

In the last decade of the eighteenth century, Rebecca Samuel, then living in Petersburg, Virginia, wrote a letter to her parents in Hamburg, Germany, in which she explained why she was moving from that city to Charleston, South Carolina. She informed them that although her husband, Hyman, had earned the respect of their Gentile neighbors as a very successful clockmaker and silversmith, and although “one [i.e., a Jew] can live here peacefully,” she and her family were “leaving this place because of [the lack of] Yehudishkeit,” or Jewishness, which “is pushed aside here.” She explained that the *shohet*, or ritual slaughterer, buys nonkosher meat, there is no Torah scroll in town, all Jewish-owned shops are open on the Sabbath, there are no educational opportunities available for her two children, and almost none of the worshippers on the High Holidays wore ritual prayer garments. “You can believe me that I crave to see a synagogue to which I can go. The way we live now is no life at all.”¹

The desire of Jews in America to be financially successful and respected by members of the community at large without sacrificing Jewish observance and communal cohesiveness has been a hallmark of Jewish life in this country from the very dawn of its existence. But those eighteenth-century Jews living in America were acutely aware that America was different than the countries from which they had emigrated and in which many of their family members and religious authorities still lived. In a letter written in 1785 to a rabbi in Amsterdam seeking guidance on a complex issue challenging their community, two lay leaders in Philadelphia noted that they were “anxiously awaiting” the rabbi’s reply “because this matter touches the very essence of our faith, especially in this country where everyone does as he pleases [*asher kol ish ha-yashar bi-enav ya’aseh*].” They wrote that in America, “the Kahal has no authority” over those who live in its midst, unlike the situation

in Amsterdam and in many of those countries and communities they had left behind.² In the old country, the community still had a hold, to a greater or lesser extent, on those who lived within its geographical boundaries. In America, by contrast, the ability of the community to exercise any power was severely limited, as its leaders were only too acutely aware. And, some half-century later, a note written to a couple leaving Bavaria for Cleveland began with the warning, "Friends! You are travelling to a land of freedom where the opportunity will be presented to live without compulsory religious education."³

Living in America, with its emphasis on freedom, democracy, and individualism, was—and continues to be—both a blessing and a challenge to perpetuating Jewish values and practice in this country. It is a blessing because Jews have been afforded an unprecedented opportunity to exercise their religion unhindered by external controls and constraints. At the same time it serves as a real challenge because in a world without any "compulsory" prerogatives, any choices—including those to define and reject Jewish practice and identity—are possible and even celebrated. And the more traditional the values and practice, the greater the challenge to its perpetuation.

In this American world that celebrates personal autonomy and individual choice, Orthodoxy has found a place. For more than a hundred years it lived in the lives of dispersed individuals committed to it who acted alone, bereft of any institutional infrastructure or support, and then somewhere in the second half of the nineteenth century, it found expression in robust communities that were beginning to be founded and developed. True, Orthodoxy's place in American Judaism was far from assured; even as late as the 1950s its "decay" was predicted and noted in respected circles.⁴ But American Orthodoxy has resoundingly confounded these negative prognostications. The greatest sociological surprise (or miracle, depending upon one's perspective) of twentieth- and twenty-first-century American Judaism is not only the dogged continued presence of Orthodoxy in this country, defying all odds, but the extraordinary growth that it has experienced. With increasing confidence, institutional strength and extraordinary unselfconscious-

ness, Orthodoxy has achieved a presence and prominence in America simply and literally unimaginable even fifty years ago.

But one cannot speak of one religious group identified as American Orthodoxy. Sociologists generally divide that group into Ultra-Orthodox (including “Hasidic,” “Yeshivish,” and even “Heimish”) and Modern Orthodox, each with its own set of assumptions, beliefs, and practices while sharing much in common. This book is devoted to exploring these categories in the Modern Orthodox community.

