

Revisiting Aspects of Modern Orthodoxy in the United States, 1945-1985

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Abstract

In the opening decades of the twenty-first century, a strand of modern Orthodoxy echoes, in part, ideas discussed by thought leaders of an earlier era. Exploration of perspectives articulated by modern Orthodox thinkers of the previous century can deepen understanding of current expressions of similar tropes. This article focuses on the period 1945-1985, by the close of which period several defining themes of that era's modern Orthodoxy had receded in prominence and, for many, the adjective "centrist" had supplanted the adjective "modern" in describing their Orthodoxy.

Among the themes that characterized the modern Orthodoxy of the decades examined were: a commitment to *klal yisrael*, one manifestation of which was connecting individually and organizationally with Jews of other denominations; interest in "synthesis" of Jewish tradition with the best of Western culture; and a focus on the process of halakhic development, with attendant consideration of internal (to Jewish teaching) ethical principles and "antinomies" within Jewish law contributing to that process. Eliezer Berkovits, Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, Emanuel Rackman and Walter Wurzbürger were among the thought leaders of this by no means monolithic approach. Though the issues and responses of the 2020s are not identical to those of the 1960s, there is much to be learned by revisiting ideas expressed decades ago that adumbrated contemporary discussion and debate within American Orthodoxy.

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Revisiting Aspects of Modern Orthodoxy in the United States, 1945-1985: The Past as Prologue

In his book *Beyond Sectarianism: The Realignment of American Orthodox Judaism*, Adam Ferziger notes that, in response to the well documented "slide to the right," "a vocal and apparently sustainable backlash ... has emerged in the last decade" (Ferziger 2015:10). In the words of Asher Lopatin, "The exciting and courageous Modern Orthodoxy of yesteryear is back" (Eleff 2016:421). Among the themes and expressions of this strand of modern Orthodoxy are commitment to *klal yisrael* across denominational boundaries; expanded opportunities for women in group prayer, study and certification as religious leaders; and openness to broad-ranging, modern Biblical scholarship and its compatibility with Orthodoxy, a latter-day instance of "synthesis."

Describing the trajectory of modern Jewish Orthodoxy in the United States, Alan Brill points to the flourishing of this approach from the World War II era into the 1980s (Brill 2013:44). During that period, Rabbis Eliezer Berkovits (1908-1992), Irving “Yitz” Greenberg (1933-), Emanuel Rackman (1910-2008) and Walter Wurzbarger (1920-2002), among others, sought—though not in identical fashion—to integrate modernity and Orthodoxy. In his 1976 investiture address as newly installed President of Yeshiva University, Rabbi Norman Lamm (1927-2020) associated commitment to such integration with his predecessors at that institution, Rabbis/Doctors Bernard Revel and Samuel Belkin. “The guiding vision of this university, as it was formulated by my two distinguished predecessors, was the philosophy of ‘synthesis,’ the faith that the best of the heritage of Western civilization – the liberal arts and sciences—was or could be made ultimately compatible with the sacred traditions of Jewish law and life...” (Lamm 2002:206).

Modern Orthodoxy was, during the third quarter of the twentieth century, outward facing, actively engaging with Jews who did not identify as Orthodox. Adam Ferziger aptly observes that, by the closing decades of the twentieth century, modern Orthodoxy had become more focused on maintaining its hold on those within; it was far more inward facing (Ferziger 2015:13). Paralleling this inward turn was embrace of the term “centrist” rather than “modern” Orthodox to describe the ideology of Yeshiva University (Lamm 1986).

Contributing to a symposium on the state of Orthodoxy in the pages of *Tradition*, early in the 1980s, Y.U. alumnus, Rabbi David Singer, observed:

If Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is correct in arguing that loneliness is the defining characteristic of the religious Jew, then it is fair to say that I am super frum. I am ... a modern Orthodox Jew and thus a man without a community. Having crossed a bridge into the modern world, I now find myself stranded there together with a handful of Orthodox intellectuals while the Orthodox community as a whole goes marching off in a traditionalist direction... (Singer 1982:69).

Gone, among most of those who continued to self-identify as modern Orthodox, was a focus on “synthesis;” they were content to lead compartmentalized lives (Brill 2013:46).

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, tropes similar to those sounded by earlier champions of modern Orthodoxy are, again, audible. It is on that backdrop that this article explores aspects of the writings and worldview of several thought leaders of modern Orthodoxy, 1945-1985, considering trends that adumbrated contemporary expressions of similar

themes. To paraphrase *Kohelet*: There is nothing altogether new under the sun.

