

# The Road from Old to New Orthodoxies

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I begin with the wisdom of the Talmud. In one of its most frequently quoted dicta (*Baba Batra* 12b), Rabbi Yohanan declares: “From the day of the Temple’s destruction, prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to fools and children.” In our times, some people have concluded that sociologists should be added to the fools and children. Perhaps this comes from the assumption that because we sociologists focus on the common wisdom and behavior of society—which increasingly is dominated by fools and children—we can somehow tease out from it some understanding of what the people are doing and thinking, and with that knowledge speculate about what they are likely to be doing and thinking in the future.

The Talmud of course was always interested in what the people were doing: “Go out and see what the people are saying” it urges (see, for example, *Berakhot* 45a and *Eruvin* 14b) those who want to know the connection between what the law requires and what people are accustomed and therefore likely to do. The Talmud is powerfully concerned with “*amre inshe*,” the voice of the people and what is on their minds; the phrase appears approximately 130 times in its pages. These considerations—what people do, say, and think—which have taken on halakhic or Judeo-legal status, are, of course, fundamentally and acutely social. Hence turning to sociologists, ethnographers or anthropologists for some understanding about social behavior and its vicissitudes may actually not be so far from what the rabbis of the Talmud advised. Asking sociologists to predict the future is based on the idea that what is likely to happen down the road is a result of what people are doing, saying, and thinking now. So, at least for this occasion, I accept this reasoning. To figure out the future of Orthodoxy, the new Orthodoxy, and how people might get there, I begin by looking at what Orthodox people are doing, saying, and thinking now.

To start, I want to invoke Gregory Treverton’s useful distinction between puzzles and mysteries.<sup>[1]</sup> Puzzles, he advises, come from having insufficient information. If you get what’s missing, the puzzle is solved. If things go wrong with a puzzle, it’s because we have the wrong piece or we put it in

incorrectly. Mysteries are a lot murkier: Sometimes the information we've been given is inadequate; sometimes we aren't very smart about making sense of what we've been given; and sometimes the question itself cannot be answered. Mysteries require judgments and the assessment of uncertainty; at times, the hard part is not that we have too little information but that we have too much, or that we are looking at matters the wrong way. Puzzles can ultimately be solved; they have *answers*. Puzzles can come to satisfying conclusions. Mysteries often don't and offer no such comfort because they may pose a question that may have no definitive answer because the answer is contingent; it depends on a future interaction of many factors, known and unknown. A mystery cannot always be resolved; it can sometimes only be framed, by identifying the critical factors and applying some sense of how they have interacted in the past and might interact in the future. A mystery is an attempt to disambiguate ambiguities. And that is not always possible.

Much of what we know about Orthodoxy today seems to be a matter of putting together the puzzle, fitting in all the pieces of what it is in order to see the big picture of what people are doing, saying, and thinking. But other elements—why, for example, the Orthodox are doing all that they do or how and whether what they say has affected their thinking and behavior or vice versa, as well as how all that will play out in the future—are more of a mystery. Determining whether the forces that are affecting Orthodoxy come from within it or whether they reflect the impact of external cultural factors, some of which may be non-Jewish and part of the wider cultural context in which Orthodox Jews in particular and Jewry in general find themselves, is more of a mystery. Those mysteries are what make predictions about the future so fraught. But let us begin with the pieces of the puzzle.

## **The Triumph of Orthodoxy**

Perhaps the most important piece is contemporary Orthodox triumphalism. In its beginnings, from at least the onset of the period of Jewish enlightenment and political emancipation, Orthodoxy, emerging as a reaction against various forms of reform and change, saw itself as an often vulnerable and diminishing minority, and worried about its ability to survive and hold onto those raised according to its norms. Even though its adherents were certain that their interpretation of what was authentically Jewish was absolutely correct and in the long run were sure that they had the recipe for guaranteeing Jewish survival and therefore wanted to impose their beliefs and behaviors on all Jews, they were not always sure that in the foreseeable future they would be able to withstand the tides of change that were sweeping the Jewish people into the mainstreams of contemporary culture and its corrosive effects on Jewish singularity and culture. Indeed, the word "*hareidim*," which we now associate with ultra- or extremist Orthodoxy, was once used for *all* Orthodox Jewry. It connoted "trembling anxiety," a kind of abiding worry about the short-term survival of their way of life in spite of longer-term convictions of triumph. The anxiety was that Orthodoxy would have to retrieve all those who were lost to assimilation, and that that was an arduous and dangerous task, as retrievers were always at risk of themselves slipping away and their efforts extraordinarily complex, a view that many today in the Hareidi community believe are the risks facing Chabad, which is after all in the Jewish retrieval business. Although some believers were certain this retrieval of the lost would be one of the precursors of the messianic times (which may be why Chabad is so convinced they can succeed), others thought that time so vaguely distant that they remained Hareidi in the short term.

