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MODERN ORTHODOXY IN THE UNITED STATES: A REVIEW ESSAY*

Samuel C. Heilman and Steven M. Cohen are unquestionably among the most important sociologists of the American Jewish community, and their pioneering work on acculturated Orthodox Jews is a major effort to help us understand an increasingly important segment of American Jewry.[1] As a potential milestone in the study of modern Judaism, the book, which has already been "highly recommend[ed] to all who would like to understand Orthodoxy today,"[2] lays claim to our careful attention. Regrettably, despite the stellar qualifications of the authors, the work is beset by problems of classification and conceptualization which severely limit its value and undermine substantial segments of the analysis.

The authors obtained their sample of Orthodox Jews in 1979 and 1980 by first sending questionnaires to mailing lists supplied by "an association of Orthodox professionals, an Orthodox periodical, a Young Israel synagogue in the Boston area, and a modern Orthodox synagogue in Northern New Jersey." These produced 515 replies more or less equally divided among the four groups. After minor revision, the questionnaire was then sent to approximately 1,000 members of Lincoln Square Synagogue in Manhattan, producing 490 replies. "These comprise the largest single source of the nearly 1,023 usable interviews" (p. 30).

At first—and even at second—glance, this last sentence presents us with an unassailable but rather unorthodox mathematical proposition: "515 + 490 = nearly 1,023." The authors' intention is no doubt that the 1,005 replies that they have detailed were supplemented by scattered additional sources, yielding fully 1,023 interviews, and this is in fact the number of responses analyzed throughout the volume. 665 of the respondents identified themselves as Orthodox, a self-classification accepted by the authors for the purposes of

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their study; the remaining 358, who largely represent the more traditional segment of the non-Orthodox, served as a reference group for purposes of comparison.

Seven questions about specific observances were selected as criteria for establishing the categories of nominal Orthodox, centrist, and traditionalist which would determine the parameters of analysis for the remainder of the book. These questions asked about eating cold salad in a non-kosher home, fasting on the Tenth of Tevet, eating warm food in a non-kosher home, fasting on the Ninth of Av, keeping two sets of dishes, turning on lights on the Sabbath, and working on the Sabbath. Only those with a perfect score were classified as traditionalists, although it was sufficient to fast just part of the day if the respondent was a woman. Those who observed from four to six of the requirements were labeled centrists, while those observing fewer than four comprise the category of nominal Orthodox.

After the categories have been established, the authors present their data regarding each group's observance of other ritual requirements, belief in a variety of doctrinal and theological propositions, relationships with other Jews and with non-Jews, and approaches to political, social, and sexual issues. Not surprisingly, there is a rough correspondence between the degree of observance of the original seven requirements and general ritual observance, doctrinal Orthodoxy, communal insularity, and social conservatism. Although the overall pattern accords fully with our expectations, some of the responses are sufficiently striking to pique interest and stimulate further investigation. Thus, only 54% of the "centrists" strongly agree that the Torah was revealed by God to Moses at Sinai (though an additional 34% agree), only 63% of them agree or strongly agree that God will punish those who transgress His commandments, only 46% of "centrists" below the age of 36 disapprove of sexual relations by an engaged couple, while only 44% of the highly educated "traditionalist" Modern Orthodox believe that it is possible to maintain a close friendship with a non-Jew.

Unfortunately, the analysis of this potentially interesting data is damaged almost irretrievably by three fundamental, systemic flaws. In each case, the authors display an awareness of the problem at some point in the book, but they apparently believe that an occasional disclaimer can neutralize objections that go to the very heart of their study.

The first difficulty is the nature of the sample. In the introductory chapter, the authors recognize that the relative inaccessibility of the "contra-acculturative" Orthodox to social scientists is unfortunate

even in the context of a study of the Modern Orthodox; they also note what they consider the compensating absence of many nominal Orthodox Jews from outside the New York area. Ultimately, they appeal to the practical difficulties of obtaining a reliable sample and maintain in effect that these data are essentially a suggestive means of extending and refining their qualitative observations of the Modern Orthodox scene (pp. 36–37).