Pre-World War II

Efforts to synthesize Jewish tradition and modernity are by no means new (Graff 2019). Though well-articulated efforts at “synthesis” were more pronounced, in the United States, during the post-World War II generation, there were rabbinic personalities in the United States promoting the harmonious blend of Jewish Orthodoxy and Western culture decades earlier. Reflecting on his first encounter, in the 1930s, with Rabbi Leo Jung (1892-1987) of New York’s Jewish Center, Herman Wouk recalled entering the synagogue on Yom Kippur ready to “tune out” as a sermon was about to begin:

I settled back, my mind closed, to enjoy my own meditations. The voice surprised me: warm, cultured, curiously blending solemnity and ironic humor. The words surprised me: clear, literate, striking words, neither pompous nor affected. I began to pay attention and then the ideas surprised me: religious ideas, articulated in the light of the secular wisdom I had learned, and some secular wisdom that I hadn’t learned (Wouk 1962:41).

Jung, ordained at the Hildesheimer Seminary in Berlin and holding a PhD from the University of London, immigrated to the United States in 1920 to assume a pulpit in Cleveland; he moved to New York, in 1922, to serve as rabbi of the Jewish Center. Jung identified with *torah im derekh erets* which he defined as “the combination of the Judaic idea with modern methods of transmission and of technical perfection – the cooperation of a general cultural attitude with a Jewish principle to lend it dignity, to form its basis” (Jung 1927:20).

Consistent with Wouk’s reminiscence, Marc Lee Raphael, in a biographical sketch, comments that “Leo Jung, the extremely cultured rabbi-scholar, (was) able to turn a Latin phrase, digest a French book on philosophy, or follow the scientific arguments of the leading writers of his era as easily as he could quote from the Talmud or the *midrashim*...” (Raphael 1992:41). Beyond his congregational work and teaching (Jewish ethics) at Yeshiva College, Jung produced numerous books promoting Orthodoxy in a modern key (Graff 2014). While Jung held forth at the Jewish Center on New York’s Upper West Side, a younger, Russian-born colleague, Joseph Lookstein, educated at RIETS—headed by Bernard Revel, himself a champion of synthesis (Rothkoff 1972)—as well as City College and Columbia University, served as rabbi, across Central Park, in the Yorkville neighborhood of Manhattan’s Upper East Side.

During the tenure, 1906-1936, of its venerable senior rabbi, Moshe Zevulun Margolies, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun engaged a succession of young, English-speaking assistant rabbis, including Mordecai Kaplan (Jung's predecessor at the Jewish Center) and Herbert Goldstein, who left to found the Institutional Synagogue. While still a student at RIETS, Joseph Lookstein (1902-1979) was hired (1923) by Kehilath Jeshurun to assist Rabbi Margolies. Three years after joining Rabbi Margolies at KJ, Lookstein was ordained at RIETS and married Margolies's granddaughter.

Following the death of Rabbi Margolies (1936), Joseph Lookstein not only served as the congregation's senior rabbi, he worked to launch and then headed (starting 1937) a co-educational Jewish day school known as Ramaz, an acronym memorializing his late grandfather-in-law. Interviewed about the school's philosophy, Lookstein emphasized the commitment of Ramaz Academy to the integration of Judaism and Americanism: "The principal aim of the Ramaz Academy is to build a well-integrated Jewish personality, one which should experience no emotional or intellectual clash between being a loyal Jew and a loyal American at the same time. While cultivating in the child a love and a loyalty for America, the school seeks to integrate in him respect for Jewish ideals and traditions and an eagerness to live in accordance with those ideals and traditions. Judaism and Americanism can thus be naturally blended into a happy harmony" (Gruen 1940:7).

In a sermon titled "A Religious Definition of Knowledge," Lookstein challenged the view that "our educational institutions are engaged in teaching a new paganism." The Holy One is truth; "knowledge is holy. It is an emanation of the Divine." Accordingly, "If they who are seeking knowledge are in fact questing for truth, is not that quest an act of religion?" (Lookstein, undated). The term "secular," Lookstein averred, does not properly attach to any form of knowledge.

Emanuel Rackman: Toward an Ideology

Though there were advocates of *torah im derekh erets*, "integration" and "synthesis" pre-World War II, a chorus of such voices emerged in the post-war decades. Describing Orthodoxy in America, in 1965, sociologist Charles Liebman pointed to a modern Orthodox strand that had yet to produce a systematic statement of ideology. "To the extent, however, that the modern Orthodox have produced an ideologist," he noted, "it is probably Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, although his position is not representative of all modern Orthodox Jews" (Liebman 1965:48).

