The Future of Orthodoxy: A Political Appraisal

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Rabbi Dr. Abraham Unger is Assistant Professor of Government and Politics at Wagner College in Staten Island, where he also serves as Campus Rabbi. This article appears in issue 25 of Conversations,the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

In assessing the future of Orthodoxy, it is important to remember we are considering only 10 percent of the American Jewish population as of the latest American Jewish census.[1] Orthodoxy is no larger than it was 15 years ago at last official count.[2] The only historical antecedent that American Jewry has in terms of assimilation and the rise of modern Jewish denominations in a Western country was pre-War Germany. Orthodoxy was, at best, only between 10 and 20 percent of the German Jewish population.[3] Therefore, when discussing Orthodoxy's place in modern, pluralistic Jewry, we are facing a minority within a minority.

The real issue before us in dealing with the future of American Orthodoxy is, quite simply, survival. There is some sense by demographers that Orthodoxy may enjoy some growth in the future because its relative youthfulness and large birthrate may offset a declining attrition rate—but that is a projection, not a sure thing.[4] In this triumphant period of Orthodoxy's potent voice in Jewish and broader American politics, Orthodoxy's actual constituent base within the American Jewish community is just holding steady.

The reason it is important to make plain the deep minority status of American Orthodoxy is because that reality only makes any internecine battles within this small denominational population that much more prone to further fragmentation, and therefore harm its effectiveness in maintaining long-term communal strength. Intra-denominational battles among the few result in even tinier population cohorts. If a partisan group lacks meaningful membership numbers, it

may serve the role of social gadfly raising awareness about one or another issue, but it lacks any chance at actually playing a competitive, long-term social role. One need only call upon the trajectory of third parties in American electoral history to confirm that political reality.[5]

Unfortunately, the Orthodox community has reached that delicate communal precipice. Although its numbers are stable and its institutions have expanded, Orthodoxy is breaking apart into smaller shards than ever before. Just as any other interest group is impacted by the political environment in which it lobbies, so too, Orthodoxy has fallen prey to the increasingly polarized American social, cultural, and political scene that has developed over the past five decades. [6]

Scholars have shown that the widening American ideological gulf between liberals and conservatives has created social and political “clusters,” distancing sectors of the domestic population from each other.[7] Partisan leaders have hardened this gulf between rank and file voters, and intensified social chasms between clustered interests only deny further exposure to differing viewpoints. [8]

The question a political scientist ultimately asks is whether or not a particular trend in the electorate is good for democracy. There are two responses in this case. One is that a cluster more committed to its issue stances means it better understands its own “interests and values,” which supports democracy. The flip side of that position is that these same clusters create a more uniform, less deliberative voting public, which hinders the politics of a democratic republic. [9]

Polarization doesn’t only create a more ideologically segregated general population. It also impacts judicial decision-making. Given that each flank of Orthodoxy claims an unswerving commitment to halakha as its lodestar, and is especially invested in a judicial elite in the form of rabbinic leadership, the role of a more divided culture on judges’ opinions has salience. Not surprisingly, it turns out “that more ideological divergence among the members [of the United States Supreme Court] will result in larger minorities on the Court.”[10]

Orthodoxy is not immune from the polarization found in American political life. Orthodox Jews operate daily within a wider social universe that has seen a declining center combined with a growing gap between right and left. The idea of disparate ideological “clusters” without mutual exposure resonates within Orthodox communal life. Gone are the days when

During their travels through the Young Israel prayer, party, and public-lecture scene and circuit, Torah Vodaath and Chaim Berlin yeshiva boys and Beth Yaacov

girls met up comfortably with the final substantial part of Brooklyn's diverse community of committed interwar Jews: the student stars of the borough's own Talmud Torah system. [11]

The multiplying of intra-Orthodox labels, ranging from "Ultra-Orthodox" or "Hareidi" to "Centrist" to "Modern" to "Open" is a symptom of the clustering of denominational identities. Indeed, it was only in the postwar period following the influx of a more right-wing Orthodox European refugee population that the term "Modern Orthodox" emerged. Until then, all traditionalist Jews, whether more or less Americanized, saw themselves, and were seen by others, as simply "Orthodox." [12]

