# The Current State of the Modern Orthodox Community

View PDF

Rabbi Zev Eleff is President of Gratz College and a professor of American Jewish history. He is the author of several books about Modern Orthodoxy. This article appears in issue 42 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

**1. Do you sense that Orthodoxy has been moving to the right? To the left? Other?**

I think it's helpful to understand why we often discuss "rightward" and "leftward" movements within American Orthodox Judaism. In 2006, the sociologist Samuel Heilman coined the term, "sliding to the right." It was the title of his important tome that, as the subtitle indicated, explored the "contest for the future of American Jewish Orthodoxy." Heilman's book studied everyday life: for example, college enrollment, yeshiva study in Israel, and attitudes toward culture and technology. His conclusion was that the rising generation of traditional-leaning Jews had moved the boundary lines of what is and what isn't Orthodox Judaism. In each case, those lines "slid" further to the right, shrinking the acceptability of so-described Modern Orthodox practices and placing greater power in the hands of those who subscribed to the values and beliefs of the "rightward" yeshiva world.

Five years later, Yehuda Turetsky and Chaim Waxman authored an article that questioned Heilman's findings. The pair interviewed 50 women and men who described their religious beliefs as in concert with Modern Orthodox Judaism. The interviewees expressed to Turetsky and Waxman a concern for how Hareidi (Israel) and Yeshivish (U.S.) rabbis had banned books and people; most notably, the "excommunicated" Rabbi Natan Slifkin. Those interviewed also expressed an openness for advanced Torah study for women, as well as some inclusion for women in synagogue rituals. They therefore found, in opposition to Heilman, a competing "slide to the left."

Both approaches are compelling, making it difficult to easily plot the trajectory of Orthodox Judaism in the United States. Simply put, it seems a mistake to suggest that Orthodox practice (and belief) has moved from a "left-leaning" liberal attitude to a "right-pulling" conservatism and rigidness. This narrow view of history is too simple when we account for the variety of forces weighing upon Orthodox observance. The history of "change" is rarely binary. Change, I'd say, does not move two-dimensionally along an x-axis. Change moves in oft-unchartable strides. It does this because change doesn't occur in a vacuum. It sometimes moves unconsciously, reacting to indigenous extratextual conditions. For Orthodox Judaism, a list of those external forces include culture, politics, technology, as well as legal and economic variables.

Orthodox Judaism has bargained, to borrow a term from scholars of the American Amish, with modernity in complicated ways. Take, for instance, the gray areas of Jewish jurisprudence, as I have argued, from the rise and fall of peanut oil in Ashkenazic-practicing homes on Passover (it has been labeled "*kitniyot*") to the emergence of bat mitzvah ceremonies in Orthodox spaces. Peanut oil was "the Passover oil" in the immediate postwar period, approved by all kosher certification agencies. There were no audible grumblings from more stringent Hungarian Jews until the 1960s. Bat mitzvah, on the other hand, was a decidedly Conservative Jewish practice in the 1950s and rarely done in Orthodox circles. In the case of peanut oil, the Orthodox community banned it and moved to the "right," while in the latter instance, bat mitzvah rituals, we have moved very far to the "left." Factor in consumerism (Passover vacations, boutique toys, and other Orthodox products), dating practices, and women in the workforce, and you will further bollix notions of linear movements to one direction or another.

Consider, as well, the uneven reception of Torah study and leadership opportunities for women. It is probably a fair assessment to conclude that most Orthodox communities have not warmed to women clergy but have expanded the scope of learning available to Orthodox women. But the notion of "clergy" is curious; and it is absolutely the case that women have been made leaders in some of the most ardently Orthodox communities, even if it hasn't taken place on a pulpit. In 2015, two rebbetzins—rabbis' wives—successfully argued in a courtroom in Portland, Oregon, that they were not required to testify in a divorce trial because they ought to enjoy "clergy privilege" and exempt from sharing conversations held in confidence with members of their community. The representatives of these women, belonging to what might be described as a "rightwing" segment of the Orthodox community, claimed that "it was reasonable to argue that despite Orthodoxy's position that women cannot be ordained rabbis, the *kollel* wives were in fact officially hired by the *Kollel* to 'minister' to the community in vital ways that overlapped with the duties of clergy." In all these instances, it is apparent that modernity has posed challenges and opportunities for Orthodox Jews to grapple with their own red lines and develop creative responses to how this community engages with their American environs. In some cases, change can be interpreted as a movement to the right. In others, it is altogether clear that change shifted things leftward. Upon observing this phenomenon, I argued in my recent book, that all American tradition-bound faiths, Orthodox Judaism included, are in search for "authenticity." The quest for authenticity, a hard-to-describe sentiment, takes a group in a myriad of directions.