Liebman observed that Rackman was interested in understanding the meaning of halakhic injunctions to better relate to their contemporary applications:

Rackman is also prominently associated with the idea that Orthodox Jews, both individually and institutionally, must cooperate with the non-Orthodox. He is outspoken in his

conviction that Orthodox rabbis should be free to associate with such groups as the New York Board of Rabbis (composed of Reform and Conservative as well as Orthodox rabbis) and that Orthodox groups should remain affiliated with the umbrella organization for all religious groups, the Synagogue Council of America (Liebman 1965:49).

Reflecting his leadership and commitment to interdenominational cooperation, Rackman served as President of New York's Board of Rabbis, 1955-1957.

Leo Jung had studied at the Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin, receiving *semikhah* from the Seminary's Rector, Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann, and Joseph Lookstein studied at RIETS at a time when Rabbi Solomon Polachek served as a *rosh yeshiva* and taught the most advanced class in the rabbinical program. Rackman, also ordained at RIETS, studied there at a time when Moshe Soloveitchik served as the school's leading Talmudist. Rackman earned a law degree at Columbia, shortly before completing his *semikhah* studies; he was later to earn a PhD from Columbia, in public law.

Following service as a chaplain during World War II, Rackman served as rabbi of Congregation Shaaray Tefila in Far Rockaway, New York. Rackman authored a number of articles on *halakhah* in which he put forward a teleological approach. "The teleological jurist asks: What are the ends of the law which God or nature ordained and how can we be guided by these ideal aims in developing the law" (Rackman 1954:215):

(T)he Orthodox view does not exclude halakhic creativity or changes, flexibility, and growth in concept and method in order to meet the most perplexing of the problems that trouble the religious minds of today. But it insists that such evolution must be organic, i.e., it must be a further unfolding of historical continuity and develop authentically out of tradition. Orthodox Jews feel that they are helping the revealed Law to fulfill itself, and in their halakhic creativity they move slowly and with the same turmoil of soul that characterizes the authentic religious experience... (Rackman 1952:550).

Rackman pointed to the need to balance values and ideas that are often in tension—"Judaism's antinomies"—within the halakhic system (Rackman 1961).

Differentiation from Conservative Judaism

While modern Orthodoxy was emerging as a strand within Orthodoxy, those who advanced this outlook were concerned about distinguishing their perspective from that of the Conservative movement. David de Sola Pool (1885-1970), Orthodox Union Vice President and spiritual leader of Shearith Israel observed, in 1942: “Today, it is growing increasingly difficult to discern any essential organic difference between Orthodoxy and Conservatism. The main differentiae seem to be that the Conservative synagogues permit men and women to sit together, and make more use of English in the services than do most Orthodox synagogues” (Gurock 2009: 162). Jeffrey Gurock describes the period 1900-1960 as an era of denominational fluidity between the Orthodox and Conservative streams (Gurock 1998).

One vehicle for articulating differentiation from the burgeoning Conservative movement was *Tradition*, a journal of Orthodox Jewish thought, initiated by RIETS graduate and rabbi of Kodimoh Congregation in Springfield, Massachusetts, Norman Lamm. Lamm, editor-in-chief of the new journal, enjoyed the close collaboration of Marvin Fox (1923-1996)—an alumnus of Hebrew Theological College, in Chicago, and professor of philosophy at Ohio State University, at the time—who served as secretary of the fledgling publication. A focus on clearly distinguishing modern Orthodoxy from the Conservative movement is evident in correspondence between Fox and Lamm relating to articles under consideration for the first issue of the journal.

Having received and reviewed essays that he was forwarding to Lamm, Fox made the following, striking observation:

(Walter) Wurzburger’s essay troubles me very much. It is by far the most competent piece we have received (apart from yours), and certainly merits publication by any critical standards. What concerns me very much is a question of policy that probably needs to be settled by our entire Editorial Board. As the essay stands I think that it opens up a very sensitive area of discussion. One of the by-products of W’s argument is the implication that halacha itself, not as a source of philosophical theories but as a matter of halacha l’maaseh (applied law), is largely determined by local historical considerations. He seems to say that movement in halacha and the differences of opinion among the authorities reflect differences in historical circumstance and individual outlook. This is precisely the point the Conservatives have always made. In fact, this is how they interpret “historical Judaism.” They conclude, therefore, that a realistic approach to halacha

today also requires us to take account of the facts of contemporary society and to adjust halacha to those facts. Now my problem is this. Can we afford, and do we want to publish an article which can easily lead to these very same conclusions? (Fox 1957).