Apart from the fact that the book is built around these data, the difficulty of obtaining a perfect sample does not justify constructing one that is dramatically skewed. In this case, virtually half the sample comes from a single synagogue which every knowledgeable observer knows to be strikingly atypical. The authors correctly describe Lincoln Square Synagogue as "a vital congregation with large numbers of young people and singles, many of whom, it is thought, derive from non-Orthodox backgrounds and affiliations" (p. 30). The vigorous outreach and adult education programs at Lincoln Square combined with the intellectual and social milieu of Manhattan's Upper West Side make this synagogue one of the most exciting centers of Orthodox Jewish life and one of the worst places for a study that wishes to produce credible generalizations about modern American Orthodoxy.

Except for the single sentence already cited, the book never alludes to the special character of Lincoln Square even where the data cry out for such a reference. I have already noted the surprising liberalism in certain sexual attitudes on the part of the "centrists" in this study. Only 72% of older "centrists" and 59% of younger ones disapprove of sexual relations even among people who are only "dating seriously." In their analysis of this information, the authors manage to tell us that the Rabbi "of one of the congregations that make up a large part of our survey was widely reported to have sermonized against the practice" of taking *tefillin* to a date in the expectation of spending the night (p. 175), but they do not entertain the possibility that the overrepresentation of this synagogue might have produced inflated data on sexual permissiveness.[3] The entire book is based on a sample that is thoroughly untrustworthy.

The second, somewhat less obvious systemic problem has to do with the criteria used to establish the authors' three categories. We recall that "traditionalists" are those who observe all seven of the defining criteria, while "centrists" are those who observe from four to six. Given the fine differences that this book wishes to measure, combining "fours" and "sixes" in a single group produces interesting and diverse results precisely because it generates the study of a group which is not a group. Anyone who is sensitive to distinctions within

Orthodoxy recognizes that there is a quite fundamental difference between someone who eats cold salad in a non-kosher home but fasts on the Tenth of Tevet and observes all the other, "easier" requirements (the typical "six") and someone who observes neither of these "hard" requirements and in addition eats hot food cooked in non-kosher utensils (the typical "four"). Since certain kinds of cold salad are probably permissible even in a non-kosher home, many of the "sixes" are virtually indistinguishable from "sevens." By contrast, about thirty-three of the roughly 140 to 150 "fours" turn on lights on the Sabbath, twelve work on the Sabbath, four do not separate meat and dairy dishes, and nearly twenty eat on the Ninth of Av. To place these people together with "sixes" and even with "fives" is to produce analytical chaos.[4]

I suspect that someone brought this point to the authors' attention after they had virtually completed the book. Thus, in the concluding chapter we read the following:

> Indeed, strictly speaking we cannot even call [the centrists] a group for they are by nature a conglomeration of people in the middle facing both directions and pulling toward opposite extremes. Among themselves the centrist tending toward traditionalism and the one closer to nominal Orthodoxy look upon each other as far apart. Thus, centrists are rather an aggregate of the ambivalent, a mass of people not completely aligned with traditionalism nor wholly in favor of settling for an Orthodoxy in name only (p. 210).

Though the final sentence is already an effort to assign a group character to the "centrist" aggregate, the effective, if unacknowledged, message of this passage wreaks havoc with the core of the book. The closest we come to such a qualification in the body of the analysis is early in the second chapter, where we are told that "the 'groups' (a more precise . . . term would probably be 'subgroups') . . . are less distinct communities than they are different regions or clusters or streams in the traditionalist-modernist flow of Orthodoxy" (p. 40). Nonetheless, this is not intended as a significant concession. A footnote at that point compares the problem of defining the boundaries between streams to the problem of defining the American Midwest. "We may not be certain where it begins, but no one doubts the existence of such a region." To pursue the analogy, it may be difficult to delineate the boundaries of the Midwest, but a definition that included both New Jersey and Minnesota would be headed for serious analytical difficulties.

The fact is that much of the book is predicated on the conceptual coherence of the group constituted by the "centrists," who are the chief protagonists of the study. In a vigorous peroration just two pages

before the concession that we are dealing with a mere aggregate or conglomeration, the authors affirm that it is this group which

> most dramatically display[s] the character of modern Jewish orthodoxy. Their dualism, an ambivalence coupled with compartmentalization, is what makes them most fascinating. These are the Jews, sitting at the epicenter of the crossroads of the traditional and contemporary worlds, who try to remain open to the outside world and close to their Judaism, who *as a group* [my emphasis] cannot decide whether they are "strictly" or 'fairly' Orthodox because, in fact, they are both. . . . These are people who are both cosmopolitan and parochial" (pp. 208–9).

