



Haredim Jews in Mea Shearim, the ultra-orthodox quarter of Jerusalem

The Orthodox world today in Israel

Modern-orthodox, orthodox, ultra-orthodox, Haredim, Neturei Karta, Hassidim, Mitnagdim ... The variety of terms to define the religious community in Israel is sometimes confusing and misleading to a lot of people.

What is today the situation in Israel and what are the challenges at stake in the religious world?

Towards a « Haredization » of the orthodox world

The Orthodox world often divides into two major categories, generally referred to as haredi (or sometimes, ultra-Orthodox) and centrist, or modern, Orthodox. But in recent years, the line between haredi and Orthodox has blurred. Many Modern Orthodox Jews are increasingly stringent in their adherence to Jewish law and express a growing sense of alienation from the larger, secular culture. Some scholars have even referred to the trend as the "haredization" of Orthodoxy, and some believe that Modern Orthodoxy is essentially dead. Orthodoxy today is more strictly observant and better educated than at any point since before the destruction of Eastern European Jewry during the Shoah. Children in Orthodox families are maintaining and increasing their allegiance to traditional Judaism and increasing numbers of non-Orthodox Jews are finding themselves attracted to Orthodoxy.

Reasons for this shift

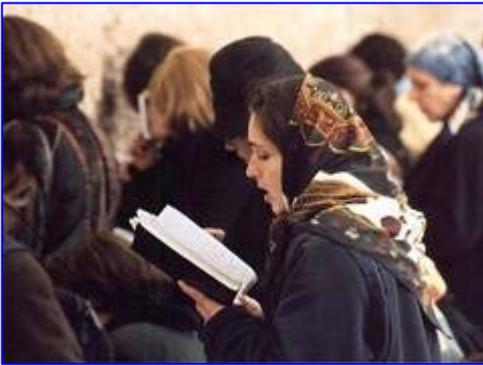
The fact that Orthodox Judaism is, in the words of historian Jonathan Sarna, the "great success story of late 20th-century American Judaism" may seem surprising; a religion that believes in strict adherence to rules and rituals thrives at a time when personal choice seems to reign as the cultural norm. But traditional religious values can be said to be the great success story of many major religious groups since the 1970s; witness the phenomenal rise of evangelical Christianity and Mormonism as examples. In Judaism, the Reform movement, long so averse to tradition that the wearing of yarmulkes was officially barred from some synagogues, has itself embraced a more traditional path of observance. The shift to the right is a product of many factors. Traditional religious groups tend to be more aggressive — and successful — in proselytizing for new members. While Orthodox Judaism rejects proselytizing non-Jews, it does embrace kiruv, the concept of working to convince non-observant Jews to adopt a more traditional lifestyle. Through organizations like the National Council of Synagogue Youth (NCSY), Habad Lubavitch, Aish HaTorah, and others, many non-Orthodox Jews have been brought into the Orthodox fold in recent decades.

In addition, the rise of conservative religion is likely a reaction against the increased permissiveness and anything-goes attitude of secular culture. Boundaries and rules attracted many people today just as the removal of such behavioral limits attracted the youth of the '60s and '70s.

Orthodoxy also has higher birthrates than other Jewish communities; sends a much-higher percentage of its children to Jewish day schools; has a much lower intermarriage rate (and children of intermarriages have a higher likelihood of being uninvolved in Jewish life); and generally have a much higher rate of participation in Jewish life — all factors that help to strengthen Orthodox communities and make it attractive for non-Orthodox Jews to join.

And the Orthodox Jewish lifestyle is easier than ever before. The affluence most Jews have achieved — together with changing societal norms — makes working on Shabbat less of a necessity. The plethora of Kosher food in supermarkets worldwide eases observance of the dietary laws, and the growth of kosher restaurants in many cities reduces the inclination among many Orthodox Jews to eat in non-kosher establishments. Religious book and CD publishing is thriving and an industry of Jewish-items producers seems to make observance ever-simpler, with innovations such as a snap-together sukkah, Shabbat-friendly kitchen appliances, and Passover-kosher food from pizza to granola bars to hamburger buns.

The Challenge Of Feminism



As the world has changed since the 1970s — the success of feminism, the rise of the gay rights movement, laxer sexual norms — Orthodoxy has, with mixed success, tried by and large to insulate itself from such evolutions. The greatest controversies, though, have taken place over questions of women's roles in Orthodox religious life. In Orthodox prayer services, men and women are separated by a curtain or low wall, with only men allowed to lead services and read or bless the Torah. Women are exempt from many mitzvot (commandments) and cannot become rabbis.

In some Orthodox communities, women do not study Talmud. But feminism — combined with stronger Jewish education for Orthodox girls — has left many Orthodox women (and men) dissatisfied with traditional gender roles and restrictions. Being Orthodox, they retain their adherence to Halakha but have sought change within the limits of Jewish law — sometimes via creative re-interpretations — and also seek shifts in Jewish culture and attitude. This has resulted in bitter disputes over women's issues.

The debate threatens to split Jewish communities while at the same time creating new opportunities for female religious participation. More synagogues are holding women-only prayer groups, allowing the Torah processional to pass through the women's section, or taking other steps to increase women's religious participation. And as these synagogues take these steps, they inevitably face bitter condemnation from within and without, driving a wedge between them and the mainstream Orthodox community. For conservatives in Orthodoxy, allowing changes in women's religious role is an unacceptable surrender to the broader secular culture; halakhah and Orthodox culture are seen by them as a bulwark against the outside world and its seemingly ever-shifting values. In the eyes of Orthodox feminists, though, Jewish tradition has always engaged and been influenced by prevailing intellectual and cultural norms, strong enough to incorporate them without compromising its core values or laws. To feminists, the change in women's status in the secular world is a monumental and permanent shift that must be reflected in Jewish life and observance; to conservatives, Jewish life and observance must be unchanging and unaffected by the cultural winds around it. Bridging that gap is difficult — possibly impossible — and reflects a profound difference in how the two sides view Judaism and its place in the world.

In the near future, Orthodoxy can expect to see continued growth and vibrancy. As more Jews become attracted to it, and as Orthodox communities retain their higher-than-average birth rates, Orthodoxy can also expect to become an increasingly large percentage of the total number of Jews. And it can also expect to continue the debates over Orthodox Jews' place in the modern world and the place of modern notions such as feminism in Orthodox Judaism.

Source : Michael Kress, « *The State of Orthodox Judaism today* », My Jewish Learning and Jewish Virtual Library <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/orthostate.html>