The article submitted by Wurzburger (a copy of which is no longer extant) was not published.

Wurzburger's first piece in *Tradition*, however, was on the topic of Jewish legal development. In a review article of the book *Law and Tradition in Judaism*, authored by Boaz Cohen, long-time chair of the (Conservative) Rabbinical Assembly law committee, Wurzburger challenged the view that the Talmudic sages simply modified the Written Law to meet the needs of their time. Rather, "it is the function of the *Halakhah* scholar, employing creative halakhic processes, to unravel the specific meaning which the timeless message of Sinai holds for his own time." Wurzburger maintained that "Because the halakhic process is characterized by a continuous interaction between subjective and objective components, it is natural that changes in historical conditions will lead to far reaching repercussions in the realm of *halakhah*. This is not all a question of 'adapting' or 'adjusting' the law to meet novel conditions, but of interpreting and applying it within the frame of reference of new circumstances" (Wurzburger 1960:86).

In Wurzburger's view, the Conservative movement treated *halakhah* as a matter of human subjectivity without regard for its intrinsic process; this "untenable approach" led to "radical revisions" (Wurzburger 1960:88). An article articulating a view of halakhic development distinguishing between Orthodoxy and the Conservative approach was, clearly, welcomed in the pages of *Tradition*. Wurzburger was to serve as editor-in-chief of *Tradition*, 1962-1988, succeeding Norman Lamm in that role.

Explaining the Halakhic Process

By the time Walter Wurzburger and Norman Lamm studied at RIETS, Joseph Baer Soloveitchik (1903-1993) had succeeded his father Moshe as lead Talmudist at the school. The younger Soloveitchik, who had earned a PhD at the University of Berlin (later serving as Lamm's dissertation advisor), was to maintain that position for more than forty years. Scion of an illustrious rabbinic dynasty and well-recognized in yeshiva circles, Soloveitchik was introduced to a broader, English reading public through an article by Emanuel Rackman in *Commentary*, in 1952.

Rackman summarized several, recent, unpublished responsa by Rabbi Soloveitchik as examples of halakhic vitality. One of those responsa dealt with drafting Jewish chaplains for service in the Korean War. Soloveitchik upheld the position of Yeshiva University calling for the drafting of its alumni for this purpose. In Rackman's words:

Rabbi Soloveitchik admitted that he had not approached the sources with complete objectivity; that he had certain intuitive feelings and held certain basic values that prejudiced him in favor of the decision rendered by Yeshiva University and guided him in his exploration of the various aspects and facets of the problem. But this lack of objectivity is merely a fundamental avowal of inevitable human limitations, and is not to be confused with arbitrariness. As anyone who has studied the Talmud knows, the Halachah is too objective a discipline to permit an approach based on transient moods. Nevertheless, in the deepest strata of Halachic thinking, logical judgment is preceded by value judgment, and intuitive insight gives impetus to the logic of argument (Rackman 1952:548-549).

Rackman's description of the halakhic process presaged Wurzburger's account of the interplay of objective and subjective elements in halakhic decision-making, set forth in the pages of *Tradition*.

Responding to “Sectarian” Orthodoxy

In his 1965 article on Orthodoxy in America, Charles Liebman pointed to the sectarian, right-wing Orthodox who maintained their distance from other Jews (Liebman 1965:42-47). This group was transplanted from Eastern Europe during and after the Holocaust era; its focus was on its own constituency. Criticizing what he viewed as excessive halakhic rigidity fostered by this element of Orthodoxy, Rackman opined that “Orthodox rabbis have become so panicky about liberalism that they have ‘frozen’ the law beyond the wildest expectations of more saintly forbears” (Rackman 1964:367). In like spirit, Rabbi Oscar Z. Fasman (1908-2003)—ordained at Hebrew Theological College and, later, its President—commented:

Torah periodicals published in the United States abound in new chumrot (stringencies), until restrictions are multiplied upon restrictions and piety is driven into ever novel extremes. If occasionally some scholar suggests that Halakhah should meet the challenges of our day by extending its principles in conformity with its own formulas of growth, no matter how scrupulously he observes the practice of the Shulchan Arukh he is branded a dangerous reformer; and whoever permits him to speak or write has sealed a covenant with the enemies of the faith (Fasman 1967:57-58).

