American Jews and the Transformation of Israeli Judaism: Book Review

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Rabbi Phil Cohen is the author of works of fiction and Jewish scholarship. He is the host of the podcast Voices of Israeli Rabbis, in which he interviews Israeli rabbis from across the religious spectrum about their lives, work, and visions for Israeli society. The podcast is available through his website, philmcohen.com.

Agents of Change: American Jews and the Transformation of Israeli Judaism, Adam S. Ferziger. New York: NYU Press, 2025. 455 pp.

Ordinarily, a title claiming that a phenomenon is transformative sounds hyperbolic. In the case of this fascinating study by Bar-Ilan University professor Adam Ferziger, however, the claim is entirely justified.

This impeccably researched study, co-winner of the Shapiro Award for Best Book in Israel Studies, traces the immigration to Israel of a number of Modern Orthodox rabbis and their families. Most were trained at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) of Yeshiva University under the tutelage of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. Beginning in the early 1970s, the talent, vision, and learning these rabbis and their families brought to Israel helped reshape the country's religious landscape in significant ways. What Ferziger calls Israeli Moderate Orthodoxy dramatically altered the religious scene in Israel. How?

This highly readable history answers that question by telling a series of fascinating stories. Consider Aharon Lichtenstein. Rav Soloveitchik's son-in-law (married to Tovah, an accomplished educator in her own right), Lichtenstein arrived in Israel with impeccable Jewish intellectual credentials. A brilliant Talmudist, he also earned a Ph.D. in English literature from Harvard University,

writing a dissertation entitled Henry More: The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist, later published by Harvard University Press.

That achievement points to a defining feature of Lichtenstein's intellectual identity. He was not only a great Torah scholar but also someone who believed that wisdom could be found beyond the walls of the yeshiva. His willingness to engage deeply with Western thought reflected an intellectual openness that distinguished him from many of his Israeli contemporaries.

This openness was hardly unique to Lichtenstein. Of the principal male figures Ferziger profiles, all but one earned doctorates, several from major North American universities. As noted, Lichtenstein studied English literature at Harvard; Nachum Rabinovitch studied the history and philosophy of science at the University of Toronto; David Hartman studied philosophy at McGill; Daniel Tropper earned a doctorate in education at Yeshiva University; and Chaim Brovender studied Semitic languages at the Hebrew University. Of the figures Ferziger studies, only Shlomo Riskin did not pursue an earned doctorate. The point is not simply that these men were highly educated. Rather, they embodied a form of Orthodoxy in which advanced secular scholarship and uncompromising Torah learning were seen as mutually enriching rather than mutually exclusive. That intellectual synthesis became one of the defining characteristics of the movement they helped transplant to Israel.

The influence of this cohort extended far beyond the classroom and synagogue.

David Hartman is a good example. He founded what has become one of Israel's most important centers of Jewish intellectual life, the Shalom Hartman Institute. Today it encompasses a major research think tank, the Kogod Research Center for Contemporary Jewish Thought; the David Hartman Center for Intellectual Excellence, which cultivates emerging scholars; the Center for Israeli and Jewish Identity, devoted to educational reform; the Center for Shared Society, promoting Jewish-Arab civic partnership; the Center for Judaism and State Policy, addressing the relationship between religion and the state; Rabbanut Yisraelit, a pluralistic Israeli rabbinical ordination program; two Jerusalem high schools; and a wide array of educational initiatives for Israeli educators, rabbis, students, and public leaders.

Ferziger's larger point becomes unmistakable: these American-trained rabbis did not merely bring new ideas to Israel. They built enduring institutions through which those ideas could shape Israeli society for generations.

Hartman's influence did not stop at Israel's borders. The Shalom Hartman Institute became a major force in North American Jewish life, offering intensive educational programs for rabbis, educators, lay leaders, college students, and Jewish professionals. Under the leadership of Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, who serves as president alongside Donniel Hartman, the Institute has become one of the most influential centers of Jewish thought in North America, shaping contemporary conversations about Israel, Zionism, pluralism, Jewish identity, and the moral challenges facing the Jewish people.

One of Ferziger's important through lines, then, is that the movement he describes did not travel in one direction only. American Modern Orthodox ideas were brought to Israel, transformed there, and then returned to North America in new forms. This transnational circulation of ideas, institutions, and religious leadership is one of the book's most illuminating themes. The Hartman Institute is only one of many examples Ferziger points to in showing how developments within Israeli Moderate Orthodoxy came back to influence American Jewish life.

Ferziger further shows the influence of this immigration on women's education. Rabbanit Malka Bina's work, for example, led to the development of the Women's Institute for Torah Studies. Housed in a multi-story building in Jerusalem, the Institute offers a wide array of sophisticated learning opportunities, including a five-year course of study equivalent to rabbinical studies, whose graduates receive the title meshivat halachah ("one who responds to questions of Jewish law").

A related development is the work of Rabbanit Oshra Koren, who teaches at the Sharon Center of MaTaN in Ra'anana. Her programs include the "Mother-Daughter Bat Mitzvah Program," now taught in eighty locations throughout Israel.

The same pattern is evident in Hadran. Founded by Michelle Cohen Farber and Shoshana Baker, Hadran seeks "to make Talmud study accessible to Jewish women at all levels...in a unique way: by providing a wide range of resources...in the voice of women teachers" (p. 268). Hadran's online platform, which includes a women's version of Daf Yomi, extends women's Talmud study to an international audience, further illustrating Ferziger's argument that these Israeli innovations have reshaped Jewish life far beyond Israel's borders.

The book's appendix, "Representative Israel-Based Students and Protégés of the American Immigrant Pioneers for IsMO [Israeli Moderate Orthodoxy]," offers an impressively large roster of figures who have extended the work of their teachers. It reinforces Ferziger's concluding argument that a distinctly Israeli form of

Moderate Orthodoxy has emerged. This evolving religious culture is rooted in tradition yet marked by an unusual degree of autonomy, as Israelis selectively embrace Orthodox practices that enrich what Shmuel Rosner and Camil Fuchs describe as Yahadut Yisraelit (Jewish-Israeli identity). Ferziger makes a persuasive case that this development owes much to the generation of American Modern Orthodox rabbis and educators whose immigration transformed Israel's religious landscape.