Underscoring the significance of this conclusion is the fact, periodically noted by the authors, that the "centrists" constitute "by far the largest" of the three groups in the sample (410, compared with 145 "traditionalists" and 110 "nominals").

Moreover, immediately after introducing the three categories, Heilman and Cohen argue that these "lines of cleavage" are validated by the respondents themselves since almost all "traditionalists" described themselves as strictly Orthodox and hardly any nominals did. "Perhaps most interesting of all is the fact that [the centrists] turned out to be divided in the way they viewed themselves," with 50% maintaining that they were strictly Orthodox and 46% describing themselves as fairly Orthodox. To the authors, this demonstrates that the "respondents agree in general terms with the way in which we have divided them" (pp. 56–57). It is hard to understand this sense of satisfaction if the authors realized all along that the division among the "centrists" results from the fact that this "aggregate" has been constructed out of sharply distinct elements.

The reason why this authorial confusion is so crippling to the entire study is that the book's major thesis, encapsulated in a quotation that I have already cited, is that these "centrists" embody the struggle of the modern Orthodox Jew by demonstrating ambivalence about a range of social and religious issues. Taking two groups who differ from one another on issues critical to the investigation, combining them under a single rubric and then documenting the disagreements within the artificial category is not an appropriate way to demonstrate ambivalence.

On a concrete level, let me try to illustrate the problem with respect to some of the book's most interesting results, which appear in the chapter on "Religious Faith and Fervency." Although 96% of the "traditionalists" and 88% of the "centrists" agree with the crucial Orthodox belief that "the Torah was revealed by God to Moses at Sinai," 83% of the former but only 54% of the latter agree with this belief

"strongly." Similarly, 85% of the "traditionalists" and only 50% of the "centrists" agree "strongly" that "there is a Messiah and he will come"; 60% of the former agree "strongly" that "God will punish those who transgress his commandments" (an additional 32% "agree"), while only 25% of the latter are prepared to affirm this belief "strongly" (with an additional 38% simply "agreeing").

The authors inform us (correctly, I think) that Orthodox insiders as well as outside observers may well be surprised at the level of uncertainty about these fundamental beliefs among "fairly observant Jews." But how surprised we should be depends in large measure on the role played by the "fours" in the "centrist" results. We recall that my best guess places the percentage of "fours" in this group at approximately 35% (140–150 out of 410). The data on these questions demonstrate a divergence of 35% or less between the "traditionalists" and "centrists." If this difference results overwhelmingly from the responses of the "fours," the picture, while retaining considerable interest, is profoundly affected. It is worth considering how the structure, rhetoric, and conclusions of this work would have been changed if the authors had divided their sample into those who observe all the easier requirements ("fives," "sixes," and "sevens"), those who observe all but one of those requirements ("fours"), and their current "nominals." This considerably more logical division would have transformed the "traditionalists" into the largest group (roughly the same size as the current "centrists") and yielded data of considerably greater interest. As things stand, the failure to supply differentiated results for the "fours" leaves the reader tantalized and frustrated.

Finally, even if the sample were credible and the categorization appropriate, the book would have been undermined by a deep-seated confusion which constitutes its third fundamental flaw. The Introduction and Conclusion make it quite clear that virtually the entire sample is made up of acculturated Jews who are generally called Modern or Centrist Orthodox. Thus, the "traditionalists" in this study are the most observant segment of the Centrist Orthodox community. The authors' decision to call the middle group of their sample "centrists" and the contra-acculturative Orthodox Right "traditionalists" is consequently a recipe for confusion that at first appears like a bewildering terminological idiosyncracy but nothing worse than that. Indeed, a footnote in the introductory chapter anticipates part of the problem by noting the growing use of "Centrist Orthodox" for "Modern Orthodox" and indicating that "centrist" in this book will be used "in a very specific way . . . to indicate an aggregate that lies between two other alternatives on a continuum" (p. 221, n. 75).

