

## Orthodox Judaism Today

Charles S. Liebman

The vast majority of American Jews (82 percent according to the 1970 National Jewish Population Study), identify themselves as either Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform Jews. Most of the remaining 18 percent call themselves "just Jewish." Jews who define themselves as Orthodox are more likely to believe in God, affirm the Divine authorship of the Pentateuch, and observe Jewish ritual laws than are Jews who define themselves as Conservative. Conservative Jews, in turn, are more likely to affirm traditional Jewish beliefs and observe traditional Jewish rituals than those who define themselves as Reform.

In short, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews can be ranged along a continuum in so consistent a manner that an observer might be inclined to suggest that the differences really boil down to the fact that the Orthodox are the more committed to religious belief and practice, Reform the least committed, and Conservatives in the middle. Regardless of how simplistic and even vulgar the statement sounds, it is truer than most Jews would like to believe. And differences in religious commitment extend to other matters as well. Recent studies suggest that however one chooses to measure Jewish commitment, Orthodox Jews are more committed to Judaism than are Conservative Jews, and Conservative Jews more than Reform. There are, after all, any number of possible measures of Jewish commitment in addition to measures of religious belief and behavior. One might define Jewish commitment as Jewish knowledge, or Jewish education, or the desire to provide one's children with a Jewish education, or opposition to intermarriage, or support for Israel or Soviet Jewry, or the number of one's closest friends who are Jewish or the number of Jewish organizations to which one belongs. Each of these measures is correlated with religious behavior. That is, the more ritually observant or devout one is, the higher one is likely to score on other measures of Jewish commitment. As noted, Jews who define themselves as Orthodox

score higher on measures of religious observance and devotion than do Jews who define themselves as Conservative, and Conservatives higher than Reform. Reform, in turn, score higher on measures of Jewish commitment than those who define themselves as secularists or "just Jewish." Anyone familiar with American Jews can think of individual exceptions. But, in terms of groups of Jews, the evidence leaves no room for doubt that one can distinguish between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, at least in the 1970s, in terms of their Jewish commitment.<sup>1</sup>

Those who feel that maximal Jewish commitment is desirable must, therefore, be troubled by the decline of the more Jewishly committed denominations, a decline that appears most noticeable if we compare denominational orientation with generation in the United States. The bulk of Orthodox Jews are first generation American Jews, the bulk of Conservative Jews are second generation Americans, and the bulk of Reform Jews are third generation or more Americans. The 1975 sample survey of Jews in metropolitan Boston reveals that Orthodox Jews comprise the largest segment of first generation American Jews 65 years or older (there were too few first generation Jews under 65 to generalize with confidence, although Orthodoxy would probably not constitute a majority of that group), Conservative Jews constituted the largest proportion of second generation Jews, and Reform the largest proportion of third generation Jews. There are also differences in income and educational attainment which are generally associated with generational status in the United States and which further distinguish Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews. But there *are* first generation Reform Jews and there *are* third generation Orthodox Jews. And differences in Jewish commitment remain even when we hold constant for generation, income, or education. Hence, the special interest in asking about the most committed of all Jewish groups—what is happening to Orthodox Judaism?

The first point to note is that their number is declining; this is not at all surprising since, despite the influx of Israelis and Soviet Jews, the number of first generation American Jews is still declining. (A generational decline, however, which may cease if the number of Soviet Jews continues to grow.) Local community surveys and the 1970 National Jewish Population Study bear this out. For example, the metropolitan Boston survey asked respondents to report their own denominational preference and that of their parents. Among second generation American Jews who reported that their parents were Orthodox, only six percent considered themselves Orthodox, 61 percent considered themselves Conservative, 22 percent Reform, and 10 percent

expressed no preference or didn't answer. On the other hand, almost no second generation Jews whose parents were not Orthodox considered themselves Orthodox. According to the National Jewish Population Study, 26 percent of first generation American Jews define themselves as Orthodox. The proportion declines to 9 percent among second generation American Jews, and 3 percent of those who are third generation or more. This last figure may be something of an understatement of Orthodoxy's strength, as I will indicate below. But if we define an Orthodox Jew as one who considers himself Orthodox, or as one who is affiliated with an Orthodox synagogue, the total number of Orthodox Jews is declining and because of Orthodoxy's generational composition will continue to decline in the near future.

