

Jews and Fundamentalism

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The differences between active and quiescent fundamentalism, two stages of the phenomenon, help explain developments among contemporary Orthodox Jewry, which is also divided along these lines. Included in the former category are Orthodox Jewish settlers in the Land of Israel as well as Chabad Hasidim who are on a mission to transform Jewish life. Those who make up haredi Jewry, and in particular those in the world of the yeshivas, constitute the latter category. The year of yeshiva study spent in Israel by young Orthodox Jews from America plays an important role in shaping these categories.

The fundamentalist view is that there is a single truth, that the people who share this truth are tied in an unbroken chain to the past, and that this truth is not limited to the private domain but can and should be imposed on the public square. This truth is articulated as fundamentals of the faith, which must be practiced or believed if one is truly to be among God's defenders. Of course, despite the fundamentalist assertion that these essentials are tied to tradition, and often demanded by an inerrant text, fundamentalism reinvents that past by selectively retrieving from it those elements that challenge alternative truths that are offered by contemporary culture. As such it constitutes a kind of counterculture and society. Fundamentalism is therefore often engaged in an intense battle against forces in the contemporary world that, in its view, seek to undermine or to defile the world as it sees it.

Active and Passive Fundamentalists

This culture war can essentially be conducted in two different modes. One can be called active fundamentalism, in which the battle is waged aggressively, taken to the enemy who is to be completely obliterated. Sometimes fundamentalists become active because they believe they have no choice. The enemy is at their gates and about to enter into and defile their world; they cannot keep the enemy out and so they are forced to fight back. Other times they become intensely engaged in the culture war because they think the enemy has been weakened and this is an opportunity to finally, apocalyptically, liquidate those forces that oppose the truth.

A second phase of fundamentalism is its quiescent or passive stage. Adherents believe they are in possession of the truth that will ultimately triumph and dominate the public square but for the moment must remain in protected waiting. Although the alternative ways of living are seductive and dangerous, these quiescent fundamentalists argue, they are ultimately doomed. All true believers have to do is to insulate themselves from becoming defiled until that judgment day, when history will right itself as stated in the prophecies of the inerrant text. The key is to remain behind a wall of virtue, protected, waiting for the day that all true believers know is coming and for whose signs they are constantly on guard.

Whether quiescent or active, cultural and social struggle is at the heart of fundamentalism. There must be an enemy. Fundamentalists are much better at fighting *against* something than at simply defining what it is they stand *for*. And that is why they often thrive precisely where they can perceive themselves as surrounded by enemies. The promise of a better time is always easier to live with than the need to deliver on the promise when the time has come, as the fundamentalist regimes that come to power soon discover.

Hence, it is not surprising that at least in the case of Jewish fundamentalism, one finds its adherents in two of the most visible precincts of secularity and modernity: the United States and especially New York, as well as the modern state of Israel. In both these locales, the enemy and the counterculture are quite close and visible.

Active fundamentalists among the Jews have largely been confined to those religiously inclined messianists who believe that through a particular set of activities they can hasten the day of redemption. For some these activities mainly involve religiously settling what they consider the biblical Land of Israel. Having elevated this "commandment" above nearly all the other 612, they are convinced that by doing so they are being true to the fundamentals of Judaism. Their conviction that this activity not only sets them apart from Jews who have hopelessly compromised God's will but also is indispensable for righting history and saving the world often places them in opposition to the rest of Jewry, whose Judaism is more complex and less essentialist. This is the fundamentalism of the religious bloc that once called themselves Gush Emunim. For these Jews any compromise in settlement activities, especially within the territories conquered in 1967, is tantamount to retarding the redemption and a propaedeutic to Jewish destruction. For them nothing more than settlement in the Holy Land, particularly when accompanied by religious faith and practice, is a full expression of Judaism. This activity is fundamental for assuring Jewish continuity.

There are other active fundamentalists for whom the redemption can be hastened not by settlements but by acts of Jewish ritual activity. For these fundamentalists, Judaism is boiled down not to the need to establish settlements in the God-promised land but to the practice of a set of ritual acts - lighting Sabbath candles, donning phylacteries, giving charity, and so on - whose performance by all Jews - and in some cases also by non-Jews - will hasten the day of the Messiah's return and hence the redemption. This is the approach of Chabad Lubavitch. For them the religious transformation of the

nonobservant and secular Jews into Lubavitcher Hasidim as well as the assurance that the "Seventy Nations" - that is, the non-Jewish world - abides by the seven Noahide commandments is the key mission of Judaism.