This note, however, which is the only place in the book other than the conclusion where the "centrists" are called an aggregate, was almost surely written after the book was substantially completed, and although the authors are obviously aware of the nature of their sample, they regularly confuse their "centrists" with the Centrist Orthodox in general and their "traditionalists" with traditionalists to the right of Modern Orthodoxy. The terminological ambiguity, then, apparently reflects and reinforces a conceptual fuzziness in the authors' own minds, and this fuzziness prevented the substitution of unambiguous terms for the ambivalent ones that they persist in using.

The authors could no doubt cite chapter and verse containing clear formulations of the distinctions that I accuse them of blurring. Even in the body of the text, they periodically remind us that the more traditionalist traditionalists are not included in the sample. This reminder carries with it the inescapable implication that the centrists of the study do not embrace the totality of Centrist Orthodox Jews, and the authors characterize their middle category as "centrist modern Orthodox" shortly after the crystal-clear phrase "the center of the modern Orthodox stream" (pp. 57, 62–64). And yet, the very first page of chapter two provides early warning signals of the ambiguities that will confront us throughout the study.

As the chapter begins, we are reminded that there are two types of Orthodoxy consisting of " 'traditionalists' . . . who see the world of *halacha* and American life as mutually exclusive paths incapable of integration within the life of the individual" and "others, the so-called modern Orthodox, [who] have tried to find a way of remaining linked both to the contemporary non-Jewish world . . . and to the practices of Judaism. For some this has meant little more than a nominal attachment to Orthodoxy, while for others it has meant a partial attachment to the demands of the tradition" (p. 39).

Who are the "traditionalists" in this passage? The description clearly fits the group described in the introductory chapter as "contra-acculturative," a group contrasted in that chapter with the "acculturative, modern Orthodox" represented in nineteenth-century Europe "by Rabbis Samson Raphael Hirsch and Esriel Hildesheimer and earlier Isaac Bernays and Jacob Ettlinger" (p. 20). Where, then, are the people who will comprise the "traditionalist" segment of the authors' sample, that is, the people who most closely represent the stated ideology of acculturated Orthodoxy? They have either been tacitly shifted into the contra-acculturative Right or they have vanished into thin air. Modern Orthodoxy apparently consists solely of the nominals and the "centrists."[5]

This is by no means a momentary lapse. In a later passage (pp. 116–17), the authors refer back to their discussion of acculturative

Orthodox Jews, who, they say, came to be called "modern Orthodox." They specifically allude (without repeating the names) to the nineteenth-century European Rabbis that they listed earlier and go on to refer to Norman Lamm as a contemporary representative of this approach. In the midst of the discussion, we find the following sentence: "[The] ideological heirs [of early modern Orthodox Jews] fall mostly—but, as we have seen, not exclusively—into the centrist and nominal Orthodox categories in our sample." This may be nothing more than a way of saying that the combined number of "centrists" and "nominals" in the authors' survey is larger than that of the "traditionalists," but this is a very peculiar assertion to make since the "centrists" alone outnumber both other categories combined, and the "traditionalists" outnumber the "nominals."[6] Such an assertion is, in fact, so peculiar that it is impossible to avoid the impression that the authors mean to say something about the greater ideological compatibility of the "centrists" and "nominals" with the founders of Modern Orthodoxy. This, however, is a self-evidently insupportable position; clearly, the closest ideological heirs of a movement that the book associates with Samson Raphael Hirsch in the nineteenth century and Norman Lamm in the twentieth are precisely the "traditionalists" in the survey. The authors compound the confusion when they use the term "centrists" just two pages later (p. 118) in a context where is must represent Modern Orthodoxy as a whole. Once again, the "traditionalists" of the sample have virtually been expelled from the Modern Orthodox camp.

The same confusion recurs in the "Summary and Conclusion" of the chapter on political, social, and sexual attitudes (pp. 178–79). The authors begin by noting the liberalism of non-Orthodox Jews with respect to these issues, and they continue as follows:

> In contrast, the most traditionalist Orthodox generally espouse the most conservative orientations in these areas. They are far more reverent of the past . . . ; they are typically more nonliberal on public policy questions . . . ; and they have the most restrictive attitudes toward sexual practice. . . . In short, the ethos of Orthodoxy is clearly expressed and supported in the life of those we have called "traditionalists."