The second point to note about Orthodoxy, despite the above data, is that it is not on the verge of disappearing. Indeed, some American Jews actually believe that Orthodoxy is experiencing a resurgence. This is true in a special sort of way that is not unrelated to Orthodoxy's numerical decline.

Orthodoxy is moving to the right religiously. I think there are two useful ways of defining the religious right in Jewish circles. First, Jews on the religious right interpret Jewish law more rigidly and prohibitively than Jews on the religious left. Secondly, they are less tolerant of deviations from Jewish law than are those of the left. Orthodoxy's move to the right is associated with a decline in the number of Jews who are affiliated with Orthodox synagogues or identify themselves as Orthodox even though they are not observant of Jewish law in their personal lives.

There are many Jews, for example, who call themselves Reform and don't belong to a Reform synagogue. Indeed, according to the National Jewish Population Study this is true of roughly half of all Reform Jews. Whereas the majority of Jews who call themselves Conservative are affiliated with a Conservative synagogue, only a minority observe Jewish law in accordance with Conservative strictures; for example, less than 10 percent observe the dietary regulations in a manner which Conservative leaders assert is basic to normative Judaism. The data from a number of community surveys suggest that many first generation American Jews who identified themselves as Orthodox in the past were not observant of Jewish law in their personal lives; they certainly didn't observe the law in accordance with Orthodox criteria. They may have identified themselves as Orthodox out of sympathy with Jewish tradition, for familial or social reasons, out of their affection for an Orthodox rabbi, or for any other number of reasons. This is much less true of second and probably even less true of third generation Orthodox Jews in America. Whereas fewer Jews identify with Orthodoxy today, those who do so are far more committed to its norms. I don't mean to suggest that Orthodoxy's numerical

decline is attributable solely to the decline in the number of non-observant Orthodox; but this is certainly an important factor. I'm not sure whether it was the move to the right which led the non-observant Orthodox to feel increasingly uncomfortable, or whether their numerical decline opened the way for Orthodoxy to move to the right. I suspect both processes took place.

The separation and sense of isolation which the main body of Orthodoxy feels from the rest of the Jewish community has led the Orthodox to develop a network of institutions which have had some success in maintaining and even strengthening an Orthodox identity among the committed. The Boston survey permits us to hold the 40 to 64 age cohort constant. Among that age group, 4 percent of second generation American Jews identify themselves as Orthodox, as do 5 percent of third generation or more American Jews. This is a notable achievement because it suggests that Orthodoxy is retaining its hard core strength by generation. The proportion of Reform increases from 33 percent among second generation Jews to 39 percent among third generation Jews, and the proportion of Conservative Jews declines from 51 percent to 36 percent. Those with no denominational preference increase from 12 to 18 percent. This suggests that the increase in the number of those who identify themselves as Reform Jews is accounted for by defections from Conservatism. The suggestion is reinforced by the fact that of those third generation Jews who report that their parents were Conservative, only 43 percent report that *they* are Conservative, 24 percent report that they are Reform, 27 percent report they have no preference, and 5 percent could not be ascertained.

The figures for Orthodoxy are inconsistent with those of the National Jewish Population Study. But I would emphasize, even if there is an overall decline in the proportion of Jews who identify themselves as Orthodox from the second to the third generation, this doesn't necessarily mean there is a decline in the proportion of Jews who are Orthodox in their behavior. The Boston data confirm a widespread impression among observers of American Jewish life that in the transition from second to third generation in the United States, Orthodoxy is retaining its hard core of committed who constitute no less than three percent of American Jewry and perhaps as much as four to five percent. And this, as we indicated, is associated with a move to the right on the part of Orthodoxy as a whole.

A number of factors help account for Orthodoxy's move to the right, but the one that seems to me of the greatest significance stems from the internal dynamics of Orthodoxy itself. Orthodoxy defines the good Jewish life as adherence to Jewish law. Hence, the more closely and rigidly one adheres to

such laws the better Jew one becomes. Two important constraints on this process operated in the past but are no longer effective.

