Challenges and Opportunities for a Robust Orthodox Judaism

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The mid-nineteenth century was a heady era for Reform Judaism in America, with a strong influx of German Jewish immigrants for whom the modernity of Classical Reform resonated. By the middle of the twentieth century, the whole world seemed to be moving toward Conservative Judaism—certainly Orthodox Judaism was the odd man out, or so it appeared. The Jewish community fully embraced suburbanization, and whether in the city or in the suburb, new synagogues being built were almost entirely without mehitsot (partitions between men and women) and with large parking lots. In fact, in many parts of America in the 1950s and 1960s there was no question about the survival of mainstream Orthodoxy as a force—that was easily dismissed out of hand. The question was whether the Traditional movement, a type of “advanced” Orthodoxy where men and women could sit together and hear a hazzan with a microphone and a state-of-the-art speaker system would be able to compete long term with the Conservative movement.

On the one hand, Conservative and Reform proved to be far more resilient than the short lived Traditional, quasi-Orthodox movement. On the other hand, over the past four decades, Orthodoxy has come roaring back, and, at least according to the newest Jewish population survey in the New York area, is returning to a demographic dominance it might have not had since the millions of Eastern European Jews came to America at the turn of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the Orthodox Jews who are increasing their share of the Jewish pie today, are not just Orthodox in name, but they are observant and seem to be passing observant Judaism down to the next generation. By any measure, the Orthodox community—from its most Modern and Open elements to its most Hareidi sectors—should feel confident that it is growing in influence and stature within the established Jewish world and even within the powerful corridors of American power. Whereas in the past we could look to senators and members of the Cabinet who were merely Jewish, now many of them are outright Orthodox—Treasury secretary Jack Lew, Senator Lieberman, Ambassador Daniel Kurtzer, just to start.

While the other movements are engaged in soul-searching on how to deal with dwindling and aging membership in synagogues, the challenges to Orthodoxy are how to deal with its burgeoning numbers: how to cost-effectively educate the hordes of children the Orthodox are having, how to expand ever-growing synagogues, and where to establish new communities where housing costs—for large homes—are low. But from college campuses, to urban communities of singles and young couples, to suburban communities with families and empty nesters—the numbers all show that Orthodoxy is an attractive type of Judaism, one that is easily replacing any fall-off, and is actually expanding through a relatively high birthrate and an expanding professional outreach movement.
It would stand to reason that Orthodoxy’s greatest challenge—in America, Israel, and around the world—would be having too much self-confidence and sense of triumphalism.

If there is any competition between the denominations, and there certainly is, then Orthodoxy would be expected to feel a sense of pride and smugness after having made an incredible comeback in the past 50 years. However, although the world Orthodox community does have a sense of zeal for its principles, and a loyalty to its leaders and its religious goals, it is stunning that in most sectors, it retains the same fear of destruction and unraveling that it had 50 years ago. Orthodoxy feels vulnerable and susceptible to challenges from feminism, liberalism, foreign influences, and temptation from the worst of American culture. The same fears of legitimating Reform or Conservative rabbis, or women wearing

tefillin, or people whose conversions might not be as pure as others pervade the Orthodox community.

Think about it: Why should the huge Hareidi community fear a few women—on the women's side of the Kotel wearing a tallit and singing and dancing once a month for an hour? Do they really think that all women will start wearing tallitot and tefillin and will start coming to the Kotel all the time and daven all the time? Do they see a revolution on the part of Hareidi women about to take off? All the fears on women's and gender issues on the part of many in the Orthodox community point to a general fear that the slope is slippery, and the Orthodox world in general is on the verge of slipping off that cliff to religious anarchy. In fact, one Rosh Yeshiva at a prominent rabbinical school was quoted by his student that allowing for same sex civil marriage was the beginning of the end of heterosexual society as we know it! If we legitimize two men or two women starting a family together, why will anyone want to start a heterosexual family? Similarly, when in my own neighborhood I tried to team up with a Conservative rabbi to give a joint kosher supervision—an attempt that failed for other reasons—I faced tremendous opposition from the Orthodox establishment who were mainly afraid of the Conservative world taking over supervision. What is the basis of this fear, when every single national kosher supervision—even the ones that are not entirely reliable—are in the hands of Orthodox rabbis and organizations? It is stunning that with all the measurable, incontestable successes of the Orthodox community—and with all the momentum that the numbers show into the next generation—the Orthodox community is still scared and lacks the self-confidence necessary to take on the role it now has as a dominant force in American Jewish life.