The divisions within American Orthodoxy are centered around the same basic ideological rifts found in the non-Jewish political world. The more conservative one's political and religious mores, the more rightward is one's Orthodoxy. While some specific denominational issues are peculiar to Judaism, such as women's Talmud study, the arena under which this falls is clearly one that speaks to ideological proclivities on the American political spectrum. In fact, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA), the Orthodox institution that pioneered an expanded a more empowered role for women within Orthodoxy, borrowed the term "feminism" directly from the secular sphere.

Just as in American jurisprudence, the rabbinic elite has also fragmented more fully than ever before. The left as represented most explicitly by Yeshivat Chovevei Torah alumni, is not recognized by the right. Historically, all of Orthodoxy did not recognize liberal denominations' Jewish clergy. Now Orthodoxy itself has recognition issues from within. The movement splintered just as America has. The idea of Blue States and Red States could easily be compared to a Manhattan Orthodox enclave centered around the Modern Orthodox community synagogue Kehilath Jeshurun and its coed day school Ramaz in relation to Lakewood's Beth Medrash Govoha and its institutional offspring. The communal rift is wide and growing.

The question is what that retreat into polarized enclave communities means for the future of Orthodoxy as a whole. Does this more clustered representative body politic of the Jewish people mean a better communal quality of life overall? Or, is the polarization of Orthodoxy going to lead to the same communal paralysis and entrenched partisan antipathy that has taken hold of American politics?

Unfortunately, the latter has already shown itself to be the case. The fractiousness of the Orthodox community is resulting in the de facto breaking up

of the movement. Certainly, Open Orthodoxy is on its own whether it prefers that scenario or not. Ultra-Orthodoxy also is essentially on its own given its cultural distance from even Centrist, or Modern, Orthodoxy. This does not deny the point made by social historian Adam Ferziger that Ultra-Orthodoxy has evolved in seemingly open ways, such as in its recent enthusiasm for outreach, just as Modern Orthodoxy has turned more inward to concentrate more fully on supporting the socialization of its own scions.[13] These transformations are ultimately cosmetic; they are utilitarian and important for public perception, but do not change the communal reality that Orthodoxy's branches have fallen off the central tree from which they blossomed.

In daily Orthodox communal life, we are confronting three Orthodox movements, not one. Each has at least one of its own seminaries, rabbinic fraternities, and membership. There is some fluidity between the center and right, but not much. The centrist RCA clearly has a right-leaning wing, as does the Yeshiva University RIETS faculty, but these are cohorts that, when they speak rhetorically, specifically address the left with rebuke and restrictions, such as the decision to refuse Yeshivat Chovevei Torah graduates membership. The Hareidi world has no use, nor does it have a need, for the RCA and the tightening of its ideological belt.

This ongoing strife between Open and Modern Orthodoxy, for all of the attacks against Open Orthodoxy from Hareidi polemicists, is, on the ground, a battle for the standing of rabbinic leaders and position-taking within Modern Orthodoxy. But, however fraternal it may be, this battle has resulted in the establishment of competing denominational leadership elites and institutions. Modern Orthodoxy itself has split in two, and the Ultra-Orthodox remain in a social, intellectual, and communal universe beyond. Hence, Orthodoxy is now a tri-partite community, divested of its own sense of the unity it once held dear during the heady immediate pre- and postwar days of holding down the traditionalist halakhic fort, as it were, against Conservative and Reform onslaughts.

A minority within a minority has become diffuse. In so doing, the history of American third parties and ideological polarization recommends that, for all of its current bravado, Orthodoxy's communal voice will diminish over time, and its effectiveness in carrying forth its message of an ongoing commitment to a revealed halakha will grow faint in coming generations. However difficult this may be to discern now, given the visibility of Orthodoxy in Jewish communal politics, American politics proves that fragmented third parties with small bases from the start, do not do well in the electoral field. They become, at best, curiosities.