One was the sense of responsibility that leading Orthodox rabbis who interpret Jewish law felt to the total Jewish community; a sense of responsibility evidenced in a reluctance to interpret the Law in such a manner that the vast majority of Jews would find its observance excessively burdensome. Orthodox leaders have been relieved of this constraint by their impression that the vast majority of Jews wouldn't observe Jewish law regardless of how they interpreted it. The experience of the Conservative movement confirms them in their impression. The remnant of Jews who have remained Orthodox are ready to accept whatever the *halachic* (legal) authorities dictate.

A second constraint in the past was economic. Prolonged Jewish study in an intensive Yeshiva environment beyond the high school level was precluded by the necessity to earn a living. Relative prosperity permitted many more young men to spend their late teens and twenties in a Yeshiva. Such young people are isolated from the rhythms and routines of life that tend to shake the foundations of a strictly Orthodox outlook. They become more thoroughly socialized to the "rightest" orientation which characterizes the Yeshiva world. When they leave the Yeshiva, they influence others within the Orthodox community; particularly since the superior knowledge obtained in the Yeshiva provides them with status.

This does not mean that Orthodox Jews have not accommodated themselves to the American environment. They have in a very radical and very non-traditional way. (I will return to this point.) But the accommodations themselves lack religious legitimation. To put it another way—one can distinguish a left wing or modern Orthodox from a right wing or more authoritarian Orthodox orientation. Orthodox Jews do vary in their degree of adherence to Jewish law and their relative intolerance for those who don't observe the law. But whereas right wing Orthodox Jews legitimate themselves by Orthodoxy's own criteria of that which is Jewishly appropriate, the left wing has recourse to legitimation *outside* the *halachic* framework; they may legitimate their position in terms of accommodating to their environment, by admitting to human weakness, in terms of universalist ethical concerns, or even in terms of Jewish philosophical and theological conceptions; but they cannot legitimate themselves in terms that all Orthodox Jews acknowledge as basic and essential to Judaism—Jewish law. They cannot do this, in part, because they tend to be laxer in their observance of Jewish law than is the right wing, and in part because they cannot find any *halachic* authorities who will publicly defend their permissiveness even when it falls within the framework of the permissible. There are a number of ways to illustrate this point. The use of birth control

would be one such example, but for obvious reasons sociological observers are not always well informed about these practices. A more obvious illustration would be the use of elevators on the Sabbath. Orthodox Jews believe that pressing an elevator button on the Sabbath is prohibited since it involves "turning on" electricity; an act prohibited by all *halachic* authorities. However, there is some disagreement as to whether this prohibition is purely rabbinic, an extension of the Biblical prohibition of kindling a fire on the Sabbath, or whether the act itself falls within the Biblical prohibition. Rabbinic law (as distinct from direct Biblical law) also prohibits asking a non-Jew to perform an act that is prohibited on the Sabbath if it is for the sole convenience of the individual Jew. Many Orthodox Jews I know who live in high rise apartment buildings in Manhattan have arranged with their doormen to press the elevator button for them when they enter their building on the Sabbath. Their justification rests on the *halachic* principle that a rabbinic limitation does not extend to other rabbinic rulings. If, indeed, the prohibition of "turning on" electricity on the Sabbath is rabbinic rather than Biblical, then the prohibition of asking a non-Jew to perform an otherwise prohibited act would not apply. But most Orthodox Jews I know who have an elevator button pressed for them are somewhat uncomfortable about it. They think of it as a concession to their weakness. Children of some of these Orthodox Jews walk rather than use the elevator. It is unthinkable for any Orthodox rabbi today to defend the practice publicly as acceptable although a number themselves use the elevator as I have indicated.

One is hard pressed to think of rabbis with any standing in the Orthodox world who seek to legitimate those behavior patterns that distinguish the modern Orthodox of the left wing from the right. One exception is Rabbi Emanuel Rackman. Interestingly, one reason Rackman was rejected for the presidency of Yeshiva University, the place once thought of as the flagship institution of modern Orthodoxy, was because he was unacceptable to the right wing. Parenthetically, institutions of the Orthodox right are far less likely to take account of modern Orthodox sensibilities or pressures in appointing their leader.