As a Modern and Open Orthodox Jew, I realize that one of my most important tasks is to help give the Orthodox community as much self-confidence as possible. Self-awareness is critical to self-fulfillment—and for the Orthodox community to assume the responsibilities it should take on in its position, it needs to realize that it is strong and successful. In fact, I think the Modern and Open segments of the Orthodox community, along with the many people in the Hareidi world engaged in outreach, have a unique role in bolstering the self-confidence of our brothers and sisters in the Centrist and Hareidi communities. The more open to contemporary concepts and the more aware of contemporary realities and trends that we are, the more we have to bond with those who are not part of Orthodoxy to assure them that they are no threat to traditional Jewish values: women clergy, gay members in shul, women wearing tefillin, Jews who may not be halakhically Jewish but are part of our community, and even interfaith work are

all not going to cause our mesorah and our Torah—the pillars that Orthodox Judaism is built on—to come crashing down. Over a decade ago, Rav Yehuda Amital, zt”l, said that Reform and Conservative Judaism were no longer threats to the Orthodox community, but, rather, they had become gateways to people to get closer to Judaism and the Jewish community. In a recent article in Commentary, Professor Jack Wertheimer quotes Hareidi outreach professionals saying the same thing. These people get it—they understand how powerful Orthodoxy is today, and that thinking that the other movements are a threat to Orthodoxy is from a by-gone era. In fact, Rabbi Ilan Feldman wrote a powerful article in Cross Currents, a Hareidi publication, where he calls on the frum Orthodox community to not focus on the fear of the “other” coming in and contaminating our communities, but, rather, to model the community upon the home of Abraham and Sarah, which was open and welcoming to everyone, convert or idolator. It is the responsibility of those in the outreach community and the pluralistic Orthodox community, who are comfortable counting Conservative, Reform, or Renewal rabbis as mentors and teachers, to find a way to show other Orthodox Jews that pluralism is only going to strengthen an already strong Orthodoxy, not destroy it.

How successful the Modern and Open Orthodox community will be at convincing the rest of Orthodoxy to be more confident and less scared, I’m not sure. I do know that it will only happen if we are able to create a big-tent Orthodoxy, which is based more and more on a desire to include, based on self-confidence, and less on a fear to exclude. The more Modern and Open elements of the Orthodox community need to be the advocates and architects of that big tent because they are the ones who feel most comfortable bringing in more and more elements into the tent. The Modern and Open Orthodox parts of the Orthodox community do feel less fear of the world around them, and fit in well with the American environment. But even though that sense of ease has all the advantages of avoiding harmful fear, it presents its own challenges:

Easier to be Religious: Need to have more rigor, not less!

Just three months ago, a fantastic kosher (CRC supervision—the best!) BBQ restaurant and bar opened smack in the middle of Lakeview, a trendy urban neighborhood in Chicago with a 400 family Modern Orthodox synagogue. Suddenly there was no excuse for people to eat in non-kosher restaurants; Milt’s BBQ for the Perplexed even has an impressive vegetarian menu. Jews and non-Jews have poured into the restaurant: Hareidim from Peterson Park along with local Modern Orthodox Jews are eating within inches of men and women from the heavily gay and hipster community. Everyone loves it. As a frum, Orthodox Jew in

America you can have it all: great eating options, eruvs to carry on Shabbat and build community, kosher cruises, kosher bed and breakfasts in Maine, etc. Most people have no problem at all getting off early on Friday afternoons for Shabbat, or taking off the Holidays, or getting their co-workers to either order in kosher or have the office lunch at a kosher restaurant downtown. The synagogue has an early quickie Shabbat minyan, a slower regular minyan, five groups for the kids every Shabbat, and free ice-cream sponsored by the shul in the local ice-cream shop almost every Shabbat. It is easier than ever in America to be fully observant and fully successful—fully Orthodox and fully American.