**What would you consider the proper "center" and how is that center doing?**

First, some history. The “center,” as in “Centrist Orthodoxy,” had a short shelf life. In the 1980s, Modern Orthodox Judaism rebranded itself as “Centrist Orthodoxy.” In 1986, Rabbi Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University, authored a visionary essay on Centrist Orthodox Judaism in the pages of *Tradition*. Two decades earlier, Rabbi Lamm had been one of the key figures to popularize the term, “Modern Orthodoxy.” By the mid-1980s, Rabbi Lamm believed that “modern” somehow connoted religious compromise, which was never his intention. Drawing from Rambam’s (and Aristotle’s) Golden Mean, Rabbi Lamm preached his movement’s belief in moderation and nuance in the areas of higher learning and Western culture. Centrist Orthodoxy, like Modern Orthodoxy before it, valued Religious Zionism.

Others added to Rabbi Lamm’s list. For example, Rabbi Gilbert Klaperman, president of the Rabbinical Council of America, confessed to his colleagues at the rabbinical group’s Midwinter Conference in Upstate New York that he and other “Centrists” were “being drawn to the right by the adamant inflexibility of those who are at the right.” In time, by the end of the 1990s, Rabbi Lamm and others reclassified themselves as Modern Orthodox Jews. Since then, some have preserved “Centrist Orthodox Judaism” as a moniker that represents something a bit more religiously conservative while others have used the term interchangeably with Modern Orthodoxy. Sociologist Sylvia Fishman provided an interesting taxonomy in her *Ways into the Varieties of Jewishness.*

How is this subgroup of Orthodox Judaism faring? In terms of numbers, it’s clear that it is no longer the dominant community. In 2013, the Pew Research Center published “A Portrait of Jewish Americans.” The report was a landmark population study of Jews in the United States. Among its findings, Pew tabulated about 5 million Jews, about 10 percent of whom belong to the Orthodox group. Within that smaller group, 30 percent self-identify as “Modern Orthodox.” According to my math, this suggests that the Modern Orthodox number just 150,000 women and men. The more recent Pew survey completed in 2020 does not drill down on these figures but the dataset available online confirms that the Modern (or Centrist) Orthodox are no longer the mainstream of Orthodox Jewish life in the United States.

Why not? I’d offer that it’s because the tenets of Modern Orthodoxy are no longer all that distinguishable from the yeshiva world. The latter has softened its stance on Israel; the erstwhile anti-Zionists (save for Satmar) are by and large non-Zionists. The yeshiva world visits Israel, champions it, and votes for American politicians who they believe best serve Israel’s interests. In addition, the Modern Orthodox and Orthodox Right are much closer aligned in terms of higher education. The yeshiva world has developed partnerships with universities to help their children earn degrees in “practical” fields such as accounting and the health sciences. Their children enroll in top medical schools and elite law schools. With great ingenuity, the Orthodox Right produces manuals to help young people navigate the higher education system to obtain degrees through online programs. One of the most comprehensive is Reuven Frankel’s *The Bochur’s Guide to College*.

Meanwhile, the Modern Orthodox have cooled to the liberal arts and the traditional undergraduate experience. Some (understandably) worry about how their children will do on a secular college campus, amid BDS and rising antisemitism. Even before this, though, about 20 years ago, two Ivy League graduate students, Gil Perl and Yaakov Weinstein, wrote a pamphlet titled, “A Parents’ Guide to Orthodox Assimilation on University Campuses.” The short tract with a Modern Orthodox audience in mind warned about the perils of the campus quad. It received significant attention; it was passed around in yeshivot and seminaries in Israel and discussed at many Hillels throughout the United States.

It's not just the social and cultural aspects of college life. The Modern Orthodox—like so many Americans—have counseled their youngsters to forsake "impractical" degrees in the humanities in favor of business programs, computer science, and other professional-minded tracks. Consider the case of Yeshiva University. In 1987, YU opened the Sy Syms School of Business in response to student requests for "new areas of interest." President Norman Lamm anticipated the criticism. Even as a minority of students pleaded for business programs, he was adamant that YU remain a liberal arts school. YU's business school, therefore, trumpeted Rabbi Lamm, "insists on a liberal dose of the liberal arts." He remained resolutely opposed to total vocationalism and intended for the business school to retain a small portion of the university's total undergraduate offerings. Today, Sy Syms' male student body is larger than (the all-male) Yeshiva College's (Stern College for Women is still much larger than the women's cohort at Sy Syms). Withal, and due to a lower birthrate than families belonging to the yeshiva world, it is little wonder that the Modern Orthodox community is not growing, at least not at the same rapid pace of the Orthodox Right.

**1. What are the three greatest challenges facing Modern Orthodoxy today?**

First, politicization. By this, I do not mean that Modern Orthodox Jews have en bloc taken up a particular political party's cause or voted in a monolithic way. Modern Orthodox Jews probably vote somewhere in between the GOP-leaning Orthodox Right and the majority of American Jews who have, since FDR, voted for Democrats. By politicization, I have in mind the recent discourse about Modern Orthodox Judaism that has centered on politics rather than faith. This is not new in the history of American religion. For instance, in the decades leading up to the Civil War, politics (slavery) split Baptists and Methodists into "northern" and "southern" sections. The United States' democratic processes are contentious and deeply meaningful; as a result, they tend to absorb considerable discussion and secrete into other areas of life—education, sports, and popular culture, to list a few. Perhaps, then, it was inevitable that matters such as LGBTQ+ and First Amendment issues would eventually dominate the conversations of Modern Orthodox Jews in the media and around the Shabbat table. Yet, it has come at the expense of Modern Orthodoxy spending time on pressing religious concerns: These include refining its approach to Torah study, revitalizing its synagogues, and forming new agencies and ideas to better support its constituencies.