Although the authors no doubt regard this description as applicable to the Orthodox Right, there is simply no question that this "summary" of data derived from their questionnaires must refer most directly to the "traditionalists" in their sample; even an exceedingly, indeed, excessively, generous formulation would have to say that it includes those traditionalists. And yet, the next sentence reads, "Between these two poles stand the *modern* [my emphasis] Orthodox who

express views between the liberalism of the non-Orthodox and the conservatism of the traditionalists." Modern Orthodoxy, then, consists solely of the "centrists" and perhaps the "nominals." The "traditionalists" have been read out of the movement.

What is particularly ironic is that this very chapter provides the clearest evidence of the modernity of these respondents. 75% of the "traditionalists" agree that "in principle, there are no fields of scientific inquiry a good Jew should not pursue"; 73% of them agree that their children should learn about the theory of evolution in school; more than half of them report a postgraduate degree; and 64% of them had seen an R-rated movie during the previous year (pp. 158–59). And yet only two pages before producing this information, the authors tell us that the "traditonalists" of the survey, "at least in their own conceptualization," do not "admit to [the] legitimacy" of the modern world even though "they cannot altogether escape from" it (p. 156). Near the end of the book, in the same paragraph in which they discover that their "centrists" are not really a group, the authors tell us that these centrists "are far less noticeable than the more exotic and often picturesque traditionalists" (p. 210). Once again, the reader is left to wonder who these exotic traditionalists are. Are they the ones who attend R-rated movies and approve of teaching evolution? If not, what is the point of noting an apparently distinguishing characteristic of the "centrists" which is just as true of the group immediately to their right? Here as elsewhere, the authors cannot quite bring themselves to include the "traditionalists" of their survey in the modern world.

It is this reluctance which is probably the central weakness of the book. The intellectual and religious leadership of Modern or Centrist Orthodoxy clearly belongs under the "traditionalist" rubric of this study, and it is more than a little disturbing to see the movement taken away from them and assigned exclusively to those sufficiently ambivalent about Jewish law and theology to satisfy the authors' criteria for modernity. Whatever the difficulties in establishing a precise definition of Modern Orthodoxy, people who are deeply involved in the intellectual challenges of modern society and culture and who affirm the value of such confrontation as a matter of principle cannot be placed beyond the pale of modernity because of an inadequate score on the authors' quotient of transgressions.

None of these strictures mean that the authors are wrong in their central contention that openness to modern culture is often associated with the attenuation of religious zeal. The qualitative observations of Orthodox insiders certainly confirm this phenomenon, and Modern Orthodox intellectuals have frequently lamented it. Nonetheless, a weakening of commitment to the level of the "centrist" aggregate in

this study is surely not part of the definition of the movement, even in a sociological sense, and the implicit adoption of such a criterion does critical damage to the analysis, all the more so because of the inconsistency and confusion with which it is applied.

Beyond the three fundamental problems, several other points require brief comment. Because of an egregious editorial oversight, the book does not provide a promised Appendix containing the precise wording of the questions.[7] This makes the proper evaluation of a variety of ambiguities impossible. We are told that many respondents added explanatory notes because they found that certain questions required clarification and elaboration. Especially because such clarifications were most common among "centrists," the authors attribute this behavior to the discomfort generated by a questionnaire that forced the respondents to confront their own inconsistencies. It is highly probable that this explanation is in large measure correct; the fact is, however, that many of the questions *are* problematic, and the authors do not appear to recognize that this is a legitimate concern (pp. 99–100). Moreover, although it is always possible to propose additional lines of inquiry, the absence of any question on the role of women in Judaism seems particularly striking.[8]

Another problem that occasionally arises is the tendency to overanalyze results that have a very straightforward explanation. "Centrists" do not fast on minor fast days or attend daily services as often as "traditionalists" for the simple reason that fasting and getting up a half-hour earlier in the morning require a level of commitment that many "centrists," particularly the "fours," do not have. In both cases, the authors add explanations having to do with modernity. In the case of fasting, it is the observation (true enough in itself) that "modernity generally shuns" such behavior (p. 62, and compare the bottom of p. 73). With respect to daily synagogue attendance, we are provided with an amusing explanation about how "this constant reminder of sectarian and ghettoized existence is perhaps difficult to bear by those who look to make their ways into the outside world" (p. 71).

