

# [Sliding to the Right](#)

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

As an interested party, I am delighted at the rejuvenation of Torah in Judaism and the increase in commitment of a very significant section of it. Yet I am very worried about the drift to the right primarily because of its anti-intellectualism, conformism, and fundamentalism. But I have always maintained that this is a phase and it will pass.

Very rarely I come across a book about current Jewish trends and think, "He's got it absolutely right." The very distinguished New York professor of sociology, [Samuel C. Heilman](#), has written an outstanding description about the ultra-Orthodox transformation of American religious Jewish life. It is called, [Sliding to the Right](#).

He documents "the rise and the rise" of a movement that fifty years ago was regarded as a defunct fossil of marginal importance on the American Jewish scene. And almost everything he says about America applies equally to the rest of Jewry. You cannot understand what is happening to Jewish communities around the world if you do not read this book (or follow my occasional pieces on the subject).

Heilman has researched the massive and exponential growth in population, communities (ghettos), schools and institutions. From near extinction before the Second World War, now 57% of synagogues in the New York area are Orthodox, and from less than 10%, very Orthodox synagogues now account for 40% nationwide. That's an amazing transformation. Hundreds of thousands attended public celebrations of the [Daf HaYomi](#) seven-year cycle of studying the Talmud—the [largest gathering celebrating pure study](#), anywhere.

Suddenly people are aware that ultra-Orthodoxy is the quickest growing, most dynamic sect within Judaism, even if it is still a minority and is always unlikely to appeal to the majority of Jews. The non-Orthodox, much-published Jewish academic, [Marshall Sklare](#), predicted the demise of Orthodoxy in the mid 50's. He now admits that Orthodoxy has refused to adopt the role of invalid and has transformed itself into a growing and dominating force in American Jewish life.

Perhaps most significant has been the rise of Orthodoxy's political influence, given that the field used to be totally dominated by Conservative and Reform lobbies. Whereas once the Jewish population was almost totally Democrat (the equivalent of the Labour Party in the UK), now the Orthodox vote is solidly Republican. Only Reform remains predominantly in the Democrat camp.

Heilman tracks back the origin of this revival to pre-war Europe. European Jews were divided between those who lived in societies with attractive features that led them to want accommodate and those who lived in repressive unattractive societies who made a point of rejecting what the outside had to

offer. And of course he adds the post War reaction to the Holocaust, a fierce determination to respond to those who wanted to destroy Jews and Judaism by answering with an aggressive survivalist response. I would add the impact of Israel on religious life.

Heilman borrows from the anthropologist [Mary Douglas](#) to describe two reactions. The Ghettoists, the “enclavists”, responded by trying to create their own communities as different than the outside as possible. On the other hand, the Accommodationists (Douglas’s “contrapuntalists”) tried to find ways of dealing with competing interests and loyalties. The one area in Orthodoxy that once accounted for a large measure of, say, United Synagogue in Britain that is fast disappearing is the nominally Orthodox, synagogue on Saturday morning, soccer in the afternoon. Most of those disappear and some migrate to other denominations. To the casual observer of the two trends within Orthodoxy, it appears that the enclavists have won hands down, in number, authority and power. But according to Heilman the doomsday scenario of an Orthodoxy totally black is not actually playing out on the ground in the USA (or anywhere else, either, in my view).

Enclavist Orthodoxy is complex—as complex as Islamic sects. There are Hassidic, Lithuanian, Sephardi and Nouveau Arrivee Orthodoxies of an amazing variety. Whereas outwardly they may appear similar, and come together to combat the outside, the variations are highly significant within and often lead to clashes. Some encourage secular education for career purposes, while others encourage more commercial and entrepreneurial pursuits. Some are eager to reach out. Others turn inwards. One common factor is that the individual does not matter as much as the group and social/religious conformity in dress and behaviour are crucial. Yet within every group Heilman detects a degree of fragmentation. The individualist host societies all encourage free choice, which in enclavist Orthodoxy is played out privately instead of publicly. It’s almost a case of, “Do whatever you want in private so long as you conform in public.” This is where the cracks begin to show, where individuals faithful to their religious leaders in public, often ignore them in private.

But whereas twenty years ago Heilman only saw the ghetto Orthodoxy (enclavists) as the growing and new face of Orthodoxy, now it is clear wherever you look that the accommodationist Orthodox are growing too. Frum need not always lead to frummer.

“In a [postmodern](#) world...dichotomies are dialectically redefined. In this world one can often avoid the either/or option of fragmentation and choose the both/and one of provisionality.” “One need not be either contrapuntalist or enclavist, Modern or Chareidi: One can actually be both.” “A postmodern view is suspicious of authoritative definitions and singular narratives of any trajectory of events,” Heilman quotes [Ryan Bishop](#).

Whatever the enclavists might like to believe postmodernism is affecting ultra-Orthodoxy too! You can see Hassidim in mufti in almost any nightclub in Manhattan, yet on the weekends they are back in proper garb in their ghettos. Could it happen that people who appear Chareidi are actually taking on aspects of modernity as they study for careers or work in the marketplace or use the internet? On the other hand, the Modern Orthodox, in the desire for

greater authenticity, study and passionate religious experience, take on aspects of the Chareidi world without abandoning alternative engagements? Some of the ultra-Orthodox outreach movements are examples of both. Heilman shows beyond doubt how Orthodoxy in the USA is reinventing itself!!

Orthodox Judaism has survived the crisis. It is now going through a fascinating almost unseen transformation that will, in my opinion, leave us stronger, richer and more creative. The Right Wing takeover may only be Phase One of the survival plan. Phase Two will lead to more openness and greater flexibility. It has always been this way. A natural response to a crisis is to tighten up; then, as it passes, relaxation sets in, and that too passes and the cycle begins again. Don't despair, my individualist, open-minded, postmodern but Orthodox friends—your day will soon come!

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