I don't want to suggest that modern or left wing Orthodoxy is distinguished from right wing Orthodoxy only in its more permissive attitude toward Jewish law. In the past, there were basic issues of ethical sensitivity or intellectual conceptions which divided the two wings although the ideological lines were never hard and fast. There was also a time when it appeared that class more than ideology separated the two groups, and there is still an element of truth to this as we shall see. But to the extent that one could once talk

of a distinctive Jewish conception that distinguished modern Orthodoxy from the right wing it is also fair to say that this distinctive conception was never asserted as *the* correct position. Instead, modern Orthodoxy claimed a parity of legitimacy with the right wing. The right wing didn't accord the same legitimacy to the position of the left. The left, as we noted, was further weakened by the sense of many, particularly among the younger generation, that modern Orthodoxy was not a distinctive ideology but a facade for *halachic* deviation. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Orthodox right has emerged the stronger and more self-confident, and modern Orthodoxy is unable, today, to articulate a *halachic*-theological position.

Orthodoxy's more rigid interpretation of Jewish law and increasing intolerance for those who deviate from Jewish law might lead one to suspect that it would find itself with less and less influence in the American Jewish world. This is not the case at all.

Orthodoxy's current influence has a number of causes. The most important one, I believe, is the sense of many non-Orthodox Jews that Orthodoxy is the voice of Jewish authenticity. There is an analogy between the attitude of the modern Orthodox toward their right wing and of the non-Orthodox toward the Orthodox. The analogy is not perfect. But the parallel rests in the sense of many Conservative and Reform Jews (including rabbis) and many of the leaders of secular Jewish organizations (Federations of Jewish Philanthropies in particular) that although *they* are not Orthodox and don't want to be Orthodox, the Orthodox are the better Jews. That means they are ready to listen attentively to what the Orthodox have to say about Judaism; particularly if they are leaders of a secular Jewish organization seeking a religious point of view.

The sense that Orthodoxy is the voice of Jewish authenticity may stem from the fact that Orthodoxy is a legitimate expression of the Jewish tradition by everyone's standard, while Orthodoxy denies that status to Conservatism and Reform. More important is that Orthodoxy speaks with a sense of confidence about its Jewishness that the non-Orthodox lack.

Indeed, Conservatism and Reform have institutionalized their doubts and ambiguities about the tradition. Reform stresses the individual's freedom to choose which traditional practices are to be observed without passing judgments on that choice. This emphasis finds increasing resonance within the Conservative movement to the point where some statements and behavior of some of their leaders are indistinguishable from Reform.

But many within Reform and surely many of the crypto-Reform within the Conservative movement don't simply believe that it is commitment to "free-

dom" which distinguishes them. Many sense that "freedom" is a substitute for doubts which they harbor about what precisely a Jew is obliged to do, and/or the virtual impossibility of imposing what they do think every Jew ought to do.

Orthodoxy makes no overt theological concessions to frailty (it leaves the individual Jew to act out his frailty without doctrinal legitimation) nor has it institutionalized any doubts its adherents may share about the implications of the Jewish tradition.

Further, if one is going to pick and choose those aspects of the tradition with which one is most comfortable, which best suit one's needs, psychological make up, etc., it stands to reason that one wants to choose from within Orthodoxy since it affirms the full gamut of the tradition. By definition, Orthodoxy offers the broadest assortment of wares. From the perspective of the non-Orthodox, moreover, Orthodox Jews have made the greatest sacrifices on behalf of their Jewishness. The life style of the Orthodox Jew, his adherence to Jewish dietary regulations or Sabbath law, for example, is an indication of self sacrifice and commitment that many non-Orthodox find particularly admirable because they lack the will power to adhere to these same restrictions. The Orthodox have become Jewish role models not because of the specific Jewish laws and prohibitions they observe but because they observe any Jewish law.

