

National News

Orthodoxy Struggles With 'Frum Or Frummer?'

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Editor's note: The second of a two-part report on far-reaching changes within American Orthodoxy. Part 1 was published last week.

The growth of a more tradition-bound Orthodoxy within American Judaism is part of the global re-embrace of traditionalist religion, a phenomenon with great political repercussions in Islam and Christianity.

In this nation, the trend is reflected in the political power gained in recent decades by the so-called Christian right, an umbrella term that covers activist evangelical Protestants, conservative Roman Catholics, traditionalist Eastern Orthodox Christians, and others.

The so-called "culture war" over gender and sexuality issues that has convulsed American politics and Christian denominational life is one result. Within American Judaism, the growth of *Haredi*, or right-wing, Orthodoxy, is another product of this global trend.

"I think the turn to ultra-Orthodoxy has been a reaction to the unsettled and rapidly changing times," said Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg, the spiritual leader of Beth Tfiloh Congregation, Baltimore's modern Orthodox ... which is to say liberal Orthodox ... flagship. "We're living in an age of extremism among all religions."

Rabbi Wohlberg's 1,200-member congregation also is wrestling with the Haredi impact on modern Orthodox practice. Beth Tfiloh has installed a *mechitzah*, the barrier that separates men and women during religious services, in its main sanctuary, rather than relying on separate seating alone as it did in the past.

Rabbi Wohlberg said the mechitzah became necessary "to permit us to continue to define ourselves as Orthodox. ... Without the mechitzah, people might think we were moving to the Conservative side" of Judaism's religious spectrum. At the same time, he's quick to add that Beth Tfiloh is exploring additional ways to include women in religious rituals ... their exclusion in synagogue services being a hallmark of Haredi Orthodoxy.

Haredi men tend to wear black brimmed hats over black felt *yarmulkes* as part of a wardrobe that rarely veers from basic black and white. Haredi women always cover their hair ... with a scarf, hat or wig ... out of concern for *halachic* rules governing

personal modesty. Modern Orthodox men, on the other hand, often favor knit skullcaps and more mainstream street attire. Modern Orthodox women as often as not leave their hair uncovered.

But communal allegiance involves more than dress. The degree to which women are included in religious and social settings; more for modern, less for Haredi, is one criteria. So is one's attitude toward Zionism; the more right-wing Haredi the more likely one is to reject a State of Israel born out of overt human struggle.

However, the factor dividing modern Orthodoxy from Haredi Judaism most clearly is the attitude toward the value of secular education, in particular higher education, said Samuel C. Heilman, a City University of New York sociologist and author of the recently released book, "Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Orthodoxy" (University of California).

Modern Orthodox, aware of education's importance in the job market and open to the broader world's ideas, embrace secular higher education.

In fact, modern Orthodox day schools such as Beth Tfiloh make their rate of student acceptance into the nation's elite colleges and universities a prime selling point.

Haredi Orthodox, if they seek secular education at all, regard "the university as a place to get through without being harmed. The faster you can get through it the better, and if you can avoid it altogether, great," said Mr. Heilman. "The view from the university and the view from the yeshiva are like night and day. In the university, new questions are the best questions asked, all possibilities are open, and academic freedom is the rule. In the yeshiva, the best questions are the questions that the 'greats' have already asked, the kind of knowledge that you learn is knowledge that has been handed down, and academic freedom is not a central value."

Still, permeable borders are the reality for many. Even some of the most anti-secular *Haredim* ... New York's Satmar Hasidim, for example ... can be encountered in that city's diamond and electronics trades, rubbing shoulders, figuratively, with the most secular of customers, male and female.

"The divide is indeed very unclear, with overlaps in many areas ... ," Rabbi Avi Shafran, national spokesman for the Haredi synagogue umbrella group Agudath Israel of America, wrote in an e-mail response to questions sent to him for this article. "But I consider all the divides to be peripheral things, sociologically important, perhaps, but not essential. If a Jew affirms the unchanging nature of Torah and Halachah, he or she is Orthodox; the rest, so to speak, is commentary. There are some nominally Orthodox groups, though, today, that I feel compromise on the essence of Jewish belief; I consider them closer to a Conservative theology than to a Jewish religious tradition."

The overlap described by Rabbi Shafran is evident in Eitan Allen's life. Mr. Allen was educated in a modern Orthodox high school in New York, but dropped out of Yeshiva University, the movement's primary institution of higher education, because he sought a clearer divide between his secular and religious studies. He enrolled in Baltimore's Ner Israel Rabbinical College, a distinctly Haredi institution.

However, he continued his secular education while at Ner Israel, which unlike many Haredi yeshivas has long encouraged students to pursue outside secular degrees for their on-the-job advantages.

