthodox might constitute over 50% of the Jewish population above the age of 60, their proportion of the population for the 20-30 age group might fall to 10% or lower. In the face of this, one might well ask: Why all the rejoicing on the part of Orthodox rabbis and professionals? Doesn't the evidence indicate that Orthodoxy has no future in the United States?

ORTHODOXY INTERESTS MANY

Yet even the knowledgeable non-Orthodox sense that this is not the case. They and the organizations they lead are evincing a tremendous interest in Orthodoxy. The forthcoming issue of the "American Jewish Year Book" (published by the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Publication Society) is devoting its feature article to American Orthodoxy. Yeshiva University is besieged daily with requests from Jewish as well as non-Jewish organizations and institutions, newspapers, magazines, and television stations for assistance in the preparation of articles, stories, and features on American Orthodoxy. Are we to dismiss all of this as research in anticipation of an obituary?

The fact of the matter is that Orthodoxy is in one sense dying and in another sense renewing itself. To understand what has taken place, however, we must understand the history of the Orthodox Jewish community in the United States.

For the first two and a half centuries of American Jewish history there was a preponderance of Jewish illiteracy. The number of learned rabbis was negligible. Even in the great waves of immigration at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th one simply did not find the intellectual and spiritual elite of Eastern Europe in the same proportion that they were to be found in the countries of their origin. There were committed Jews who built synagogues and day schools—even the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. But the outstanding rabbinic leaders of Eastern and Central Europe did not come to the U. S., and even sought to dissuade their Jewish countrymen from coming to a *trefe* land. The greatest rabbinic authority of his generation, the renowned Rabbi Israel Meir ha-Kohen, the "Chofetz Chaim", warned Jews to



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stay at home and not endanger their Judaism by emigrating.

Most of those who did come were Orthodox because they knew no other way of life. Confronted with the possibility offered in America of abandoning their ancestral ways, which impeded their upward climb on the economic and social ladder, they left the Orthodox fold. Even many of those who chose to remain in the fold did so not because they were ideologically or philosophically committed to Orthodoxy, but rather because it represented a way of life with which they had neither the energy nor the initiative to break. (Obviously, there were those who remained traditional out of conviction, but they could hardly stem the tide.) The children of this large contingent of Orthodox Jews who remained within their familiar camp because of lethargy or inertia rather than commitment, had little or no reason to retain their Orthodoxy. Sometimes they retained it for reasons sentimental or superstitious. But knowledge plus commitment was rare.

OLD GENERATION IS PASSING

This is also the group which is still large enough numerically and proportionately to determine the statistical profile of Orthodoxy. That is why statistics indicate that Orthodox Jews are older, of more recent immigrant origin, and generally more poorly educated. However, this is a vanishing remnant. Within a generation it will be gone or will have experienced a transformation as a result of Orthodoxy's new face.

This new face comprises two elements. First there are what may be called the "modern Orthodox". Among these are the offspring of earlier immigrants who, unlike most of their contemporaries — second generation Americans—chose the alternative of Orthodoxy. They have become acculturated to American life, and are relatively well educated. They have built



In traditional home, girl watches her brother don t'fillim for prayer.

new and modern synagogues and introduced many new practices which remain within the bounds of *halachic* requirements even when they ostensibly represent a departure from the behavior of their forbears. In many "modern Orthodox" synagogues are also found nonobservant Jews who are nevertheless impressed by the commitment of the rabbi or the other congregants, the warmth of the service, or the nostalgia it evokes. The ranks of this group are further augmented by a growing number of young American Jews who were reared in totally non-observant homes but who have embraced a more traditional spirit of Judaism.

But "modern Orthodoxy" is not the only component of contemporary Orthodoxy. The second large group consists of those who emigrated more recently to the United States—immediately prior to World War II or shortly thereafter. Unlike the earlier immigrants, this group has a deeper commitment to Orthodoxy and a higher level of Jewish learning. Unlike the "modern Orthodox," they reject many manifestations of contemporary life. They are far less outgoing and thus, while they exercise much less influence on other American Jews, they are also less influenced by them and less compromising in the nature of their religious practices.

They are, themselves, however, not a monolithic group. They include a variety of Chassidic groups, including the ultra-Orthodox Satmar, numbering 35,000 to 40,000, who eschew secular education, and have little contact with other Jews. The other Chassidic groups, including the numerically larger Lubavitcher Chassidim, are less resistant to some form of acculturation. In addition to the Chassidic groups, there are many Yeshivot for Talmudic study such as Rabbi Chaim Berlin or Torah Vodaath, in New York, the Beth Medrosh Govoha, in Lakewood, Ner Israel in Baltimore, and Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland. These are far less preoccupied than Yeshiva University is with the synthesis of Torah learning and western civilization. At their helm stand "Roshei Yeshivot" (heads of Yeshivas) whose relationship to their students and alumni often resembles the charismatic relationship of the "Chassid" to his "rebbe".

Generally, it can be said that American Jewish Orthodoxy is more poorly organized than either Conservatism or Reform. However, no group can rally for any cause either the zeal or the numbers that Orthodoxy can. The funeral of a Rosh Yeshiva can evoke the participation of at least a hundred thousand people as the cortege moves

from Lakewood to New York and thence to Jerusalem. Lectures by another Rosh Yeshiva—with the meagrest advance publicity—finds New York's largest auditoriums filled to capacity. A call for a demonstration, even picketing, receives a response more keenly felt than any sponsored by better organized groups with professional public relations staffs. The republication of Jewish classics in the original Hebrew is good business: modern Jewish writers enjoy no comparable market. Even the marketing of kosher products has reached such proportions that the *Wall Street Journal* takes note of it.