The idea that Orthodoxy, in spite of its conviction that it had a recipe for Jewish survival, might suffer losses in the short term was of course a fact of history. Many of those who made up the ranks of the Reform or other liberal religious movements as well as the secular, from the socialist Zionists to the pure skeptics, could trace their origins to Orthodoxy, and many came from Hasidic courts or the yeshiva world. When, for example, the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe was arrested by the Yevsektsiya, the Jewish affiliates of the Soviet Secret Police, he was led away by two former Lubavitcher Hasidim, and former yeshiva students made up many of the earliest socialist activists.

For much of the twentieth century, Orthodoxy seemed destined to be the form of Judaism one abandoned. From Ben Gurion to American sociologist Marshall Sklare, those who considered the likely future of Orthodoxy saw it as at best a residual category that would inevitably experience “institutional decay,” decline in numbers and confidence, and soon disappear.<sup>[2]</sup>

Even the Orthodox themselves betrayed a fear about their survival outside their European strongholds. When asked whether or not they should emigrate from Europe, where albeit in diminished form Orthodoxy still flourished, to America, the land of promise, or Palestine, the Promised Land, Orthodox leaders counseled against such a move, saying that both were places where Jews as individuals might survive but where Judaism, and in particular Orthodox Judaism, would die. We know now this counsel was tragically wrong. The Orthodox Jews who remained in Europe suffered decimation from Hitler’s Holocaust and Stalin’s purges, while in America and Israel Orthodoxy has reversed its decline and now virtually no one anymore argues that this form of Judaism will disappear. If anything, all the other religious movements seem in danger of disappearing while Orthodoxy, although radically changed from what it was in Europe, appears to be flourishing. In place of anxiety about its future, it seems extraordinarily triumphalist. Why?

The triumphalism comes from some remarkable successes of Orthodoxy beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, a time of economic boom and political stability that allowed it to grow. Among these successes is a powerful achievement in institution building. In the Diaspora, and particularly America, this has been in founding and maintaining synagogues. In the United States, almost 40 percent of the synagogues are Orthodox, and in the New York metropolitan area, where Orthodox Jews of all sorts make up more than 20 percent of the Jewish population and 32 percent of the Jewish households, that proportion rises to 57 percent.<sup>[3]</sup> Moreover, in America Orthodox Jews comprise one third of those Jews who describe themselves as “regular synagogue goers,” an attendance that is frequently daily. That pattern is repeated elsewhere in the Diaspora, while in Israel, that proportion is probably twice that or more. The birthrates of the Orthodox of all persuasions are higher than those of all other Jews, and their apparent ability to hold onto their offspring within the boundaries of Orthodoxy more than ever before (over 60%), moreover, suggests these proportions will grow into the foreseeable future.<sup>[4]</sup>

In addition, the Orthodox have created an educational system that includes both traditional yeshivas as well as the new-model Day Schools, which combine intensive Jewish learning with secular studies aimed at preparing students for university studies at a high level. In Israel this is paralleled by the yeshivas and the state religious public school (*mamlakhti-dati*) system. To these schools, beginning in the late 1960s with the founding of the Diaspora Yeshiva and later *Ohr Somayach* in 1970, were added the so-called *ba’alei teshuva* yeshivas for attracting Jews to Orthodoxy. Enrollment in *all* these schools has grown exponentially, and institutionally they remain one of the key instruments leading to Orthodox success in holding onto the young, a key element of future survival. Although the economic cost of these schools presents a daunting challenge, their importance is still recognized in the Orthodox world.

Supporting these is also a developed camp program, as well as increasing numbers of Israeli educational experiences for Diaspora Jews that have enhanced and often reinforced the synagogue and school. These camps operate not only in the summer but also during extended breaks in the school year. And the activities in them are Orthodox in form and content.

Although the staff in all these institutions has been changing, as have their goals and methods along with the financial burdens for supporting them, they, along with the many synagogues, have infused Orthodoxy with a confidence in its future and its ability to pass on its way of life that may be unrivaled in its history.

In addition, Orthodox Jews tend to live in areas of high Jewish density, generally in enclaves of the religiously like-minded, which gives them a sense of the ubiquitousness of an Orthodox lifestyle. This

residential concentration synergistically acts to strengthen and intensify a sense of Orthodox identity and belonging. In the case of Hareidi Orthodoxy, people are so used to living in their enclaves that they often are unequipped to live anywhere else. In an open society, this socialization effectively prevents people from leaving the precincts of Orthodoxy, which in a mobile society they would otherwise be expected to do, thus reinforcing Orthodox solidarity into the foreseeable future.