Fasman described the changes he had seen from his student days at Hebrew Theological College in the 1920s to the 1960s, changes that he associated with the orientation and impact of European Talmudists who had taken refuge in the United States during and after the Holocaust.

During his Presidency of Hebrew Theological College, Rabbi Fasman engaged Eliezer Berkovits as Chair of the Department of Jewish Philosophy. Like Leo Jung, Berkovits was ordained at the *Rabbinerseminar* in Berlin—in the case of Berkovits, by the Seminary’s last Rector, Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg. Like Joseph Baer Soloveitchik, Berkovits held a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Berlin. Leaving Berlin—where he had served as a congregational rabbi—following *Kristallnacht*, Berkovits served a congregation in Leeds, until 1946, when he relocated to Sydney. Four years later, he moved to Boston. After decades in rabbinical positions, Berkovits was delighted, in 1958, to accept appointment as a professor at Hebrew Theological College, in Chicago.¹ Berkovits saw Jews and Judaism at a crossroad; hence the title of his collected war-time sermons, *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (1945). For Berkovits, the great challenge of the time was renewing the creative strength of *halakhah*. *Halakhah* needed to be redeemed from its “deep freeze.” “The task has devolved upon us to interpret comprehensively and anew ... the entire halakhic heritage...” (Berkovits 1953:17-18).

Berkovits published widely during his years at Hebrew Theological College, before moving to Israel, in 1976. In an article on “Orthodox Judaism in a World of Revolutionary Transformations,” Berkovits commented that “often *Halakhah* is taught and applied in a spirit of insufficient sensitivity toward ethical and moral problems inherent in the conditions and practices of modern Jewries; one cannot but sadly point to the present ineffectiveness of the technique of Halakhic application of Torah to life” (Berkovits 1965:77-78). For Berkovits, moral aims that are integral to the same revealed message that serves as the basis of Jewish law must surely be considered in the context of halakhic development.

Berkovits – at the suggestion of his mentor Rabbi Weinberg (Shapiro 2013, 19) —authored a book exploring halakhic precedents for rabbinic annulment of marriage and certain forms of conditional marriage (Berkovits 1966); the work elicited considerable controversy. Emanuel Rackman shared Berkovits’s concern for the plight of *agunot*. He called attention, with approbation, to a responsum of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein permitting, under certain circumstances, “husband or wife to remarry without a *Get* when there is reasonable assurance that if either had known some important fact about the other in advance of the marriage they would not have entered upon the marriage” (Rackman 1964:367).

In an article on “An Integrated Jewish World View,” Berkovits pointed, as had Joseph Lookstein, to the reality that “In the realm of truth, there is no distinction between the secular and the sacred. Truth is, as the

Talmud teaches, ‘the seal of the Holy One, Blessed be He’; all truth leads man to its source, to God” (Berkovits 1962:11). It is essential that “Israel, the people of the Torah..., acquire mastery in the realm of worldly knowledge and weave the pattern of unity between fact and value, faith and reality, between life and Torah” (Berkovits 1962:16). Berkovits decried the rejection of “secular” education by some Jewish pietists, considering it embarrassing that the integration of religious studies and broader, general education remained a contentious issue.

Covenantal Imperatives

Berkovits emphasized “the priority of the ethical” inherent in *halakhah*. “God forbid that there should be anything in the application of the Torah to the actual life situation that is contrary to the principles of ethics” (Berkovits 1983:19). His younger contemporary, Walter Wurzbürger, pointed to “covenantal imperatives” extending beyond specific halakhic strictures. In Wurzbürger’s view, Jewish ethics encompass “not only outright halakhic rules governing the area of morality, but also intuitive moral responses arising from the covenantal relationship with God...” (Wurzbürger 1994:15).²

Munich-born Walter Wurzbürger arrived in the United States in 1938, at the age of eighteen and, by 1944, had completed a degree at Yeshiva College and earned *semikhah* at RIETS.³ He became, early on, a close student of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. Recounting the experience, decades later, in an interview, he recalled: “What happened was when I was in Dr. Belkin’s class, when Rabbi Soloveitchik arrived (1941), Dr. Belkin selected his top students, and he gave them to Rabbi Soloveitchik, so that he should have a proper class. And I became very attached to Rabbi Soloveitchik.... I had a very strong personal relationship” (Wurzbürger 1981a:24).

As Wurzbürger completed his studies at RIETS, Soloveitchik, asked by a Boston congregation to recommend a rabbinic candidate, referred Wurzbürger for the position. While holding the pulpit of Chai Odom, Wurzbürger earned a PhD in philosophy at Harvard. He also took an active role in the broadly inclusive Jewish Community Council, in Boston.