The challenge is, will this ease make us more complacent and numb, or make us more rigorous and passionate Jews? In Los Angeles, where it is even easier to be Orthodox than Chicago, there is the Happy Minyan. Yes, those attending are living the happy American life. However, they channel the ease in a healthy way: they push themselves to be more rigorous, more passionate, more elevated on Shabbat—they don't take the easy way out. Likewise, do we allow the easy, ready make Passover experiences in bungalows in Florida to make us forget about the homeless and the poor even more, or do we use the ease and joy in being Orthodox in America to push us to be at the forefront of advocating and working with the homeless and the underprivileged? Will people take advantage of kosher food to commit to eating strictly kosher and to inviting more strangers over to their homes for Shabbat? Or will they let the consumer culture of America drag them away from the values of thoughtfulness and care in our food that kashrut is all about? In the past people kashered their own meat in the bathtub (removing the blood), or at least went to the butcher to get the right cut. Now that it is all done for us, are we going to spend more time learning the laws of kashrut, saying the blessings before and after eating, or donating to food drives and food pantries—both Jewish and non-Jewish? We have an incredible opportunity to enable our children to get involved more in civics, or to take time off before or after college to work or study in Israel: will we take this God-given opportunity to find more rigor and passion in Judaism and the Jewish community, or will we be lulled to sleep by the ease and success that we have achieved? Will we become leaders and pilots of a new and exciting, reinvigorated Orthodoxy—pushing issues that we believe in—or will we go on auto-pilot and ignore the opportunities that we have been blessed with?

Finding the Passion—and the Difficulty Finding a Way of Relating to It

Actually, the Orthodox community does have a lot of passion and commitment, but it is usually coming from the right-wing groups, and frequently the more

modern, centrist Jews (of, let's say, Teaneck, Scarsdale and the Upper West Side) see that passion as either misplaced of foreign. The passion of the Hareidi world is admirable, but it gets mixed up with protesting women at the Kotel, or avoiding army duty, or asking the government of Israel—or of the United States—to pay for things that the Modern and Centrist Orthodox communities believe individual families should pay for themselves.

This disconnect—between the beauty of self-sacrifice and the ugliness of the politics behind it—is tragic: those who have perhaps the most serious sense of self-sacrifice are not able to impart its beauty to the community that needs to adopt it in their lives because they are challenged by Jewish life becoming too easy and to convenient. One group is enjoying kosher meals at Disney World, while the other group is rejecting any form of secular education for their children so that they are not corrupted by the world around them. Moreover, it is specifically the Hareidim of Israel, those who are even more extreme in their avoiding the Western world and Western education who are the most profound example of self-sacrifice. It is true that a typical middle class Modern Orthodox family is sacrificing tens of thousands of dollars—at least—every year on their children's education; but as difficult as that is, it is not necessarily instilling passion, or a sense of sacrifice for Torah, in the life of the family. My wife tells the story of her parents taking out a home equity loan in order to make a substantial donation to the day school's capital campaign because their rabbi asked them to: how often do we see that today in the Open, Modern or Centrist Jewish community? Perhaps not even in the American Hareidi community.

So we have passion in some parts of Orthodoxy, and we have the ability to integrate Orthodox observance with the Western world, American life, in other parts of the Orthodox community. The challenge is to bring the two together. To succeed, I believe the Modern and Open Orthodox community has to make an effort to understand the Hareidi community better. Not by compromising values such as pluralism, gender sensitivity, openness to the entire world—Jewish and not-Jewish—and prioritizing inclusion, but, rather, by reaching out and making the first steps for our students and children to meet with Hareidi families, for our rabbinical students to meet with Hareidi rabbinical students, and for the leaders of all the communities to make more of an effort to come together on issues that concern all of us—education, caring for the poor, Israel, and other important issues.

Are We Truly an Open Tent?

Earlier I mentioned Rabbi Ilan Feldman's critique of the Orthodox community for stressing preservation of the community over reaching out and welcoming outsiders. He is correct that the fear of the "other"—ideas, people, cultures—which we also discussed earlier, has the more right wing members of the Orthodox community circling the wagons in preservationist mode rather than open up the tents in "modeling" mode as Feldman calls it. However, the other side of the Orthodox community, the more Modern and Centrist, is also not opening up their homes, and not even their shuls as much as they should, because of the complacency and easy living that we discussed earlier. Why should they bother to take in a guest who is not a friend or a relative? Why should they bother speaking to someone they don't know at kiddush? Why should they make their shuls comfortable for people who know less than they do? Even in Israel this is an issue, and I have heard of congregants who complain to the rabbi for announcing pages—the most basic of welcoming acts—because it bothers them—suddenly they feel the shul as catering to the outsider! Orthodoxy, then, as strong as it is, is facing the perfect storm in not doing its work in opening up the tent: fear of the outside meets up with disdain for the work necessary to welcome the outsider, and, together, this united front of Orthodoxy is not reaching out to thousands, if not millions, who would love to be exposed to the gifts that Orthodoxy has to offer. If we didn't have the model of Abraham and Sarah, maybe we wouldn't think this kind of Open Tent Orthodoxy was important; we know better.