When the more cosmopolitan Orthodox, the university graduates and professionals, have moved to the periphery of the Orthodox Jewish community (often for career or educational reasons), they have managed to do what few other Jews achieve: They transform the places into which they have moved rather becoming changed by them. Even when the Orthodox are outward-looking, they will not acquiesce to a diminished level of Jewish life, no matter where they live, and thus the movement of Orthodox Jews of all stripes into new locales has frequently promoted greater religious and ethnic participation in these places, and has attracted other Orthodox Jews to them. Orthodox Jews have been able to make areas of Jewish scarcity flourish by increasing its level of religious behavior and institutions. Once that happens, this tendency has led in recent years, especially among the Hareidi sector, not only to an effort to enhance Orthodoxy even more where they live but also to increasing intolerance toward those who do not share their lifestyle and values, an attitude the more modern Orthodox often try to downplay—though often their non-Orthodox neighbors do not recognize these efforts as genuine and therefore lump all Orthodox into a single group for whom they have little affection.

More and more, the Orthodox entry into a neighborhood has been met with a backlash of resistance to Orthodox residence by others in places where they seek to enter. There are a variety of strategies of opposition, often from other Jews, from denying the establishment of *eruv*s in the Diaspora to mass demonstrations against Hareidi norms and demands in Israeli communities. In residential movement, the triumphalism of the Orthodox has been redefined by its opponents as religious imposition of the sort commonly associated with fundamentalism. This tension is not likely to disappear anytime soon, as Orthodox Jews continue to insist on living with other Orthodox Jews like them.

In the domain of marriage and the family, the Orthodox also display triumphalism. In America, where intermarriage has been skyrocketing, the Orthodox proudly point to their difference: About nine in 10 of them are married to Jews (and commonly to Orthodox Jews), and of the relative few who have intermarried, a quarter have spouses who converted to Judaism (and were the rabbis more open to conversion, that number would probably rise). In their family life, the Orthodox maintain a high degree of stability, with a divorce rate that, although rising, remains far lower than the approximate 30 percent among other Jews and than in much of the rest of America. What holds true for America is largely the case in the rest of the Diaspora. In Israel, where the divorce rate is only about 15 percent, the Orthodox rate was reportedly rising, although still well below that of the non-Orthodox.<sup>[5]</sup> That stability, an accepted norm in a relatively conservative population that regards marriage as the ideal state, is likely to continue into the near term.

The Orthodox birthrate, surging during the last 25 years, remains on average somewhere between three to eight children per family (in the Hareidi sector the median household size is about six).<sup>[6]</sup> In Israel, demographers believe that by 2025, the Hareidi Orthodox sector alone will grow from 16 percent to 23 percent of the population. In a single year, according to a nurse at one hospital in the Lakewood, New Jersey, an area serving a Hareidi Orthodox population, 1,700 babies were born to 5,500 local families, yielding a rate of 358 births per thousand women. (The overall American rate is 65 births per thousand women.) Orthodox adults are younger on average than other American Jews, with more than half falling between the ages of 18 and 44. It does not take a prophet to discern the eventual impact of these trends. The Orthodox are the smallest of the three major denominations; in numbers, the Conservative and Reform movements far outstrip them. In America, however, they are the only group of Jews reproducing beyond replacement level. And that trend is growing, particularly in the Hareidi sector. While Jewry in general is aging, Orthodoxy is not.

In fact, the percentage of Orthodox Jews aged 18–29 is nearly double that in the 30–39 age group. In certain Hareidi enclaves, such as New Square or Kiryas Joel in New York, the median age is around 14. In America, among synagogue-affiliated Jews, the Orthodox have more children than any other group. In the UK, 3 out of 4 births of Jews are from Hareidi families. They are 17 percent of the total UK Jewish population, and in Greater Manchester about half of all Jewish children under five are Hareidi. What is true in America or the United Kingdom is even more so the case in Israel, where government subsidies have supported large families. If the Orthodox continue to retain the loyalties of their young people, as they have mostly done over the past 30 or 40 years, they will become an ever larger, more visible, and better represented part of the total community, and will be in a position to insist on a larger share of communal expenditures—as some Orthodox leaders are already doing.<sup>[7]</sup>

In the political domain, Orthodox Jews have risen to unprecedented levels of political power and influence both in local and national government, all without hiding their Jewish and religious commitments. Nowhere is this truer than in Israel, where Orthodox Jews hold important government posts and often the balance of power in coalition politics. But in America, and even in Russia, the Orthodox have found ways of exerting influence in spite of their relatively small numbers in relation to the general population. Long before the Orthodox Joseph Lieberman was nominated as a major party vice-presidential candidate, whenever politicians wanted to indicate their support for or from Diaspora Jews, they often had themselves photographed with Orthodox Jews, and preferably with ones with the longest beards and most stereotypical Hareidi appearances.<sup>[8]</sup> In spite of the fact that Hareidim are still a minority among Jews, they have succeeded, with the help of politicians and the media, in making themselves icons of Jewry, and in the process enhanced their political influence, confidence, and triumphalism. As other Jews become indistinguishable from the mainstream, the Orthodox can be expected to increasingly make a claim to represent the ethnic and identifiably Jewish in the Diaspora.