Second, expertise. A dozen years ago, researchers Randall Stephens and Karl Giberson authored a brilliant monograph on expertise in the American evangelical community. Their work, *The Anointed*, demonstrated how the Christian Right elevated self-taught and self-described experts to champion "Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age." These men (few of these experts were women) published books, wrote articles and took to other forms of modern media to weigh in on science, politics, and history. Their goal was to provide an alternative and "safer" form of truth that could, in their minds, better jibe with their communities' religious and social sensibilities. Very often, these evangelical exponents deployed rhetorical apologetics and made statements without the sufficient scholarly scaffolding to make cogent and compelling arguments—at least not the kind that would satisfy the most learned. While some within this group such as the historian Mark Noll, described this phenomenon as the "scandal of the Evangelical Mind," many pious Protestants have felt more comfortable with internal experts, no matter how these individuals compare to scholars and researchers who had trained and received credentials from American universities.

In the 1960s, the same was the case for the yeshiva world. Their magazines described "newfangled" research in psychology and education. They also worried about the research produced by women and men who were part of the nascent field of Jewish Studies. They often positioned these flawed disciplines against the flawlessness of *Daas Torah*, a term that denotes a belief in an unimpeachable form of rabbinic wisdom.

More subtly and more recently, the Modern Orthodox have revealed the same concerns about elevating experts, even within their own community, who possess top credentials. More often than not, congregational rabbis and yeshiva heads are asked to opine on mental health, dating advice, and lecture in the areas of science, history, and philosophy. In some instances, these rabbis and religious leaders possess relevant credentials. Rarely, however, do they conduct research, write, or, I suspect, generally keep up with their peers in the field. Modern Orthodox communities have become much better about inviting a small (but growing) cluster of women leaders to speak on a myriad of issues. But, like their male counterparts, these women are often asked to speak about areas far beyond their specializations.

Confounding this further is social media and the relatively low cost of publication. On the one hand, social media has democratized discourse, permitting many people to obtain a voice on various platforms and podcasts. On the other hand, the phenomenon has short-circuited the vetting process. While it is hardly the case that all articles and books published decades ago were the finest works of scholarship, there are, at present, no controls on material produced for wide consumption and consideration. The result of this and the decline of expertise in the Modern Orthodox fold is that there is no very trustworthy forum for intelligent conversation about Modern Orthodox Judaism.

Third, economics. It is very expensive to live a Modern Orthodox lifestyle. The cost of education is particularly painful. Day School and college are very expensive. Tuition for families, say, with four children enrolled in Day School and summer camp can run, easily, about $120,000 (and that's after taxes). Rising mortgage rates and housing costs just add to the high cost of Modern Orthodox living. To be sure, it's not cheap to live in the yeshiva world. Yet, the Orthodox Right, it is my sense, finds philanthropic and government resources (troubling exposés in the media, notwithstanding), to help subvent some costs.

**What positive developments do you sense for contemporary Modern Orthodoxy?**

It is too soon to speculate about our post-pandemic Modern Orthodox communities. No doubt, synagogues and their leaders have had to reconsider the needs of their congregants. Likewise, Day Schools, forced to pivot and improvise during the "shutdown" Covid period, have learned a lot about their capacities and their ongoing needs for professional development. As for economics, especially amid rising interest rates and inflation, it is far too soon to prognosticate remedies. However, it is heartening to observe the efforts of the Orthodox Union and other agencies who have worked closely with state-level lawmakers to find funding to support Jewish education. In short, the crisis wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic has forced all types of people to think differently about their communities and organizations. This has, no doubt, extended to the Modern Orthodox.

There's another reason for optimism. Even before the coronavirus pandemic, Modern Orthodox Judaism in the United States was the beneficiary of an exciting jolt of energy from their *dati-le'umi* counterparts in Israel. Israelis have inspired new and more advanced forms of learning for America's Modern Orthodox women, introduced new thinkers and ideas, thanks in large part to Koren Publishers. Still, there are cultural differences between the Modern Orthodox in the United States and Israel's *dati-le'umi* leaders. America's Modern Orthodox community was fashioned by a Lithuanian rabbinic folkway.

For this reason, traditional Talmud study ("yeshiva learning") was the coin of the realm for leadership. Unlike in Israel, non-Eastern European exponents such as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, did not gain a sturdy foothold in American environs. It's also the reason that Tanakh scholarship is better appreciated among the *dati-le'umi* constellation Israel than it has been within the Modern Orthodox communities in the United States. This also may suggest why women's leadership has developed differently in the two communities. If these realms are changing in the United States, it is probably because of Israel's influence. Not everything from Israel will "take," of course. The indigenous Modern Orthodox community will continue to privilege traditional Talmud learning, even as other areas of Torah scholarship gain increased reception. We'll figure out what works best and redevelop the infrastructure to reimagine and fortify our Modern Orthodox communities in the United States.