And all of this was achieved without any coordination or even cooperation between the various components of American Orthodoxy. The component that is less concerned with acculturation expresses its views through the heads of the Yeshivot, and in such organizations as the Union of Orthodox Rabbis, which is primarily composed of European-trained rabbis, and the Rabbinical Alliance of America, which is composed primarily of younger American trained graduates of Yeshivot other than Yeshiva University and the Hebrew Theological College of Chicago.

Their voice is also expressed by Agudath Israel and is often heeded, though not always followed, by the National Young Israel movement, with close to 100 synagogues, and the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, with several hundred affiliated synagogues. In addition, each of the Chassidic groups has its own rabbinic authority and its own network of schools from the elementary level to advanced Talmudic academies.

"MODERN ORTHODOX" AGENCIES

"Modern Orthodoxy" expresses itself in such groups as the Rabbinical Council of America, the largest Orthodox rabbinic organization in the country, the Religious Zionists of America, composed of Mizrahi and Hapoel Hamizrachi and their women's and youth groups, the Young Israel movement, the Hebrew Theological College of Chicago, and Yeshiva University, in New York. Yeshiva University alone, in its secondary schools and undergraduate colleges, has over 3,000 students who spend as many hours per week in the study of Torah as they do in their secular studies.

All the organizations have increased in number and strength in recent years. Although the absolute number of practicing Orthodox Jews may have declined and will probably continue to do so for another decade as the older immigrant generation vanishes, the younger Orthodox Jews have achieved

partment store, where she could choose freely. The unpleasant persons—loud, self-righteous old-maid cousins—were victorious in championing the bride’s freedom, while the sympathetic ones, including Molly, were defeated. Unsparring of herself, Molly spent a half hour once relentlessly pursuing a fellow convalescing patient in a hospital ward, the mother of an eligible young man, in behalf of her frowsy second cousin. She nagged the woman into a relapse—and in the process made my skin crawl. Another time, provoked by Jake’s attack on her “mixing in,” Molly gave a party for the couples she had been instrumental in getting together. Molly herself was pleased with the sheer bulk of her efforts. “There were some pretty awful messes, clearly shown,” Mrs. Berg remarked of this program, “and it was a question whether these could make up for all the good marriages. The happily married couples would have surely been happy in any case; the wretched ones were pushed into their disasters by Molly’s pressures.” On the other hand, one program was devoted to Molly’s upbraiding Sammy for laughing at Rosiely because she looked ridiculous in an evening gown. “Did I teach you ever to laugh at people, to hurt their feelings because they look funny?” asks Molly.

I saw one other session of Muttie’s troubles, on Second Avenue, and on the following Tuesday went down to the DuMont Television Center, on East 67th Street, an hour and a half before broadcast time to see the dress rehearsal. The studio occupied one floor, two stories high, of a converted furniture warehouse. The set was along one wall, open to the three cameras and the several sound booms. Technicians, advertising men, photographers, and assorted assistants, most of whom hadn’t seen the sketch before, watched the rehearsal attentively, laughing now and then, eliciting appreciative grins from Mrs. Berg when off camera. There were at least thirty persons standing around or handling the equipment. One man had gone to sleep in a lounge chair; the chair was the family’s gift to Muttie.

During the pause reserved for the middle commercial, which was on film, Mrs. Berg whipped out of the dress she was wearing, revealing another one underneath, and four men rushed over to the dining room table

carrying a large circular board on which was laid out a complete setting, which they hurriedly transferred to the actual table. The changed table setting and Molly’s new dress marked the passage of time. The script had been shaped into a neat playlet between Tuesday and Thursday; rehearsals had gone on all day Friday, Saturday, Monday, and on Tuesday afternoon.

At the end of the rehearsal, I wandered on to the set. The strict attention paid to details of furnishing and decorating clearly reflected Mrs. Berg’s preoccupation with authenticity. The wallpaper and the furniture were pretentious and shabby. The sofa was indeed a Castro, as the label on the back testified. On the walls hung pictures of Washington and Lincoln, one of Sammy in uniform, and one of a naked baby sprawled on a bear rug. There was an old discolored brown-tone portrait of a family in 19th-century dress—ladies with high collars and elaborate hair arrangements, mustachioed men with spats and intricate watch chains.

Mr. Cherney Berg invited me to join him in the control room during the actual show. There, a flight upstairs, at a long table before a wide window that overlooked the hanging lights and other equipment in the studio, sat the assistant director in front of a panel of switches, the director, a script girl, Mr. Berg, and several others. There were five television screens. The assistant director, who wore earphones and a chest phone, was in constant touch with the three cameramen, and decided at each moment which of the three shots was to be broadcast; the selected shot was shown on the other two screens.

The cast, the directors, and others hugged and congratulated Mrs. Berg at the end of the program; in the group was a bald, sharp-faced gentleman—Mr. Berg. Before leaving the studio Miss McQuade changed from the shapeless wool blouse and skirt and flat heels she was wearing as Rosie to a tight fitting dress and high-heeled thin-strap shoes. Tom Taylor left in the same sports jacket and tan chino trousers he had worn as Sammy, and he drove off in a miniature, fire-engine red, foreign convertible.

As I was leaving the building, my eye was caught by the row of tall, narrow tenement houses across the street, of the type in which one might conceivably find the original of