

RUPTURE AND RECONSTRUCTION: THE TRANSFORMATION OF CONTEMPORARY ORTHODOXY

Haym Soloveitchik

Published in *Tradition*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Summer 1994)

Haym Soloveitchik teaches Jewish history and thought in the Bernard Revel Graduate School and Stern College for Woman at Yeshiva University.

This essay is an attempt to understand the developments that have occurred within my lifetime in the community in which I live. The orthodoxy in which I, and other people my age, were raised scarcely exists anymore. This change is often described as "the swing to the Right." In one sense, this is an accurate description. Many practices, especially the new rigor in religious observance now current among the younger modern orthodox community, did indeed originate in what is called "the Right." Yet, in another sense, the description seems a misnomer. A generation ago, two things primarily separated modern Orthodoxy from, what was then called, "ultra-Orthodoxy" or "the Right." First, the attitude to Western culture, that is, secular education; second, the relation to political nationalism, i.e. Zionism and the state of Israel. Little, however, has changed in these areas. Modern Orthodoxy still attends college, albeit with somewhat less enthusiasm than before, and is more strongly Zionist than ever. The "ultra-orthodox," or what is now called the "*haredi*"¹ camp is still opposed to higher secular education, though the form that the opposition now takes has local nuance. In Israel, the opposition remains total; in America, the utility, even the necessity of a college degree is conceded by most, and various arrangements are made to enable many *haredi* youths to obtain it. However, the value of a secular education, of Western culture generally, is still denigrated. And the *haredi* camp remains strongly anti-Zionist, at the very least, emotionally distant and unidentified with the Zionist enterprise. The ideological differences over the posture towards modernity remain on the whole unabated, in theory certainly, in practice generally. Yet so much *has* changed, and irrecognizably so. Most of the fundamental changes, however, have been across the board. What had been a stringency peculiar to the "Right" in 1960, a "Lakewood or Bnei Brak *humra*," as—to take an example that we shall later discuss *shiurim* (minimal requisite quantities), had become, in the 1990's, a widespread practice in modern orthodox circles, and among its younger members, an axiomatic one. The phenomena were, indeed, most advanced among the *haredim* and were to be found there in a more intensive form. However, most of these developments swiftly manifested themselves among their co-religionists to their left. The time gap between developments in the *haredi* world and the emerging modern orthodox one was some fifteen years, at most.

It seemed to me to that what had changed radically was the very texture of religious life and the entire religious atmosphere. Put differently, the *nature* of contemporary spirituality has

undergone a transformation; the ground of religiosity had altered far more than the ideological positions adopted thereon. It further appeared that this change could best be studied in the *haredi* camp, for there it takes its swiftest and most intense form. With this in mind, I read widely in the literature of the *haredim*, listened to their burgeoning cassette literature, and spent more time than was my wont in their neighborhoods. I tried my best to understand what they were doing in their terms and what it meant in mine. And the more I studied them, I became convinced that I was, indeed, studying myself and my own community. I uncovered no new facts about them or us, but thought that I did perceive some pattern to the well-known ones. As all these facts are familiar to my readers, the value of my interpretation depends entirely on the degree of persuasive correspondence that they find between my characterizations and their own experiences.

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If I were asked to characterize in a phrase the change that religious Jewry has undergone in the past generation, I would say that it was the new and controlling role that texts now play in contemporary religious life. And in saying that, I open myself to an obvious question: What is new in this role? Has not traditional Jewish society always been regulated by the normative written word, the Halakhah? Have not scholars, for well over a millennium, pored over the Talmud and its codes to provide Jews with guidance in their daily round of observances? Is not Jewish religiosity proudly legalistic and isn't exegesis its classic mode of expression? Was not "their portable homeland," their indwelling in their sacred texts, what sustained the Jewish people throughout its long exile?

The answer is, of course, yes. However, as the Halakhah is a sweepingly comprehensive regula of daily life-covering not only prayer and divine service, but equally food, drink, dress, sexual relations between man and wife, the rhythms of work and patterns of rest-it constitutes a way of life. And a way of life is not learned but rather absorbed. Its transmission is mimetic, imbibed from parents and friends, and patterned on conduct regularly observed in home and street, synagogue and school.

Did these mimetic norms—the culturally prescriptive--conform with the legal ones? The answer is, at times, yes; at times, no. And the significance of the no may best be brought home by an example with which all are familiar—the kosher kitchen, with its rigid separation of milk and meat—separate dishes, sinks, dish racks, towels, tablecloths, even separate cupboards. Actually little of this has a basis in Halakhah. Strictly speaking, there is no need for separate sinks, for separate dishtowels or cupboards. In fact, if the food is served cold, there is no need for separate dishware altogether. The simple fact is that the traditional Jewish kitchen, transmitted from mother to daughter over generations, has been immeasurably and unrecognizably amplified beyond all halakhic requirements. Its classic contours are the product not of legal exegesis, but of the housewife's religious intuition imparted in kitchen apprenticeship.