The fundamental point of departure of the Modern Orthodox perspective is generally described as combining a commitment to living a life shaped by Halakhah with an acknowledgment of the legitimacy, value, and, for some, even the necessity of “non-exclusively Torah” disciplines and cultures to enhance one’s human personality and even one’s spiritual religious persona. Of course, this combination certainly predates modern times.⁵ However, it has been brought more sharply into focus in the last decades as Orthodoxy has confronted the ever growing diminution of religious authority, the values and demands of feminism, the task of identifying the theological significance of the State of Israel, the claims of a larger and vocal liberal community, secularism, academic Jewish studies including biblical criticism, claims for the primacy of individual conscience, and cultural relativism. Inherited truths and assumptions have been challenged by a range of contemporary values, and the effort to retain a commitment to both has led sometimes to creativity and original thinking and sometimes to frustration, inconsistency, and even conflict.

We are greatly indebted to Dr. Zev Eleff, already an outstanding scholar in the field of American Jewish life, for tracing the history and current state of this social and intellectual movement through a series of carefully chosen primary texts. Blessed with a prodigious intellect, wide-ranging knowledge, firsthand engagement with his specific subject matter, clarity of writing, richness and depth of religious commitment, indefatigable energy, and generosity of spirit, Dr. Eleff has produced a volume that enables its reader to grapple with the complex issues of identity and ideology, religious practice and social behavior, rooted-

ness in tradition and openness to new ways of thinking and acting that define Modern Orthodoxy both in private as well as in public spaces. Dr. Eleff explores the inherent complexity in maintaining a commitment to both “Modern” and “Orthodox,” and he does so with great nuance and sensitivity. This work will be invaluable to those interested in the challenges of living meaningful religious lives in our contemporary world, Jews and non-Jews alike.

In the second half of his poem entitled “Tourists,” the late Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, wrote:

Once I sat on the stairs at the gate of David’s Tower and put two heavy baskets next to me. A group of tourists stood there around their guide and I served as their orientation point. “You see that man with the baskets? A bit to the right of his head, there’s an arch from the Roman period. A bit to the right of his head.” But he moves, he moves!! I said to myself: redemption will come only when they are told: You see over there the arch from the Roman period? Never mind: but next to it, a bit to the left and lower, sits a man who bought fruit and vegetables for his home.⁶

There is much wisdom here, of course, but the worldview of Modern Orthodoxy argues that Amichai is wrong. At the end of the day, both the “arch from the Roman period” (the tradition) and the “man who bought fruit and vegetables for his home” (the contemporary) need to be in conversation, both celebrated and affirmed at the same time. Our thanks to Dr. Eleff for helping us appreciate the vital necessity—and complexity—of this most important effort.

Notes

Foreword

1. Jacob Rader Marcus, *American Jewry: Documents, Eighteenth Century* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1959), 52–53. I am frankly impressed with those Jews who did choose to come together for prayer, even if they did not dress in traditional religious garb. See also Jeffrey S. Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 34.
2. Sidney M. Fish, “The Problem of Inter marriage in Early America,” *Gratz College Annual of Jewish Studies* 4 (1975): 89, 93.
3. Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 66.
4. Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (Glencoe IL: Free Press, 1955), 43. This prediction also appears in the 1972 and 1985 reprints of Sklare’s book.
5. See *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?* ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Northvale: Aronson, 1997).
6. Yehuda Amichai: *A Life of Poetry, 1948–1994*, trans. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 333.

Preface

1. “Prag,” *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, June 8, 1869, 453–55.
2. “Berliner Zustände,” *Der Israelit*, June 9, 1869, 441–42.
3. “Modern Orthodoxy in Germany,” *Jewish Times*, July 9, 1869, 5. A leading reformer in Cincinnati jested in a similar vein at this time. See “Elements of the Jewish Faith,” *Israelite*, August 7, 1857, 36, and “The Fundamental Error of Modern Orthodoxy,” *Israelite*, April 30, 1869, 4.
4. “Reform’s Sacrifice,” *American Hebrew*, February 19, 1886, 18.
5. “The Aim of the Order,” *Jewish Messenger*, January 3, 1868, 5.
6. “Reformation in Israel,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, November 19, 1885, 6. See also Stuart E. Rosenberg, *The Jewish Community in Rochester, 1843–1925* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), 98.
7. See Jeffrey S. Gurock, “From Fluidity to Rigidity: The Religious Worlds of Conservative and Orthodox Jews in Twentieth-Century America,” in *Ameri-*

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