Wurzbürger’s pattern of communal leadership and scholarly pursuits alongside his congregational responsibilities continued in Toronto, where he served as rabbi of Shaarei Shomayim Congregation, 1953-1966. In 1967, Wurzbürger returned to New York, succeeding Emanuel Rackman as rabbi of Congregation Shaaray Tefila. There, too, Wurzbürger engaged in communal and scholarly activities outside his congregational setting, serving as President of the Synagogue Council of America, editor of *Tradition* and adjunct faculty member at RIETS and Yeshiva College.

Wurzbürger devoted much of his writing—and many of his sermons—to Jewish ethics. For Wurzbürger, the function of *halakhah* is “to serve, true to its name, as the avenue towards the development of a Jewish ‘ethics of responsibility’ that mandates the ongoing cultivation of the kind of

autonomous moral perceptions that emerge from the engagement of the human self with the ethos of the tradition” (Jacobs and Carmy 2008:307). Referencing, appreciatively, Rackman’s article on the dialectics within *halakhah* (Rackman 1961), Wurzbarger commented that “the *Halakhah* succeeds in combining a stress on moral laws with an awareness that all moral principles must be handled with care, lest their rigorous application, without counterbalancing safeguards, yield a harvest of moral paradoxes” (Wurzbarger 1962:237).

From his earliest years in the rabbinate to his closing years in the pulpit and beyond, Wurzbarger promoted cooperation with non-Orthodox Jews. Recognizing a growing chasm within the Jewish community, he urged cooperation with “Jews of all persuasions in a massive effort to resist the tidal wave of assimilation” (Wurzbarger 1986:39). Wurzbarger’s words echoed thoughts expressed by Joseph Lookstein who, in an address to the (1975) annual convention of the (Orthodox) Rabbinical Council of America, pointed to increasing discord threatening the solidarity of the American Jewish community and urged tolerance and understanding (Lookstein 1976).

Recurring Themes in Modern Orthodoxy during the Third Quarter of the Twentieth Century

Among the commonly discussed themes of modern Orthodoxy were the nature of halakhic development—in which connection, the situation of *agunot* and means of addressing it were not infrequently referenced—synthesis of Jewish tradition and Western culture, Jewish ethics and the meta-ethics of *halakhah*, and a commitment to *klal yisrael*, expressed in part by participation in pan-denominational Jewish organizations and interaction with and a sense of responsibility for the broader Jewish community. In 1966, Dr. Irving “Yitz” Greenberg—rabbi and Harvard PhD, serving as associate professor of history at Yeshiva University—was interviewed by a freshman student at Yeshiva College. The interview, published in Yeshiva University’s student newspaper, *the Commentator*, related to several of these themes, and offered some sharp critiques.

In the realm of *halakhah*, Greenberg opined, echoing Berkovits, that “today, there are some experiences that *halachah* doesn’t cover adequately, and we are unwilling to apply many *halachot* that deal with contemporary problems. The *Poskim* aren’t meeting their responsibility in updating and fully applying our law codes. This inaction represents a denial of one of the basic tenets of Judaism: that our tradition may be applied to any situation. In short, the *halakhah* has broken down” (Eleff 2016:178). Greenberg maintained that the contemporary era called for a thorough re-examination of the *Shulkhan Arukh*.⁴

Greenberg also called attention to Biblical scholarship: “We need to undertake Biblical scholarship in order to more fully understand our own revelation. We should be committed by faith to the Torah as Divine

revelation, but what we mean by ‘Divine revelation’ may be less external or mechanical than many Jews now think” (Eleff 2016:178). That same year, Emanuel Rackman remarked in the pages of *Commentary* that much of the Pentateuch “may have been written by people in different times.” While affirming that, at a moment in time, God “made the people of Israel aware of His immediacy,” and the Torah, recorded by Moses, is the evidence of the covenant between God and His people, Rackman noted: “Even the rabbis in the Talmud did not agree on the how” (Rackman 1966:128).

Greenberg, who would eventually spend most of his career working outside denominational settings, commented, in the course of the interview: “I believe that the definition of a Jew is one who takes the covenant idea seriously, who struggles to find its validity in his own life. It doesn’t matter to me whether one calls himself Reform, Conservative or Orthodox” (Eleff 2016:175). He, as Rackman, Berkovits, Lookstein and Wurzbarger and other modern Orthodox leaders of the period emphasized the imperative of relating to Jews of all denominations. This sense of *klal yisrael* extended in many cases to activism in support of Soviet Jewry and, universally, to strong interest and concern for the well-being of the State of Israel.