Kosher food in its various incarnations is available nearly everywhere, and no airline can afford not to offer it, for the many Orthodox travelers. That ubiquity, as attested by the Kosherfest exposition in the New Jersey Meadowlands stadium with its more than 6,000 exhibitors, has also persuaded the Orthodox that their way of life is here to stay.

Although poorer as a class than all other Jews, in part because of their higher Jewish bill and larger families, Orthodox Jews have benefitted from the long period of sustained economic growth during the last 60 years in countries where they live, as well as from the welfare state, which in these places has in effect been the benefactor of last resort for the Orthodox, and they have learned how to manipulate the system for housing and food subsidies or even occasionally educational ones, as well as through laws that make charitable contributions to them tax deductions. Thus while poverty remains a concern in the most Hareidi areas (for example in Kiryas Joel, where Satmar Hasidim make up nearly all the residents, over half are on supplemental security income), it has not been enough to undermine the Orthodox way of life in these places.<sup>[9]</sup> On the contrary, it has sustained large family size and a lifestyle in which Torah learning has often become a full-time occupation. Nowhere has this become more the case than in Israel, where grants to large families and financial support for yeshivas are part of the government budget.

Orthodox Jews publish and own more sacred Jewish books (many in translation as well as the original) than ever before in their history. Most Orthodox Jews today have libraries that rival those owned by some of the most famous yeshivas of Europe.<sup>[10]</sup> Moreover, regular Torah study has become a common activity within Orthodoxy. The *Daf Yomi* has now become a regular feature of Orthodox life, and the recent *siyum* the largest ever. On the Internet, thousands of sites can be found that enable and coordinate such study, and these do not include the synagogue or corporate groups that meet daily for face-to-face learning or the telephone dial-a-daf.

In cyberspace, not only can one study Talmud, but Orthodoxy's presence is ubiquitous. From askmoses.com (a Chabad site—one of thousands—that seeks to present itself as the voice of Moses

and hence all of Judaism) to Kabbalah study at Zohar online, there is virtually no area of significance in Orthodox Jewish life that does not have a web address. For those seeking a place to pray, there is [godaven.com](http://godaven.com). To find a Jewish study partner there is [kehilla.org](http://kehilla.org) for those seeking a Lithuanian-style approach or [yagdiltorah.org](http://yagdiltorah.org) for someone looking for a Hasidic *havruta*. And if one wants a Russian speaker, there is [toldot.ru](http://toldot.ru). This expansion of Orthodoxy onto the web in effect has removed geographic limitations, so inherent to the enclave culture of Orthodoxy, as an obstacle to growth or the enhancement of a network of ties. This means that there are now more opportunities for Orthodox Jews to be in touch with one another, regardless of where they find themselves physically. That results in values, concerns and even behavior patterns that are not only more widely shared, but relationships that can transcend the limitations of space/time. Although Hareidim generally claim to spurn the openness of the Internet and would appear to be on the other side of the digital divide, they too have their own websites.

Of course YouTube and a variety of video sites allow anyone with a Smartphone and an Internet connection to participate in a Hasidic *tish* or wedding as well as to witness an Orthodox event. In one of my more prescient moments, I once predicted that the Lubavitcher Rebbe would be on re-runs after his demise, and indeed he is—so much so that some people, as noted in my latest book, *The Rebbe*, report recently having gone to a *Farbrengen with the rebbe* via a video, years after Menachem Mendel Schneerson's physical death. Should the rabbis find a way to allow cyber-presence to be equivalent to physical presence, not only could Orthodox Jews study together in cyberspace, as they already do, but they could also worship together, listen to Torah being read in one place while they are present in another or answer amen to the lighting of Hanukkah candles in Israel while they are standing in Melbourne, Australia or Melbourne, Florida.

Together all this suggests that Orthodoxy is powerfully rooted in the modern world, in which Jewry finds itself and is likely to remain powerful and growing well into the current century. As for the economic future, particularly in the face of a downturn in the last couple of years and the possibility of a worldwide depression, one can only point to the fact that the poorest sectors of the Orthodox society are perhaps the most resistant to abandoning it, suggesting that Orthodox attachments, while not immune from financial considerations, are not completely dependent on the economic situation. Moreover, they have learned to make do with less and so unlike their more well-to-do non-Orthodox counterparts, they may know better how to weather economic hardship.

