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שמע Sh'ma

Inside Haredi Judaism

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Talk About the Passion

Yehudah Mirsky

Sh'ma's readers, it seems safe to say, share a number of characteristics. University-educated; economically middle class or better; broadly liberal-minded in outlook and politics, pluralist with regards to their understandings of Jewish tradition and community; at the very least respectful and regularly outright devoted, passionately, to Jewish tradition and Jewish continuity; spiritually curious and at times adventurous; at home, at least to some extent, perhaps conversant with the world of Jewish texts, and the texture of Jewish rituals; appreciative of the many genuine intellectual, ethical and political benefits of secular modernity, though not unaware of its fraught relationship with Jewish life; people for whom their Jewish identity is a vital, perhaps the central component in an ongoing process of self-creation and expression, by the lights of their understanding of morals, community and spirituality, a process they share with other families of humanity, and with concerned individuals everywhere.

This is of course a broadly schematic (though I think roughly accurate) picture. There are, however, some very different pictures of Jewish life in our time, deeply at variance with this one and in this issue we

hope to open a window onto one of them, a window through which we look on them and, hopefully, ourselves. This issue is devoted, primarily, to the ultra-Orthodox, the Haredim.

In the pages of this issue you will encounter ultra-Orthodox women in Jerusalem, their spiritual lives, their musical culture; a self-described "Hassidic Heretic," who blogs anonymously from Brooklyn; the editor of the ArtsScroll publishing empire, whose combination of Haredi ideology and top-of-the-line production and editing values has created a new and powerful Orthodox readership; Chabad Hasidim; Sephardi Jews who have found their best vehicle to power and dignity in Israel in the creation of a Sephardic ultraorthodoxy that never existed before. Also included is an analytic perspective on the "shift to the right" in Orthodoxy, the ambivalent heritage of modernist Jewish philosophy, and for a comparative perspective, a reflective look at contemporary European Islam.

Haredi Judaism, a phenomenon that is shot through with paradox, has in recent decades generated an extraordinary amount of academic discussion. There is no doubt that Orthodox halakhah more closely resembles the way of life lived by the vast majority of Jews for centuries than do other contemporary forms of Jewish life. At the same time, ultra-Orthodoxy is not a simple, unmodified continuation of the tradition, but is itself — in its ideological self-consciousness, internal organization, creation in Israel of an entire subculture of full-time adult students, sophisticated and often compelling uses of religious freedom and the opportunities of democratic societies, not to mention its integration into information technology and its creating its own marketing niche — involved in a range of fascinating, surprising negotiations with modernity. There is striking diversity within the Haredi world and within Haredi groups as well.

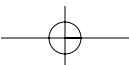
People and groups who choose not to act according to the script laid out by modernization theory and the liberal narrative of secularism's march through civilization challenge those of us who do. The categories we deploy to understand them, such as "fundamentalism," at times obscure as much as they explain.

Shmuel Eisenstadt, the dean of Israeli sociologists, defines fundamentalists as "strong

Who are these people who choose not to act according to the liberal narrative?

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sectarian-utopian movements oriented to a pristine reading of the tradition, in light of which they seek to reconstruct the social-political order.” Yet Ashkenazi Israeli Haredim consistently refuse to serve in ministerial positions and argue that Zionism is the ruinous sectarian utopia of our time. Even so, the word “pristine” may hold the key. Unlike liberal Jews and even unlike Modern Orthodoxy, Haredi Judaism offers a pristine Torah, a liberation from this world, a vision unblemished by the ruptures, discontinuities, failings, and often terrible fragmentation that constitute the modern lens onto reality, which is the epistemological and metaphysical price modernity pays for its own vision of liberation.

The boundary marking Haredi and not,

runs deeper than terminology and categories and speaks to how we live our Jewish lives. Indeed recognizing the inadequacy of most social science categories to capture the lived realities of religious life is maybe its own reminder that Torah never really fits in boxes.

One thing that all the people and groups presented in this issue share is passion, a passion for Judaism, for Jewish learning, and for Jewish peoplehood, however they understand it, a passion that shapes their lives and by our shared peoplehood, shapes our lives as well. Do we, who move in Judaism’s more avowedly liberal spheres, have an equal passion, something that could enable us all to work to build the Jewish future together? 

The Changing Face of Orthodoxy

Samuel C. Heilman

Over the past 35 years, there has been a gradual shift in the center of gravity of the most traditionalist of American Jewish religious denominations. That shift is constituted by a consistent “slide to the religious right,” during which elements of what has come to be called “Haredi” Orthodoxy have grown increasingly assertive and public, in many instances becoming the dominant voice and face of Orthodoxy. They stand in contrast to the Orthodox who embrace the plural and sometimes inconsistent life of American culture and parochial Jewish Orthodoxy. These Jews, whom I call “contrapuntalists,” and who turn increasingly outward toward a concern with a cosmopolitan lifestyle, seek to remain firmly planted both in contemporary mainstream culture as well as the world of parochial Jewish commitments, even if that entails tension and living with inconsistency.

The more traditionalist Haredi Jews reject this stance and choose instead to remain ensconced in Orthodox Jewish enclaves, keeping American culture at arm’s length. Moreover, because they stay put almost completely inside these enclaves, and “Jewish” is for them the paramount concern and field of activity, they have become the keepers and defenders of Orthodoxy and its institutions, as well as the framers of its ideology and mores. While their contrapuntalist counterparts sought engagement with the outside world believing that by doing so they would demonstrate one could

be both fully Orthodox and fully American, in practice they became largely occupied by their professions, pursuit of an American lifestyle, power, and some wealth. In contrast, Haredi Jews who remained in the Orthodox enclaves became the Jewish educators, rabbis, Torah scholars, religious functionaries, and the like because they believed that all that was Jewish was all that counted. While contrapuntalists went to the university and pursued careers outside the four cubits of Jewish life, even as they maintained loyalties to Orthodox praxis and deferred to the rabbi/scholars in matters of halakhah, their Haredi counterparts stayed in and built up the walls around the Orthodox enclaves, which they fashioned according to their standards and parochial norms. In time, they naturally came to feel that they “owned” these enclaves and spoke for Orthodoxy. Moreover, as they have grown more politically astute and experienced, they have also begun to exert clout in local and national politics. Although at this point in time, the Haredi population still appears to constitute a numerical minority, at most somewhere around 35 percent of the approximately 750,000 to 800,000 of American Orthodox Jews, their confidence is that of a majority.

Demographically, the numbers of those who chose to remain in the enclaves are growing both because of their high birthrate (more than three times as high as the rest of Jewry) and their ability to discourage religious drop-

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