A footnote elaborates the point further:

> On those occasions that centrists do go to daily morning services in the synagogue, they will likely carry out their prayers there in a hurried fashion. . . . This rushing is a symbolic way of saying that while they are ready to display attachment to the Jewish domain, this attachment is attenuated by another attachment to the world outside. However moving prayer may be, the modern centrist seems to be saying, "I must get moving to make my train to get to work (in the outside modern world) on time." This approach is also in

> contrast to the longer, more impassioned prayers of the traditionalists, and in particular the yeshiva students or hasidim.

One wonders whether that train leading to the modern world is symbolic or real and whether our "centrist" must really catch it. As for the prayers of the traditionalists, there is little doubt that a representative sampling of 6:30 A.M. *minyanim* in Boro Park would reveal that even worshippers firmly ensconced in the Orthodox Right are not unaffected by the need to get to work on time.[9]

I have great respect for the authors of this study. Samuel Heilman has proven himself a wellspring of important insights into American Jewish life, and the superb quantitative studies by Steven Cohen have set the standard for the field. This book, however, is unworthy of its justly distinguished authors. Marred by fatal conceptual confusions, it is more likely to mislead its readers than to enlighten them. A study of Modern Orthodoxy in America remains a desideratum.

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NOTES

1. I refer throughout this review essay to Samuel C. Heilman and Steven M. Cohen, *Cosmopolitans and Parochials: Modern Orthodox Jews in America* (Chicago, 1989).
2. *CLAL Perspectives*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (June, 1990), p. P1.
3. It is, of course, not impossible that I am wrong about this and that Lincoln Square "centrists" gave answers to these questions that were virtually identical to those of other "centrists." Even in the unlikely event that this is so, the possibility of significant disparity is so great that the authors should have told us the surprising and very important news that these natural expectations were disconfirmed. Instead, they evince no awareness of the issue at all. It is also worth noting that we are not informed of the percentages of the 665 self-identified Orthodox who came from the five major sources of the survey. I must consequently assume that the percentages are not significantly different from those in the full survey of 1,023, but once again I could be wrong.
4. These numbers are a result of some deduction since the authors never tell us how many "fours," "fives," or "sixes" there are. It is hard to imagine that many of the "centrists" who turn on lights on the Sabbath are "fives," but it is much harder to tell with respect to those who eat warm food in non-kosher homes. A few of the approximately eighty-six "centrists" who do this may very well fast on the Tenth of Tevet and consequently be "fives" rather than "fours," although they would be substantially less observant "fives" than those who refrain from food cooked in non-kosher utensils but eat on the

minor fast day. In any event, the numbers in the text constitute my best guess about figures that the authors should have provided.

5. While some observers might use the phrase "a partial attachment to tradition" to characterize even the "traditionalists" in this sample, the entire tenor of the book demonstrates that Heilman and Cohen would not do so. In the context of this study, the phrase can refer to "centrists" and "centrists" alone.

6. This is apart from the fact that the artificiality of the categories makes any head count a highly dubious enterprise.

7. The promise appears on p. 200. I have not followed up on footnotes to determine whether this example of editorial sloppiness extends to other facets of the book. I do know that in the one place where I am quoted (p. 26), the footnote, which should cite *Tradition*, Vol. 20 (1982), provides a wildly inaccurate reference. Factual errors are relatively rare, though it is worth noting the remark that the man whose assassination is commemorated on *Tsom Gedaliah* was killed by "the rulers of Babylon" (p. 47).

8. The questions about abortion, the role of a wife in making decisions, and the Equal Rights Amendment (p. 167) are in a different category. In the same table (on political and social attitudes), I would have liked to see the "Homosexuality is wrong" question supplemented by one that would have measured the respondents' positions on legislation protecting homosexuals against discrimination.

9. This is not to deny that when time is available, the prayers of the Orthodox Right indeed tend to be longer and more impassioned. But this is a straightforward function of heightened commitment and fervor, and although such fervor in itself may be associated with relative isolation from the modern world, the authors' discussion goes well beyond a measured appeal to this factor.