So confident and triumphalist has Orthodoxy become that Rabbi Norman Lamm, former head of Yeshiva University and an opinion leader in so-called Modern Orthodox circles, was quoted in 2009 predicting the demise of all non-Orthodox Jewish denominations (even though the “just Jews” non-denominational category remains today the fastest growing one). While I think this is unlikely, Orthodoxy goes into the first third of the twenty-century with an unprecedented confidence.

No doubt some of this is also a reflection of an increasingly conservative political atmosphere in those countries where Orthodox Jews find themselves in greatest numbers. In these places, liberal and progressive groups have been on the defensive for at least the last 30 years. Whether it is with the backing of evangelicals in the United States or conservative political forces elsewhere, the Orthodox often find their conservative lifestyles, family values, and political outlook in consonance with the conservatives in society, a factor that has added to their confidence that they will find a supportive environment and political landscape in which to root themselves.

## **Who Is Orthodox?**

Given this sense of triumphalism propelling an assertive and confident Orthodoxy into the new century and growing over time for the reasons I have outlined, the question now increasingly has become which segment of Orthodoxy is responsible for this or who speaks for Orthodoxy? As this group of

Jews has grown both in numbers and confidence, it has also grown in complexity, and within it there has emerged a contest over who will define its future based on who is controlling or responsible for its present. It is that contest, occasionally bitter but surely all-pervading, about which I have written in my book *Sliding to the Right*, that will play a role in determining what happens to Orthodoxy in the years ahead and I turn to it now.

Generally Orthodoxy has defined itself as a single group having two faces. One is outward-looking, engaging with the outside world in all its complexity, while maintaining fidelity to Orthodox faith and commitments. Although reflecting a belief that Orthodox religious behavior and customs are valuable and vital for Jewish continuity, it is unprepared to impose them on all Jewry but admits that other ways of living as a Jew are possible and in some cases even acceptable. It accepts the legitimacy of other Jewish denominations as well as the Zionist project and sees the State of Israel, though having religious meaning, as belonging to *all* its citizens regardless of the level of their Jewish observance or commitments. Indeed, many of its adherents even adopted the Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew in prayer, study, and speech, in a tacit effort to identify with the State of Israel as representing what they believed was the authentic accent and sound of Hebrew. This Orthodoxy is generally tolerant and relatively pluralist in outlook, and its adherents see themselves as part of the modern world, and seek a life that while Jewishly committed is cosmopolitan and not totally bounded by Judaism. They view a university education as a desideratum and a professional career as valuable. They increasingly accept the idea of gender equality as both a fact of life and a moral value. Women are considered to have both a private and public role in Judaism, and also a place outside the home and community. While they see marriage based on personal choice and the family as normative and desirable, they tend to marry at a later age (in part because of their pursuit of a university education and professional career). Once married, they have more children than most non-Orthodox Jews, but still fewer than the other Orthodox. This comes both from their later marriage and the practice of some forms of birth control. As Orthodox Jews they are generally conservative in their worldview, but in comparison with other Orthodox Jews, they seem more liberal or progressive.

The other Orthodox face is assertively parochial, defined by those commonly called Hareidim, who are assertively inward-looking, creating all sorts of ideological and behavioral barriers to acculturation. They prefer to live, work, and socialize with those who are as or more Orthodox than them, a standard that is subject to continual recalibration and some debate. They view the outside world as seductive, its values toxic and patterns of behavior as dangerous, including and perhaps especially the university and its worldview. Their attitude toward other Jews is that they are lost if they do not accept Orthodoxy, and believe that where possible the Orthodox ways, as they understand them, should be offered, either by persuasion but if not then by imposition. Within their Orthodox culture, there are ongoing often bitter contests as to who best represents the authoritative version of what is proper behavior and beliefs. By and large they view the Zionist project with a jaundiced eye and seek to make Israel a place governed by their Hareidi point of view. As for their pronunciation of Hebrew, they reject the sound of modern Israeli Hebrew for prayer or study and increasingly adopt the accents of Lithuanian yeshivas or pre-war Polish Jewry as their own, as if to tacitly and aurally indicate that only in those places was Jewry authentic and the ideal sound of Jews to be heard. They have increasingly made gender separation a key element of their Orthodox identity, seeking to limit the mixing of the sexes not only in schools and synagogues but also in public places. They tend to have arranged marriages (or very short and pointed courtships) and wed at an earlier age. They have larger families than their counterparts, viewing any form of birth control as transgressive behavior. Women are expected to be sexually modest and hold traditional homemaker roles, although increasingly they are forced also to find work beyond the role of wife and mother. Paradoxically, Hareidim often place a greater burden on women to support and maintain the families, leading to an increased economic dependence on women than their modernist counterparts, and likely giving them more power in the years ahead.