Both these groups are engaged in an active struggle to bring about as soon as possible the time of redemption, a utopian messianic age, and to dominate the public square with their beliefs and practices. They believe they are absolutely right in their emphases, that God is on their side and abetting their activities, that they are fulfilling His commandments as presented in holy writ, and that history is close to the day of judgment and the "first flowers of redemption," when the world - and particularly those who currently fail to see the truth in this way - will recognize that they are right. They are often willing to challenge the status quo and engage in world-transforming activities, regardless of the this-worldly consequences. For these active fundamentalists, the world is divided in a Manichean way between those who are joined with them and those who are their opponents. The fact that they see enemies nearby, both from within and without, only encourages them to continue in the struggle and trust that history will vindicate their efforts.

Quiescent fundamentalists also believe that the world will someday learn the truth. They too emphasize certain essentials of the faith. But they are ready to wait patiently. In the meantime, they build the walls of their fortress, remain within their enclaves, and construct a corps of believers and defenders of the faith. This is largely the strategy of the haredi world. They too see themselves in a struggle, but most consists of keeping the secular, contemporary, seductive West at bay. This is a society that has used the yeshiva as its instrument of choice, raising study in it and life around its strictures and leaders to the highest level.

The yeshiva is viewed as a protective and insulated environment in which Torah Judaism can grow. Secular learning is regarded as not having particular ontological value; it may have pedagogic value of a very limited sort. Those who abandon yeshiva life or are unwilling to support it are portrayed as Jews who contribute to the undoing of Judaism at worst and as hopeless compromisers who have endangered Jewish continuity at best. The quiescent fundamentalist Jews who are, in contrast, willing to make the material sacrifice and embrace what one haredi rabbi called the "heroic retreat" from concerns and entanglements, to be in contemporary society but not caught up by it, are the ones who assure Jewish continuity.

Nonfundamentalist Modern Orthodoxy in Decline

This view was not the ideal in modern Orthodox institutions. These institutions - predominantly the day school - sought to reflect a nonfundamentalist model that modern Orthodoxy embraced. This trend saw Torah learning as important but not as the exclusive intellectual or spiritual pursuit of the observant Jew. Indeed, modern Orthodoxy took the position that tradition and the contemporary world could coexist.

Struggle was not the dominant mode of Jewish life, the world outside the Jewish one did not have to be kept at bay, and Judaism was far more nuanced and complex than the fundamentalists argued.

These ideas emerged out of the modern Orthodox worldview that argued in the early post-Holocaust period that the best way to assure Jewish continuity until the redemption was not to be insular, since that certainly had not guaranteed Jewish continuity in Europe, but to have a foot in both worlds, and that while Torah and ritual observance were important, and maintaining a strong fidelity to Jewish values and learning was critical, this alone was not sufficient for the Jewish people. There was an ontological and educational value to what we would call today a liberal arts education, and education was second to nothing. Western culture was not just a vehicle for making a living but something worth living

But fundamentalism has found a way to infiltrate and undermine this view and is increasingly becoming the dominant mode of Orthodoxy. In Israel, modern Orthodoxy was largely caught up in the political ideology of Gush Emunim, making settlement in the biblical lands the most important commandment and the sine qua non of modern religiosity, with all else becoming secondary. In America, while this too became a concern, fundamentalism has largely taken a more quiescent form in the slow and steady undermining of liberal and multiplex values and outlooks in favor of the monist and Manichean haredi way.

Four factors appear to account for this change. One is the perceived decline of American culture beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s. This led many modern Orthodox Jews to have second thoughts about the ontological value of standing with a foot in that culture and raised fears that doing so would mean a step down the slippery slope of religious diminution and cultural assimilation.

The second is the professionalization of day school education to an extent that led to the family's complete handover of the responsibility for Jewish education to the schools. Since few modern Orthodox themselves were part of the religion faculty in those schools, the task of religious socialization was ipso facto turned over to those who did go into Jewish education, those who saw it as a moral calling, the haredim. The transformation of women's roles in Orthodox Jewish life in America, a product of the feminist movement in the United States and the college educations they received, led to an increased flow of Orthodox women into the career culture, removing them as an important modern Orthodox source for Judaica faculty. A woman who could be a lawyer, doctor, professor, or CEO was unlikely to choose to be a teacher of Torah in a day school. She and her husband simply gave that role to those who remained in that job. But those people came more and more from another world.