One can argue that the breaking up of Orthodoxy into smaller constituent parts is a healthy sign of confidence in the movement. A desperate unity isn't necessary when members are confident in their own ideologies and ability to live out their lives fully and freely within their belief system. In an ideal democratic universe, that is likely true. That is why some scholars, and perhaps even the American Founding Fathers themselves, did not mind what is now called "gridlock." That, too, is part of the democratic process on occasion.

But Orthodoxy is not the bulk of American Jewry. It is a tenuous and minute denomination. If it is to thrive for oncoming generations in terms of institutional continuity and the cultivation of a reliable leadership cadre, it cannot afford denominational paralysis. Orthodoxy loses its own exemplary role as the halakhic standard bearer of American Judaism if it breaks apart and becomes even tinier in its numbers of intra-denominational adherents. However bright the future seems at this moment when Orthodoxy is regularly flexing its political muscle, it is grim when looked at practically from this behaviorist standpoint as a small, fragile, interest group.

Aristotle wisely stated that man is a political animal.[14] By this Aristotle actually meant that man can discern justice from injustice and ought to subscribe to the rule of law. Clearly, the halakha shares this value. Rashi takes the famous biblical verse, "Justice justice shall you pursue" as meaning, "Go after an effective Court." [15]

American government cannot lately achieve any bipartisanship, but America has demographic depth. It is a big country. Congress is not about to go out of business. Orthodoxy is just hanging on at 10 percent of the American Jewish community. If it becomes a community of divided thirds unto itself, or some other fraction, its relevance is weakened. Orthodoxy's responsibility right now is, quite simply, not to disintegrate. A meaningful Orthodox presence is too vital to the broader health of American Jewry, and to its own sons and daughters within the community, to allow that to happen. It is up to the Orthodox communal leadership and laity together, in both formal and informal interactions, to offer a rapprochement towards each other in fulfillment of the halakhic mandate of "pesharah," settlement.

Politics can be divisive. Orthodox Jews have proven all too well they are not immune to the polarization of the American political environment. Alternatively, politics, as hoped for by Aristotle and the classical rabbinic canon represented succinctly by Rashi's statement above, can compel a community of reason that helps realize each citizen's potential through the maintenance of a just civil

society. This may seem some distance away from where we sit today, but, at the minimum, the Orthodox community must achieve some working, practical degree of cohesion once again, if only for the sake of its own long term self-interest.

Compromise will be required of all parties, and it will be hard. I do not delineate here those issues; they are best left to the negotiating table. But, if pesharah is not accomplished soon, all the accomplishments of past, pioneering generations of American Orthodox Jews from across the communal spectrum, will have been for naught.

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[3] Breuer, Mordechai. Modernity within Tradition: The Social History of Orthodox Jewry in Imperial Germany. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, p. xi.
[4] Pew Research Center, ibid., p. 10.
[5] Hirano, Shigeo, James M. Snyder, Jr. “The Decline of Third Party Voting in the United States.”The Journal of Politics, vol. 69, no. 1 (Feb. 2007), p. 1.
[6] Garner, Andrew, Harvey Palmer. “Polarization and Issue Consistency over Time.” Political Behavior, vol. 33, no. 2 (June 2011), p. 226.
[7] Ibid., p. 241.
[8] Ibid., p. 242.
[9] Ibid., p. 243.
[10] Clark, Tom S. “Measuring Ideological Polarization on the United States Supreme Court.” Political Research Quarterly, vol. 62, no. 1 (March 2009), p. 156.
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[12] Joselitt, Jenna Weissman. New York’s Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 149–150.
[13] Ferziger, Adam S. Beyond Sectarianism: The Realignment of American Orthodox Judaism. Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2015.
[14] Aristotle. “Politics.” The Basic Works of Aristotle, ed. Richard McKeon, New York: Random House, 1941, p. 1129.
[15] Rashi on Deuteronomy 16:20 and B. Talmud Sanhedrin 32b.