Finally, there is the sense of many non-Orthodox Jews I know that the Orthodox are the real Jewish survivors. They are the ones least likely to assimilate. As spiritual survival of American Jewry increasingly emerges as the latent if not the manifest goal of Jewish organizations in the United States it stands to reason that Orthodox status and hence Orthodox influence has expanded.

The paradox is that the voice of Orthodoxy among the non-Orthodox, particularly in public lectures and discussions, is generally heard from the mouths of the modern Orthodox. Only they will meet with Conservative and Reform rabbis, lecture in Conservative or Reform synagogues, or negotiate a mutually acceptable stance with Conservative and Reform leaders. The modern Orthodox Jew also tends to be more comfortable in the presence of secular Jews than is his right wing counterpart. Class as well as theology plays a role here. Finally, the non-Orthodox prefer the modern Orthodox Jew who can articulate Orthodox conceptions in a terminology which they can understand. The Orthodox rightist and his world view often seem so distant that there is little basis for communication.

The popularity of the modern Orthodox Jew among the non-Orthodox

may lead him into temptations he finds difficult to resist. One modern Orthodox rabbi has developed a presentation to leaders of Jewish philanthropic organizations assuring them there is nothing basically wrong with their Jewish behavior, indeed that they are the best of Jews, that they simply ought to do more of what they are now doing, and the fact that they don't do more is primarily the fault of the synagogue and other rabbis who don't understand "post-modern" Judaism. Paradoxically, an opposite approach may also constitute a form of pandering. Telling non-Orthodox Jews how assimilated and uncommitted they are may provide them with an exculpation of guilt and a surrogate for taking a more careful look at themselves and their Jewish behavior. In both cases, Orthodox spokesmen provide theater rather than religion.

The other side of the coin is that this platform may provide modern Orthodox rabbis with a status they have heretofore lacked. Furthermore, their articulation of Orthodox Judaism in conceptual terms that are comprehensible to a non-Orthodox Jew may yet lead to a revitalization of modern Orthodox thought and a more favorable self image. In addition this tendency may find reinforcement among a new breed of Orthodox laymen.

This is not the place to describe the cultural implications of a professional career. It is clear that for a variety of reasons a professional career is a form of identity which may compete or alternate with one's Jewish identity in a way that is not true of a businessman's identity. It is the second and third generation of Orthodox who have entered the professions. They have changed the image of Orthodoxy as they associate with the non-Orthodox on the semi-social, semi-business occasions when professionals often meet. Furthermore, secular Jewish organizations are increasingly likely to employ Orthodox Jews because their Jewish skills, status, and commitments are an important supplement to their professional skills.

This increased association of Orthodox and non-Orthodox at the professional and Jewish level has an important impact on the Orthodox. Many of them find themselves making concessions in their personal behavior. The Orthodox professional is often fearful lest he cross the borderline between being steadfastly and courageously Jewish and being viewed as fanatical, intolerant, and ill mannered. Secondly, as Orthodox Jews are increasingly co-opted into secular Jewish organizations they are exposed to the very real Jewish concerns and arguments of the non-Orthodox; concerns and arguments that are not always consistent with Orthodoxy. At the very least, upwardly mobile Orthodox Jewish professionals discover that contrary to what they had been led to believe, the non-Orthodox, even the Conservative

and Reform, are really engaged in efforts to help other Jews and are really concerned about Jewish survival. Herein lies a potential core group to whom a modern Orthodox theology might have a strong appeal.

The non-Orthodox have listened to the Orthodox the last few years but I don't think they have posed the question that is in the back of their minds; perhaps because they are embarrassed by the poverty of their own Jewish resources, perhaps because they are afraid of the answer they would get, perhaps because on the face of it the question sounds silly.

What I think they really want to know is: how can we non-Orthodox, especially our children, be as strongly committed, as proud, as Jewishly self-confident as you and your children without being Orthodox? What is the secret ingredient that makes you Orthodox such good Jews? The Orthodox are likely to dismiss such questions by saying—if you want to be like us you must become Orthodox. Maybe they are right. Surely, however, it is poor counsel. For if they are right their counsel is an encouragement to assimilation. The vast majority of American Jews would opt for assimilation if they believed it was their only alternative to Orthodoxy. If this surprises the Orthodox Jew, let him consider what he would choose if he was convinced that becoming a Satmar Hasid was the only alternative to assimilation.