Third, this changing nature of Judaica faculty in the day schools, and in particular the changing nature of those who became Orthodox rabbis, a role that the modernists also abandoned, served to enhance the haredi, fundamentalist outlook in the schools. Because the parents had largely withdrawn from personal involvement in the education

of their offspring, they became overly dependent on the Judaica faculty of these schools. These teachers increasingly promoted a way of life that was far more fundamentalist than the modern Orthodoxy that characterized the homes and families from which the students came. Moreover, whatever those teachers said, the parents who were in a kind of iron cage were forced to accept. After all, they hired them, sent their children to them, and endowed them with an authority that was near absolute in the domains of religion. That discontinuity between what they saw at home and learned in school either made the students reject Orthodoxy altogether, because it was so disconnected from the way they lived at home, or converted them into haredi sympathizers, who saw their parents and the rest of modern Orthodoxy as the incarnation of folly, duplicity, and hypocrisy.

America declining, the Jewish education of children completely under the control of the schools, these schools themselves and the Judaica faculty moving further and further to the right - all this produced a fear that for the children eventually to enter American society via the university, which was still much more radical and liberal than the rest of America, and also remain fully committed to Orthodox Jewish tradition would prove impossible. In other words, it would not be possible to guarantee Jewish continuity in its Orthodox incarnation. Finally, as a response to all this, came the emergence of study in Israeli yeshivas and women's seminaries or midrashot as an essential part of Orthodox education for American Jews - something that began as a kind of extra insurance against the seductions of American contemporary culture that the young were expected to encounter in college. This further helped transform the modern Orthodox into a more fundamentalist mode.

The Role of the Israeli Yeshivas and Seminaries

Because these Israeli yeshiva institutions are dominated both by active and quiescent fundamentalists - settlers and/or haredim - the "graduates" of these schools often absorbed the ethos and worldviews they represent. Moreover, they were taught that there really was no graduation. Torah was the only legitimate pursuit; all else was selling out and going down the drain of assimilation. Some stayed in the haredi world of the yeshiva and Israel; others became settlers and converts to the messianic cause. Those who came back home came back ready to transform the Orthodox world into a far more fundamentalist one.

The yeshiva/*midrasha* experience in Israel is extraordinary. Here, where there are no pressures of getting grades - since most students have already been accepted to college - one finds young people who are ready for a change. They are in the period of identity quest and role moratorium. For many of them, this is their first extended period away from their parents. It is spent in what is essentially a total institution, cut off from their parents and everything that is familiar to them. Being in a yeshiva is being where the key element of life is sitting side by side with a peer, in a protective environment where the rabbis and religious teachers are the only adult models, where all one has to

do is study Torah and absorb the holiness of the place (both the school and the Land of Israel) and where one is told that by doing so one fulfills God's plan. The result is a kind of identity transformation. Ultimately the goal is never to leave the yeshiva because that is the ideology of yeshiva life. The Land of Israel and Torah become the essentials of Jewish life, surpassing all else.

There are few if any alternative voices or patterns of life that these institutions present. Life beyond is viewed as threatening at worst and defiled at best. There is no going back. If one does return to that world left behind it is only to engage in a struggle with it, to transform it. Those who do come back see themselves as a class apart. They seek to recreate cultural enclaves where they can fashion a kind of quasi-yeshiva or where they identify with and support the activities of the messianists who seek to hasten the redemption.

The complexity of Judaism is lost; the contributions of general culture are often denied. The only concerns are those that are the fundamentals of the faith. Whether this guarantees the continuity of Judaism and the Jewish people is of course subject to debate. The Jewish people has throughout the millennia of its existence managed both to retain some key elements of its identity while also adapting to the societies and cultures in which it found itself. That ability to rebuild and recreate itself was what allowed a people that began as a Temple cult and became a people of books to survive exile and dispersion. It was nothing less than the capacity to be different in different times and places, even as it remained attached to a covenant and a history, that enabled the Jews to endure. To those who argue today that all this complexity can be devolved into a few fundamentals, one can only say time will tell. If one considers what has happened to the rich culture of Islam as it has devolved into Islamist fundamentalism as a model, the Jews who espouse this option would do well to rethink their strategy.

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