An Approach, Not a Movement

Writing in 1969, Emanuel Rackman opined that “one can hardly regard modern Orthodoxy as a movement: it is no more than a coterie of a score of rabbis in America and in Israel.... I no less than they, deny any claim to innovation.... Ours is a commitment which invites questions, and creativity in thought and practice as applied not only to the Law but to theology” (Rackman 1969:146).

Rabbis Rackman, Lookstein, Berkovits, Wurzbarger, Greenberg and others identified as modern Orthodox did not share identical views, nor did they organize conferences or networks of like-minded colleagues. Modern Orthodoxy was an approach, not a movement. At one point, however, Eliezer Berkovits proposed creating an association to address contemporary halakhic issues.

In November 1970, Berkovits sent Emanuel Rackman a proposal outlining the “Formation of a Society of Jewish Scholars to Deal with the Contemporary Intellectual, Ethical and Social Challenge Confronting Judaism and the Jewish People” (Berkovits, 1970a). It was an idea that he had earlier raised in a letter to Leo Jung:

Of late, I have been thinking of the sad situation that while there are innumerable problems on the horizon of our existence, here as well as in Eretz Yisrael, nothing is being done to do planned halakhic research into them. There is not a single place in the world where vital halakhic

research in contemporary issues is being undertaken. It is a situation inconceivable in any civilized society.

It may not be a bad idea to assemble, be it even a small group of talmidei chachamim, who know how to do scholarly work and have accepted the Torah im derech erets ideology, who would undertake certain halakhic projects, would meet with some regularity for mutual discussion, and would publish the results of their work. The accumulative effect of such an association might be considerable (Berkovits 1970b).

Subsequent correspondence suggests that the project did not materialize for lack of funds (Jung 1970 and Berkovits 1970c).

A Drift to the Right

By the late 1970s, both Berkovits and Rackman had moved to Israel, and Greenberg was operating the non-denominational Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL). Reflecting on the drift to the right within Orthodoxy, Walter Wurzburger told an interviewer that, of his three (adult) children, two would surely not come to his synagogue were he not the congregation's rabbi: "It wouldn't be Orthodox enough" (Wurzburger 1981b:14).

In 1985, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik withdrew from public life, owing to declining health. Based on his endorsement of the permissibility of participation in such bodies as the inter-denominational Synagogue Council of America many Orthodox rabbis had, over the years, comfortably participated in pan-denominational organizations. By the 1980s, the number of Orthodox rabbis who joined such organizations was diminishing; within a decade of Soloveitchik's retirement, the Synagogue Council ceased to exist.

Though not widespread, the phenomenon of women's prayer groups first emerged in the 1970s, in a limited number of circles of modern Orthodox women. This elicited condemnation in a responsum authored by a group of five rabbis from the "centrist" RIETS Talmud faculty, published, in 1985, by the Rabbinical Council of America (Eleff 2020:200). Commenting from Jerusalem, after having read the responsum, Eliezer Berkovitz observed that the rabbis' "'*T'shuva*' has nothing to do with *Halacha*." He added: "There may be a great deal of Orthodoxy around. Unfortunately, there is only very little halachic Judaism" (Eleff 2016:385-386).⁵

In his book *Authentically Orthodox: A Tradition-Bound Faith in American Life*, Zev Eleff notes that, in the 1970s, American Protestantism experienced a conservative upsurge; opposition to all things "modern," and "biblical rigidity, piety, and separatism" were on the rise (Eleff 2020:43). Similar developments were, during the late 1970s and 1980s, also reflected in Jewish Orthodoxy. Sociologist Chaim Waxman comments that, "As is almost universally the case, the patterns of Jewish life are a reflection of the

surrounding society and culture. The ‘turn to the right’ in American Orthodoxy was, in large measure, a reflection of the broader turn to the right and the rise of fundamentalism in a variety of different countries and continents” (Waxman 2017:81). Jonathan Sarna observes that, during this period, there was an inward turn in American Judaism; not only within Orthodoxy. “Whereas during the 1950s and 1960s universal causes ... dominated the American Jewish agenda, subsequent decades saw greater emphasis on particularistic Jewish concerns” (Sarna 2004:306-307).