I'm not sure that Orthodoxy is the only alternative to assimilation. I would like to suggest, albeit very tentatively, that there are two characteristics basic to Orthodoxy's strength that need not be peculiar to it. In other words, I want to suggest that one doesn't have to be Orthodox to survive as an American Jew, though it certainly helps.

One characteristic that is basic to Orthodoxy's survival and accommodation to America is compartmentalization. The characteristic response of Conservative and Reform Jews has been to reshape their Judaism to meet the changing social and cultural environment. Orthodoxy has responded by compartmentalizing Judaism. Judaism and things Jewish are sacred; things not Jewish are secular or profane. I doubt if there is any term in the vocabulary of religion on which social scientists and religious adherents have greater consensus than on the meaning of *sacred*. It means "set apart." From the ancient Near East to Durkheim and his students, people who reflected on the nature of holiness understood that its basic component was its apartness, its radical differentness. Now the compartmentalization or separation of Jewish from non-Jewish symbols, activity, conceptions, modes of relationship, etc. can never be perfect. Secondly, within the sphere of things Jewish, there are more sacred and less sacred objects, activities, etc. Hence we really have a continuum of the

sacred. What I wish to emphasize by the term compartmentalization is that the Orthodox Jews, by and large, do not search for consistency between their Jewish and non-Jewish life. On the contrary, they make a virtue of their inconsistency. This is much less true of the modern Orthodox and, therein, is another source of their weakness.

Compartmentalization has few philosophical advocates. Indeed, from the Jewish theological and *halachic* perspective it is indefensible. It is Christianity not Judaism which sharply distinguishes the sacred and non-sacred. But my concern is with basic orientations and behavior patterns in the present; orientations which generally lack an explicit theological or philosophical foundation but really evolved as a survival strategy. My argument is that most Orthodox Jews have retained their ritual tradition and belief system virtually intact and at the same time have acculturated in language, dress, and education to American styles because they have been able to separate these two aspects of life so that they impinge on each other as little as possible.<sup>2</sup> My illustration is taken from an aspect of behavior that ostensibly goes to the very core of human experience where religion has presumably retained its greatest authority—child rearing practices. I want to indicate that even here, Orthodox Jews have compartmentalized their behavior. (I rely on my own observations.)

Middle class second generation American Orthodox couples raise their children with the same permissiveness that characterizes their non-Orthodox counterparts—with one important exception. On issues dealing with Jewish matters, particularly Jewish law, they are not permissive. Not only are certain matters forbidden in absolute, non-negotiable, non-compromising terms, but in matters involving Judaism in general and observance of Jewish law in particular, the parents' whole attitude toward the child changes.

What happens, I think, is that parents who like to think of themselves as autonomous, all powerful, as setting the rules by which the child must abide, find themselves in a realm where they have no primary authority but are really only surrogates for the Jewish community, for tradition, and—in an ultimate sense—for God. This unconscious orientation which can be acted out in different ways is conveyed to the child who learns from the earliest age that things Jewish are quite different from things non-Jewish. I am not suggesting that there are no implications of parent-child relationships from one realm to the other. There are. The very permissiveness in the non-Jewish realm is moderated by the fact that there is a realm in which the parents are not permissive. Hence, the child's conception of the world and of society is affected with respect to matters that are ostensibly not Jewish. The relative political

conservatism of most Orthodox Jews is related to this. Compartmentalization is never absolute. But it nevertheless exists in degree and functions as an important component in the identity of the Orthodox Jew.

Compartmentalization refers to separations and distinctions between areas of life but also to the different modes of relationships in the distinctive areas of life. The suspension of the intellect that characterizes some aspects of Orthodoxy's response to Jewish life limits its capacity to respond effectively. But it is not the specific mode of relationship that I think the non-Orthodox can learn from the Orthodox. Rather, it is the process of compartmentalization itself; the sense that the Jewish aspects of one's life are different and set apart from the non-Jewish aspects and being Jewish doesn't necessarily have implications for everything a Jew does. The concomitant, after all, is that everything one does has implications for one's Jewishness; a proposition that may be theologically sound but hardly tolerable to those who would preserve Judaism in some form.