Mr. Allen, who plans on becoming a rabbi, obtained an undergraduate degree in psychology from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Currently, he is in the pastoral counseling master's-Ph.D. program at Baltimore's Loyola College, in addition to studying in the Ner Israel *kollel* program for married students.

A modern Orthodox-Haredi blending is likewise evident in the life of Rabbi Leonard Oberstein, Ner Israel's director of planning and community development. Formerly, he served as spiritual leader of Shaarei Tfiloh near Druid Hill Park, and the now-shuttered Randallstown Synagogue Center, both considered modern Orthodox.

"For me," Rabbi Oberstein said of his close association with Haredi Orthodoxy, "what yeshiva Orthodoxy has is dynamic and exciting leadership. That is attractive to anyone looking for meaning and purpose and direction. Yeshiva Orthodoxy has great leadership who show a willingness to sacrifice for their beliefs and values.

"I am a Jew who is loyal to my people and for whom Jewish survival is paramount. Religion is only part of the package for a Jew ... I am loyal to whatever will keep the Jewish people going."

In the end, Mr. Heilman said, economics may well tilt the competition between Haredi and modern Orthodoxy toward the modernists. Eventually the number of Haredi men engaged in full-time Torah studies well into adulthood will become an unsustainable financial burden on their community, he explained.

Rabbi Shafran, a Baltimore native, agreed that economics will "necessarily" impact Haredi insularity in the coming years, although he minimized the "seepage of mainstream society's ideas or ideals" that will bring into the community.

"Responsible Haredi ventures to train breadwinners have existed for years and the steps taken to ensure that they do not compromise with regard to traditional Jewish values and practice seem to have yielded well-rounded and capable Haredi workers," he said.

Jonathan D. Sarna, a professor of Jewish studies at Brandeis University and author of "American Judaism: A History," agreed in general with Mr. Heilman's assessment of Haredi Orthodoxy's rise. Where he differs is on the state of the struggle for Orthodox influence.

Mr. Heilman is, at best, hopeful about modern Orthodoxy's eventual revitalization. Dr. Sarna, in contrast, sees clear indications that the more liberal view has already made a strong comeback.

"The reason I am a little more optimistic than some is that the European-trained [Haredi] rabbis are now gone, and I don't think the American-trained rabbis have the same mythical power over their communities," he said. "Today, I see modern Orthodoxy a little stronger than it was 10 or 15 years ago. ... That said, modern

Orthodox couples have far fewer children than Haredim and precisely because they expose their children to the modern world, not all will stay modern Orthodox."

A sign of modern Orthodoxy's renewed vigor cited by Dr. Sarna is Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, the New York institution founded by Rabbi Avi Weiss a few years ago. The school, according to its Web site, was established "to develop leadership that will shape the spiritual and intellectual character of the modern Orthodox community."

In Baltimore, Netivot Shalom-New Shul of Baltimore is one tangible outcome of this effort. The lay-led "democratic" congregation of more than 50 members began as a splinter group from Suburban Orthodox, which also shifted rightward in recent years to a degree Netivot Shalom's core found uncomfortable.

"We're for an open Orthodoxy. We are not closed off to wisdom wherever it might come from. We do not want to be separate from the larger community," said Rabbi Murray Singerman, head of the congregation's *Halachah* committee. (Several ordained rabbis belong to Netivot Shalom, although none has assumed an overall leadership role.)

On the other hand, an attempt by the modern Orthodox rabbis of Beth Jacob Congregation, Ner Tamid Congregation-Greenspring Valley Synagogue and Moses Montefiore-Anshe Emunah- Liberty Jewish Center to organize a forum for sponsoring public events emphasizing the modern Orthodox perspective fell by the wayside.

Rabbi Chaim Landau of Ner Tamid blamed public apathy and time constraints for the forum's demise.

Similarly, it should be noted that Edah, a much-ballyhooed modern Orthodox think-tank founded by Rabbi Saul Berman in New York, also recently closed its doors. Financial problems were cited as a prime cause.

Mr. Heilman's book ends with a cautionary note about trying to predict the future. Nonetheless, he succumbs to musing about the future.

"American Jews have reinvented themselves, particularly as they have become overwhelmingly native-born in this country," he wrote. "There is reason to suppose that Orthodox Jews in America will also reinvent themselves and their movement again and again, generation after generation. A post-modern Orthodoxy may be contingent and temporary and may refuse to make claims to any single truth or grand scheme for living as an Orthodox Jew. Today, *frum* [religious] leads to */frummer*, but tomorrow ... who knows?"

10% Orthodox Jews in America

21% Orthodox Jews in Baltimore

Sources: 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey and 1999 Jewish Community Study of Greater Baltimore