Recent Trends

The founding of *Edah* by Saul Berman (1996) and Avi Weiss’s manifesto, *Open Orthodoxy! A Modern Orthodox Rabbi’s Creed* (Weiss 1997), were harbingers of efforts to assert a revitalized modern Orthodoxy. Though *Edah*, which aimed to give voice to modern Orthodoxy, lasted institutionally for only a decade, Weiss’s Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, launched in 1999, has endured. Asher Lopatin, Weiss’s immediate successor as President of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, urged a modern Orthodoxy “willing to listen to voices from without and within” (Eleff 2016:420). He called for “bringing back the real Modern Orthodoxy: the kind in which an Orthodox journal could print an article like Rabbi Norman Lamm’s ‘Faith and Doubt,’ which claims doubt as part of our religion, or an article by Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits accompanied by a note stipulating that the content is not necessarily in consonance with editorial opinion” (Eleff 2016:423). Reflecting the commitment of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah to interacting with Jews of all streams, representatives from the liberal Jewish denominations were invited to speak at Lopatin’s installation, in 2013.⁶

In a recent article, Marc Shapiro presents considerable evidence of changing attitudes toward modern Biblical scholarship “in a segment of Modern Orthodoxy over the past twenty years or so, and which will continue to pick up steam in the years ahead” (Shapiro 2017:185). This trend is evident in posts on *TheTorah.com*, reflecting “synthesis” of traditional Jewish thought and contemporary scholarship. Adam Ferziger notes that the increasing acceptance of critical approaches to the Hebrew Bible among contemporary Orthodox educators and rabbis includes accepting the possibility of multiple authorship of the Torah (Ferziger 2019a:233).

In the landscape relating to the role of women in various aspects of Jewish life, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, founded in 1997, advocates for the “meaningful participation” of women, within a halakhic framework, in Jewish family, synagogue and community life. A dramatic milestone in expanding the scope of women’s religious leadership was the establishment of Yeshivat Maharat, in 2009, to ordain Orthodox female clergy. At this writing, dozens of women have been ordained and are serving in a variety of professional capacities. The plight of *agunot*—amelioration of whose situation was vigorously advocated by modern Orthodox activists in

the 1960s—remains a matter of continuing attention. The most recent attempt to address the matter was the creation of the New York-based International Beit Din, headed by Rabbi Simcha Krauss, in 2014.

Alan Brill reminds us that “All constructions of modern Orthodoxy are culturally situated, geographically located, and ever bound to a specific time” (Brill 2019:192). Modern Jewish Orthodoxy in the 2020s is not identical to that of the 1960s. Yet, exploring antecedents of today’s modern Orthodoxy can contribute to a richer understanding of contemporary trends, for the past is surely prologue.

Endnotes

1. In a letter to Leo Jung, Berkovits expressed gratitude to his senior, well-established colleague for his “inestimable help” in securing this appointment (Berkovits 1958).
2. Alan Brill has authored an outstanding intellectual biographical sketch of Walter Wurzburger (Brill 2008).
3. Wurzburger records that, in the course of a summer job, washing dishes at a Jewish camp, he approached and shared his personal situation with the camp rabbi, Leo Jung. Wurzburger had been juggling work, classes at City University and studies at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath (which he found ideologically stifling). Rabbi Jung arranged his admission to Yeshiva College with a full scholarship for tuition and lodging (Wurzburger 1981a: 18-21).
4. An entire volume of essays, including an autobiographical sketch by the subject of the book, is devoted to Yitz Greenberg and “the road not taken” (Ferziger, Freud-Kandel and Bayme 2019).
5. The last book that Eliezer Berkovits authored is titled *Jewish Women in Time and Torah*. He closes by noting that the need for halakhic development is not restricted to the status of women in Judaism; regrettably, however, the prevailing “so-called drift right ... is a drift away from authentic *Halakhah*” (Berkovits 1990:134).
6. The need to educate Orthodox clergy to recognize cause and occasion for interaction with Jews of other streams has been noted in more “centrist” circles, as well. The late Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein (1933-2015), son-in-law of Joseph Soloveitchik, who, after teaching at Yeshiva University, moved to Israel (1972) to serve as *co-rosh yeshiva* of Yeshivat Har Etzion, recounted the following. A former student, preparing for an interview for a rabbinic position in upstate New York, phoned his teacher for counsel on a matter relating to other denominations that he understood would likely be raised. “Upon further inquiry, it turned out that the specific issue – which had apparently generated some debate in the *kehillah* – related to *Yom Hashoah* and whether he would favor a joint or separate convocation. Shocked, I responded that, as far as I knew, the Nazis had not differentiated.

Could we? In my stupefaction, I realized that we had an educational charge to fill” (Lichtenstein 2010:207-208).

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