I do not think the process of compartmentalization had been adequately investigated, and I am quite certain it is highly complex, involving a host of psychological and sociological factors. Nevertheless, it seems to me we have enough evidence to justify asking Conservative and Reform educators to take a second look at their own educational predispositions and to consider compartmentalization as a major educational strategy.

Perhaps the proposition is better stated in the negative. Jewish survival in the United States is threatened, I believe, by educational and behavioral programs that characterize Judaism as of a piece with other types of experiences. It is true that a Jewish value is the integration of the secular into the sacred, the extension of the sacred to all aspects of one's life. But assuming there is a priority to values, the current priority item on the Jewish agenda is to ensure that some aspect of one's life remains sacred.

The second characteristic of Orthodoxy that is an important factor in its ability to generate commitment but that need not be peculiar to the Orthodox is a sense of community. I begin with an outsider's question.

How does one account for the fact that Americanized, well educated, upwardly mobile men and women engage in behavior that appears absurd from the perspective of everything else they do? How does one account for the fact that otherwise intelligent men and women won't turn their electricity on or off on the Sabbath, won't carry handkerchiefs or tear toilet paper on the Sabbath, abstain from all kinds of food, use separate dishes for dairy and meat products, etc.

These same people do not stand out from their non-Orthodox or even

their non-Jewish peers in other ways. Orthodox Jews appear to behave like normal people except when it comes to their Jewishness. We have already noted that the mechanism through which the Orthodox rationalize behavior in one sphere of life that would be quite inappropriate to behavior in another sphere of life is compartmentalization. The kinds of questions Orthodox Jews ask themselves and the kinds of social pressures and constraints that govern their behavior in the non-Jewish realm are totally different from the questions and constraints in the Jewish realm. But from an outsider's point of view, to be a committed Jew means to behave, to some extent, in a manner that is absurd by contemporary standards.

Any strategy of Jewish survival, I believe, has to be built around mechanisms that make deviations from contemporary standards of behavior tolerable to the Jew. This is even true for Reform Jews with their minimal level of ritual observance given the evidence presented at the outset that Jewish commitment of all kinds is associated with religious performance.

The problem is of special force because of the nature of contemporary culture. If we lived in a ritualistic society, observance of Jewish traditions would be less absurd. The individual, one could argue, performs all kinds of overtly symbolic acts; that is, acts that bear no direct instrumental or rational relationship to achieving his goals. But we live in a society that is less and less ritualistic.

I am not suggesting that we are bereft of ritual. But there is less ritual today, and the ritual that exists is less overt and explicit, nor does it evoke the sense of the sacred it once did. For example, even when we perform such rituals as standing for the national anthem, we are less concerned with the details of how we stand, we don't feel guilty if we don't perform ritual properly, nor do we believe that the proper or improper performance of the ritual has consequences for our lives. Ritual still remains an important instrument for organizing and projecting thoughts and emotions, for ordering reality in symbolic terms (graduation exercises are marvelous examples) but they are less serious events than they once were. Initiation rites in universities, for example, have either disappeared or are now disguised as part of the educational process.

But Orthodox Jews who share in society's general disenchantment with ritual carry on their own ritual as though nothing had changed. In other words, the question one is led to ask is not why Orthodox Jews perform this or that ritual or find this or that ritual meaningful (most Orthodox Jews I know don't know why they perform most of their rituals nor do they find most of them meaningful in their particularity). The question is: Why do Orthodox Jews find ritual itself meaningful rather than absurd?

Mary Douglas, in her book *Natural Symbols*,<sup>3</sup> provides an explanation for the differences between people and societies in the importance they ascribe to ritual. Ritual, she observes, expresses our sense of order. In those cultures where man perceives himself as intimately related to society, lacking autonomy and individual freedom, where the social group grips its members tightly, ritual is most highly developed, and symbolic action is perceived as efficacious. Individual autonomy, the breakdown of the individual's sense of group dependence, means a movement away from ritual and a substitution of the notion that what really counts is our intent, our feeling, and our relationship to other people.