As one observer has accurately noted: “While to an outsider all Hareidim may look alike—with their black coats, hats, and beards—the Hareidi community is as fractured as the Jewish community as a

whole.” It is divided along Ashkenazic and Sephardic lines, Hasidic and non-Hasidic, moderates and extremists. Within the Hasidic community, too, there are multiple sects and sometimes even competing grand rebbes within the same sect.<sup>[11]</sup> These divisions have often led to various Hareidi sub-communities competing with each other for Orthodox leadership.

Some claim that only the most severe isolationism is truly Orthodox. Others try to negotiate some engagement with the outside, either for purposes of livelihood or in an effort to co-opt and use elements of the general culture instrumentally and only on their own terms. Still others are only interested in the outside world insofar as they can reach out and retrieve “lost souls” who are halakhically Jewish from it and bring them back to Jewish tradition (they are generally uninterested in converts to Judaism).

This contest within the Hareidi subculture has led, as the late Charles Liebman put it, to extremism as a religious norm, in which each group seeks to surpass its competitors in religious and behavioral demands, in its intolerance of other points of view, and in its desire to impose its ways upon Judaism in general and Orthodoxy in particular.<sup>[12]</sup> That contest can only be expected to intensify, as the young seek to outdo their elders.

Demographically, the cosmopolitan and outward-looking Orthodox outnumber their parochial counterparts; however, as I have argued elsewhere, the latter have in recent years become more assertive and confident that they alone are the voice of Orthodoxy. In part this is because most of the key institutions of Orthodoxy are progressively more under their control. Although the cosmopolitans have used their university education and outward tendencies to make headway in the general culture, entering fully into the professional class and making an impact beyond the provinces of religion, the latter often relegated to the private domain, the more parochial Orthodox have become religious school teachers, rabbis, religious court judges, scribes, mohels, certifiers of kashruth—in short, what sociologist Max Weber called “the religious virtuosi.”<sup>[13]</sup> As such, Orthodox Jewry is increasingly dependent upon them for their religious needs and therefore looks to them as authorities. Moreover, because one of the core principles of Orthodoxy is its reliance on rabbinical authority and its halakhic expertise, these religious virtuosi who dominate that world of authority have an institutionalized advantage in defining norms. Thus, for example, the Orthodox Jew who eats kosher must now adhere to a standard of kashruth determined by the parochial Hareidi authorities. If they change standards to be more restrictive, as they have, those who keep kosher are often forced to keep those new standards even if they do not necessarily feel a need to abide by such strictures since the Hareidim certify kashruth.

Given the structure of Orthodoxy and its dependence on institutions governed by Hareidim, one might confidently predict that this will increase the power and authority of the religious right wing in the movement. Even should the cosmopolitan and more liberal wing decide to infiltrate the rabbinate and these institutions—an unlikely prospect given the lower remuneration and prestige associated with these jobs and the fact that few would choose to pursue these vocations upon graduation from university—the training and socialization that those entering these vocations undergo would undoubtedly transform them in ways that would draw them away from their cosmopolitan origins and make them part of the Hareidi domain. That this would be the case is suggested by what has happened to many young Modern Orthodox men and women who have attended yeshivas in Israel or elsewhere during their post-high school years. The changes they have often undergone, as they become socialized to this life, have been called “flipping out” by some and hareidization by others.<sup>[14]</sup> Although not everyone who attended these institutions has moved to the religious right, those who come out of them and choose to become religious virtuosi generally have. This suggests that the opportunity to reverse this trend of dependence on an increasingly extremist, inward-looking, parochial, fundamentalist-like Orthodoxy is limited and unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.



The institutional impact is further affected by the expanding claims of authority by rabbis through the concept of *da'as Torah*, a conviction that one who is steeped in the wisdom and understanding of Jewish sources, “Torah,” becomes endowed with an intuitive understanding of its intent and its charismatic authority, *da'as*, such that he (and it is always a male, for in the Hareidi world women are not expected to be able to reach this level of knowledge) can expand the Torah to cover matters upon which it is silent. With *da'as Torah* rabbis deliver guidance beyond the judicial. As modern life throws all sorts of apparently unprecedented new realities that seem beyond the boundaries of the Torah into the basket of human experience, traditionalists use the concept and bearers of *da'as Torah* to fill the vacuum created by the seeming silence of the time-honored texts on many of these matters:

For the *talmid hakham* [Torah scholar] is like the Torah itself and he is in its image, and

therefore it is certain that for this reason the Torah also commanded us to “not depart from all he will instruct you,” for the *hakhamim* [scholars] are the Torah itself, and as the Holy One, may He be blessed, decreed and gave the Torah to all of Israel, so he gave us the *hakhamim* and they are also the essence of the Torah.[\[15\]](#)