It is worth noting that there are small signs of changes in the Hareidi community regarding opening up: first there is a growing professional group of Hareidi kiruv (outreach) rabbis and families who do see it as their responsibility to connect with the rest of the Jewish community—as Chabad has been doing for decades. But even more significant, I have been told that regular Hareidi families are requesting these professionals to send non-observant Jews to their Shabbat dinners and lunches. This is not true pluralism in the Hareidi world; the families don't necessarily want to learn about Kant or feminism from their guests, but they do what to connect with them, and it is an encouraging first step towards the openness of Abraham and Sarah's tent.

Rav Avi Weiss has pushed the Open Orthodox community, and the students of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, to specifically seek out ways of connecting, as Orthodox rabbis and Orthodox lay people, to the broader Jewish community, on college campuses, in hospitals and especially in Orthodox synagogues that are frontier and outreach synagogues, where many of the members are not Orthodox but are open to learning and growing. My own synagogue, Anshe Sholom, in Chicago has

been made up of many members of all ages who would not classify themselves as Orthodox, but they choose an Orthodox synagogue to a great extent because of the efforts my wife and I make to reach out and connect with them and make sure synagogue regulars are connecting with the new people and guests. Orthodox communities are uniquely positioned to reach out and welcome and connect outsiders to insiders and create community—just like Abraham and Sarah—but only if Orthodoxy is not afraid and not complacent will it make the effort and take the seeming risks (which are more imagined than real) to make it happen.

It may be that Open Orthodoxy's niche, and the important role of the hundreds of future ordainees of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Modern and Open Orthodox yeshiva in Riverdale, New York, will be not only to open the tents of Orthodoxy to anyone interested—and in a sense of mutuality, learning from each other—but to go beyond welcoming to actually making the journey to where our fellow Jews are. Both Hareidi and Chabad outreach welcome all Jews to come to Orthodox homes, Orthodox Shabbat tables and Orthodox places of prayer—and that is admirable connecting. A confident, self-assured Orthodox community will be able to go even further and connect with students, young adults and families where they are. This means learning together with Reform, Reconstructionist, and renewal teachers and students; it means being willing to be on panels even with other rabbis or leaders who will be saying things that are not consistent with Orthodoxy; it means being willing to have Orthodox students spend time with non-Orthodox students, and then Orthodox families find ways of going to the non-Orthodox homes for Shabbat. All without compromising the beliefs or the practices of Orthodoxy! Beit Hillel in Israel produced a brochure outlining how religious Jews could "safely" go over for dinner with more secular Jews—on the one hand this was not a revolution in halakha, but on the other hand, how many Orthodox Jews in American synagogues are doing that? Either we don't feel safe or we are lazy. Shabbat, Holidays, kashrut, Torah: all these pillars of Orthodox Judaism are strong, and we have to have the confidence that they can all survive—nay, thrive!—when experienced with less observant, non-Orthodox Jews. This might be the frontier which Open and Modern Orthodoxy can move to, and, by so doing, inspire the rest of Orthodoxy to follow suit.

Orthodoxy is reaching a golden age in America, and all the statistics suggest that it will continue to gain strength and prominence. This era should be offering Orthodoxy great opportunities to make a difference and fulfill its destiny, which is really the destiny of the entire Jewish people begun with Abraham and Sarah. But Abraham and Sarah, when they were true to form, displayed self-confidence and passion—loyalty to a difficult life, but joy in knowing it was the will of God. My

hope is that Orthodoxy in America, and throughout the world, can follow their model of understanding how strong we are, but using that strength go make us more rigorous, more passionate, more Open and welcoming and filled with the courage and confidence to go that extra mile to connect with our fellow Jews and with a world that needs us and the entire Jewish people so much.