The Orthodox Jew is related to a Jewish community of time and place. He lives with the sense of an omnipresent community that mediates relationships to other Jews, to Jewish history, and to major Jewish symbols. At the simplest level this means that relationships to the local Jewish community, the national Jewish community, and even to Israel take place through a network of institutions (the Synagogue, the Jewish school, American counterparts of Israeli political parties, hospitals, other philanthropic societies, etc.) that share an Orthodox orientation. On the other hand, relationships at the most intimate level, family and peers, are, at least to some extent governed by a sense of obligation towards the rules and customs of that community. The same sense of community governs relationships to the Jewish past.

Now this has a double reinforcing effect. The specific injunctions of the ritual observance are backed by sanctions of community approval or disapproval. But, more significant, precisely because of the omnipresent sense of community, the notion of ritual, and the efficacy of ritual, as Douglas suggests, are natural rather than artificial. Grippled in the web of community bonds, both in a metaphysical as well as a material sense, the Orthodox Jew believes because he experiences. His sense of community and his ritual behavior reinforce each other rather than become surrogates for one another.

Such a community with its impingement on individuality, on freedom, on personal expression might be quite intolerable even to the Orthodox were it not for the fact that it is apprehended, however unconsciously, as a partial community. It may make absolute demands, but these demands extend to certain areas of life and not to others. The Orthodox *oleh*, immigrant to Israel, tends to be the Orthodox Jew who finds this partiality unsatisfactory. The small number of Orthodox *olim* suggest how few such Jews exist. But unless the non-Orthodox can recreate the experience of community in however partial a form, they are unlikely to generate the sense of commitment necessary for Jewish survival.

## Notes

1. Bernard Lazerwitz and Michael Harrison, "American Jewish Denominations: A Social and Religious Profile," *American Sociological Review* (forthcoming); Bernard Lazerwitz, "An Approach to the Components and Consequences of Jewish Identification," *Contemporary Jewry* (1979, in press); Mervin Verbit, *Today's Young Jews: Patterns of Jewish Identity on the Campus* (forthcoming); Harold S. Himmelfarb, "Patterns of Assimilation—Identification Among American Jews," (paper delivered to the Seventh World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 1977) and Charles S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), pp. 142-143 and the literature cited therein. The point is developed in greater detail in my forthcoming article "The Sociology of Religion and the Study of American Jews."

2. I am indebted to Egon Mayer whose doctoral dissertation, published under the title *From Suburb to Shtetl* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), suggested this line of thought.

3. New York: Vintage Books edition, 1973.

## *The Changing Orthodox Jewish Community*

Gershon Kranzler

Any appraisal of the changing Orthodox Jewish community in this country must be related to the significant developments in the broader American Jewish community. It is therefore necessary to draw on some of the findings of recent national and local community studies, notwithstanding their limitations or flaws, since they indicate trends and patterns that transcend the narrow confines of their researchers' intent and perspective. Above all, they contain serious implication for Jewish survival that must not be disregarded. The American Jewish community with 42 per cent of the world's Jewish population, is not only the largest but it also is the most important.<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, one must take seriously the changes that are taking place on the American Jewish scene.

The Jewish community has always known that "assimilation means sociological death."<sup>2</sup> No unlikelier a witness than Baltimore's senior reform rabbi, on the occasion of his retirement after forty years of service, declared in a front page interview in the Baltimore Sun:

The only hope for survival is the "saving remnant" of young people who are seeking a more intensive Jewish life, a keener concern for the preservation of Jewish values, much more intensive Jewish education than what they have had in religious schools, congregational life, and home training.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, in spite of the efforts and successes of assimilationists, the National Jewish Population Study found that 85 per cent of its sample Jewish household heads are still convinced that "Jewish survival as a distinct people is vital," and that "Jewish people everywhere have some important things in common."<sup>4</sup>