"My will," as Hasidic Rabbi Avraham Mordecai Alter of Gur put it even more starkly in a 1922 letter to his followers, "is the will of Heaven."[\[16\]](#) This sort of power, once limited to heads of yeshivas over their students and rebbes over their Hasidim, now has been asserted by all sorts of Hareidi leaders and often acknowledged by their followers. Indeed, the rabbi who has *da'as Torah* now has the power and authority to issue an ukase that in the minds of his followers has the authority of heaven. Given this power, the limits on extremist or restrictive Orthodoxy seem likely to shrink in the years ahead. For example, is the Internet kosher, should women be allowed to drive cars, or does the Israeli state have religious significance? It is the ability “to interpret day-to-day events in a proper Torah light,” discern what tradition had in mind, and thereby extrapolate from it, thus being able “to anticipate the ramifications of events . . . in the future” that makes the rabbis’ opinions as authoritative as Torah.[\[17\]](#)

While one can imagine liberal rabbis and more cosmopolitan Orthodox chafing under these restrictions and endeavoring to challenge *da'as Torah*, this would require a political revolution that would force Orthodox Jews who are currently engaged by other interests and accomplishments to turn away from them and devote themselves to a full-time struggle to retake the rabbinate and its religious institutions, first in Israel and then throughout the Diaspora.

In the last 25 years, outward-looking Orthodoxy has indeed been mobilized to turn its attentions to parochial Jewish matters, but the matters they have become sometimes consumed by have to do primarily with religious Zionism, and the efforts to expand Jewish settlement in the biblical lands. That transformation, however, has not halted the slide to the right. If anything, it has gradually led to this Orthodoxy seeing itself in the same us-versus-them position as Hareidim. With each shift away from territorial expansion by the Israeli and Jewish body politic or withdrawal from settlements, those who have embraced settlement as an expression of their religiosity have become more oppositional and Jewishly inward-looking. This has led to an Orthodoxy often called “*hardal*,” an acronym for “*hareidi-leumi*” (nationalist Hareidi), that finds itself having more in common with the Hareidim than with their more cosmopolitan Orthodox counterparts. Extremism of one sort seems to lead to extremism of another. Jewish concerns as defined by the insiders become seen as the only important ones, and these views and the behavior associated with them considered paramount and legitimately imposed upon all people. This leads to greater parochialism and fundamentalist-like attitudes and behavior.

### **The Puzzle and the Mystery**

Having thus put together all of the pieces of the puzzle in my possession, I see a future of a demographically increasing triumphalist Orthodoxy that becomes more inward-looking and less

pluralist and tolerant, using all the technology and political power at its command to reinforce its increasingly extremist views and impose them as the dominant and only legitimate form of Orthodox Judaism—and in effect Judaism in general. But here's the mystery. Why was this not always the face of Orthodoxy? Why was there ever a cosmopolitan, outward-looking, pluralist, and tolerant Orthodoxy, the so-called "Modern Orthodoxy," and if it was dominant once can it become so once again? Is there a pendulum in the Orthodox world that swings between the outward- and inward-looking poles, or was the modernist phase simply a unique moment in time? There is no easy answer, but I would offer this hypothesis.

Orthodoxy was always viewed by its adherents as a strategy for Jewish survival, based on fidelity to law, custom, and powerful belief. The period of fast Jewish change in the twentieth century, characterized by mass migration from the old to new worlds, rapid assimilation, and the rise of an unexpectedly successful Zionist movement, coupled with the catastrophic experience of the Shoah, led to a period of doubt, instability, and confusion for the Orthodox. By the mid-twentieth century, many harbored doubts about the old ways and their ability to guarantee Jewish survival into the future. The failure of the advice of the rabbis and leaders who opposed emigration from the European centers of Orthodoxy to America or Palestine (and later Israel) was obvious and disorienting. The new situation of Jewry finding itself in a sovereign Jewish state or in a welcoming American society (as well in some other democracies) that allowed religious liberty and opportunity to taste of the outside world without necessarily sacrificing Orthodox allegiances led to many believing that the world was so changed that new ways of being Orthodox had to be created. Modern Orthodoxy was that new way, an Orthodoxy that believed that the secret of survival was compartmentalization, being a committed Jew but also standing with a foot in the outside world. But as they succeeded, they paradoxically created an atmosphere of confidence that would in time, as I have tried to sketch here, create the conditions in which the religious right wing would begin to emerge and warn that, in fact, this modernist, liberal strategy was not the right answer. While the Hareidi sector strengthened its hold on the institutions of Orthodoxy, the cosmopolitan sector became caught up in outward-looking, universal, and secular pursuits, even as it remained Orthodox institutionally. When Modern Orthodoxy was on the rise, the general culture was liberal. As during the 1960s and 1970s, liberal culture became radicalized, antinomian, and sometimes anarchic, doubts among the cosmopolitans about their strategy for Jewish survival emerged. In Israel, the Zionist project deteriorated into embourgeoisement and Israel became caught up in its own culture wars, political confusion, and doubts, while messianism and settlement building divided the society and confounded Orthodoxy.

In the face of rapid change, uncertainties, and confusion, the advantage is always to those groups who have absolute and extreme views. Driven by a confidence they know the truth, *da'as Torah*, they easily outflank those who see ambiguity and nuance. That is where I think Orthodoxy is today, driven by those who are Manichean and absolutist in their views. Where moderns see uncertainty in the future, those who are unambiguously certain they know the truth can gain control.

To be sure, outward-looking modernist and cosmopolitan Jewry has not altogether given up its struggle against creeping Hareidism. The emergence of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and its new seminary for Orthodox rabbis, the selection of the cosmopolitan Richard Joel as head of Yeshiva University, the growth of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, the establishment of the International Rabbinic Fellowship (an association of Modern Orthodox rabbis), Bet Hillel in Israel, the development of minyanim of the Shira Hadasha model that endeavor to empower women as well as men in the leading of public prayer, and the ongoing commitment of many among the Orthodox to a liberal arts university education for their children are all signs of a resistance to the Hareidi model of Judaism and Jewishness. Whether they will grow or go the way of the now defunct Edah, an association that characterized itself by its motto, "the courage to be modern and Orthodox," remains to be seen.

Of course, while all this goes on, liberal Jewish denominations are fading as Conservative and Reform movements find themselves losing members and aging, and most of the rest of Jewry sees itself as

post-modern and post-denominational world citizens who are “just Jews” and not necessarily exclusively so, leaving even more room for the most inward-looking Orthodox to define not only Orthodoxy but Judaism in general. When asked how many Lubavitcher Hasidim there were in the world, the Lubavitcher Chaim Hodakov, answered “how many Jews are there in the world?” Besides being a cute way to avoid giving a number (which is surprisingly small), he was in a sense saying, we see no difference between the Lubavitcher version of Judaism and Judaism in general. That is the dominant view in Hareidi Orthodoxy today.

Yet the Hareidi Orthodox attitude that suggests that everyone should and can mold him or herself to its conformist, Manichean, and conservative way of life disregards the uniqueness of the individual, the human desire for autonomy, and the I–Thou attitude that exists in human beings that allows them to accept otherness and encourages tolerance. An Orthodoxy that does not divide the world into us and them and does not hold the view that “you’re either with us or against us” may in time turn out to be an Orthodoxy that can serve as the vanguard on the road to a renewable and renewing Judaism that eschews reform without being wrapped in the straight-jacket of the past. Stay tuned.

## Notes

[1] Gregory Treverton, “Risks and Riddles” *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 2007.

[2] Sklare, *Conservative Judaism*, p. 43.

[3] See JCSNY 2011 <http://www.ujafedny.org/get/196904/>, accessed October 12, 2012.

[4] See JCSNY 2011, p. 123.

[5] <http://www.divorcemag.com/statistics/statsWorld.shtml>, accessed January 3, 2012. This rate may be artificially low because in Israel the rabbinate controls divorce and only a husband may give a divorce to his wife.

[6] See U.S. Census for Hareidi villages Kiryas Joel, New Square, or Kesar.

[7] Jack Wertheimer, “Jews and Jewish Birthrate,” <http://www.simpletoremember.com/articles/a/jews-and-jewish-birthrate/>, accessed January 1, 2012.

[8] Google “Rabbis meet President” and the overwhelming number of images are of bearded Orthodox rabbis.

[9] [http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?\\_afpt=table](http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?_afpt=table), accessed October 12, 2012.

[10] See Gershon Hundert, “The Library of the Study Hall of Volozhin, 1762: Some Notes on the Basis of a Newly Discovered Manuscript,” *Jewish History*, Summer, 2000.

[11] Uriel Heilman, “Where Do Israeli Haredim Stand on Haredi Violence?” Dec. 30, 2011, <http://www.jta.org/news/article/2011/12/30/3090966/where-do-israeli-haredim-stand-on-haredi-violence>, accessed January 3, 2012.

[12] Charles S. Liebman, “Extremism as a Religious Norm,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Mar., 1983), pp. 75–86.

[13] Max Weber, *Economy and Society* vol. 2, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 538.

[14] See Shalom Berger, Daniel Jacobson and Chaim I. Waxman, *Flipping Out: Myth or Fact, The Impact of the Year in Israel*, (Jerusalem: Yashar Books, 2007) and Samuel Heilman, *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of Orthodox Jewry*.

[15] The Maharal of Prague quoted in Piekarz, p. 84.

[16] *Collected Letters*, pp. 51–52, cited in Piekarz, p. 109.

[17] Elya Svei, “Torah: A Source for Guidance in Every Phase of Jewish Activity,” *The Jewish Observer*, February 1982, p. 7.