

# BOOK REVIEW

## *Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites its History*

by MARC B. SHAPIRO

(London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015),  
347 pages.

Reviewed by  
Yoel Finkelman

On rare occasions, academics manage to cross over and speak to those who live outside the ivory tower, and nobody in the contemporary Modern Orthodox intellectual scene does that better than Marc B. Shapiro. On even rarer occasions, forthcoming academic monographs elicit wide-eyed anticipation on the part of non-academic readers. Shapiro's new book, *Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History*, has done just that, garnering hundreds of pre-orders and a barrage of online pre-publication speculation. Shapiro has earned this well-deserved reputation not only through impressive erudition, but also through a serious investment in teaching and writing for lay audiences, through "well-attended" online courses, by leading tours of Jewish Europe, and with continual publication on the well read Seforim blog.

The current book adds to the decades-old discussion of Orthodox historiography: namely, the way in which Orthodox Jews in the past 200 years have responded to the historical self-consciousness of the modern period and to the academic or "scientific" historical writings that come with and help form it. Jewish Orthodoxies of various stripes have gone about writing their own histories that match their theological and ideological convictions. At times, Orthodox historiography has provided a helpful corrective and a conservative response to the gleeful iconoclasm of some modern historians. At other times, it has simply involved fudging what actually happened and why. Shapiro traces a particularly extreme form of this kind of historical work, namely censorship of sacred texts in order to bring those texts in line with the current fashionable dogmas.

Shapiro writes chapter-length essays on Orthodox censorship of works of Jewish thought and halakha, as well as lengthy discussions of historical manipulations of the figures of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch and Rav Kook. Finally, he addresses ways in which contemporary publishing eliminates discussions and images of sexuality that were deemed unproblematic in previous generations.

The book's examples are so extensive and irrefutable that one is forced to reach a simple conclusion: Orthodox Judaism has, consistently, invested significant energies in protecting readers from holy works that contemporary gatekeepers identify as "problematic." Rav Kook's students drop or edit sentences that hint at more radical antinomianism than those students are comfortable with. Publishers who were fond of the practice of *kapparot* arranged to leave out the *Shulhan Arukh's* stated opposition to the practice. *Kippot* are added to drawings or photos of well-known rabbis, such as the Lubavitcher Rebbe or Isaac Breuer, who had once been photographed with uncovered heads. An American translation of Megillat Esther leaves out some of the more bloodthirsty passages in its English translation, since they did not match the desire for Americanization and acceptance so popular in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Shapiro offers, quite literally, hundreds of pages of such examples.

*Changing the Immutable* has a kind of love-hate relationship with this kind of censorship. As the last chapter argues, the Jewish tradition (as, to be honest, all cultures) allows, or really insists, that people fudge the truth under some conditions. (See, for example, the somewhat dystopian picture of a truth-telling society in *Sanhedrin* 97a or in the 2009 film *The Invention of Lying*.) On the other hand, Shapiro understands the ways in which censorship of any text which some editor or publisher finds troublesome actually undermines the grounds on which the tradition itself rests. Sacred texts should, ostensibly, determine how Jews act and what they believe. Yet contemporary gatekeepers can censor and manipulate these texts, such that they will bind readers only when the texts tell the community what those gatekeepers want people to believe. Shapiro refers to this as an example of "a generation that judges its judges," (13), one that shows outward signs of respect for the great rabbis and their Torah, but is happy to manipulate that Torah when it suits current needs. In these cases, contemporary sensibilities determine what Torah is allowed to say, rather than Torah determining contemporary sensibilities.

Shapiro lists these examples in a rapid fire and clear style, and wisely juxtaposes full-page scans of censored and uncensored editions of works so that readers can see exactly what the censorship looks like. But Shapiro does not offer much by way of conceptual tools with which to help the reader make sense of the different phenomena he describes, even by contextualizing a given matter. Without background, many readers might not understand the urgency, for example, to misrepresent Rav Kook's advocacy of physical exercise. They may not realize that what was at stake was not only cardiovascular health, but siding with secular Zionist voices in critiquing the perceived disembodied and cerebral Judaism of the yeshivas

## TRADITION

and of the diaspora as a whole. Furthermore, Shapiro misses an opportunity to point to the ironies of religious censorship, since by now virtually every segment of Orthodoxy celebrates exercise and physical fitness.<sup>1</sup>

Jewish sources have a great deal to say, much of it negative if not downright nasty, about nonobservance on the part of Jews. This became a matter of great ideological debate and halakhic creativity throughout the modern period as increasing numbers of Jews became nonobservant. Hence, when the *Kitsur Shulhan Arukh*, following precedent in Rambam and *Shulhan Arukh*, determines that one should disregard the laws of mourning and celebrate upon the death of one who “casts off the yoke of the precepts,” there is little novelty. But when later editions of this classic text eliminate or modify this passage, a great deal more is at stake than just the fact that such treatment of nonobservant Jews “is not the sort of passage the would be ‘helpful’ to schoolchildren” since it “would be referring to some of their own relatives” (87-89). Instead, this is about redrawing the boundaries of community and in-group, accepting definitions of Jewish identity more dependent on ethnicity and lineage than observance of mitzvot. That is, this rewriting of *Kitsur Shulhan Arukh* offers Shapiro a missed opportunity to trace Orthodox reactions to some of the most important questions in modern Jewish identity and address changing compromises not only with the integrity of holy books but with the secularizing trends of the last two centuries.

Even more broadly, showing how sacred texts shift over time and place is one of the basic tasks of intellectual history. Scholars and students, for example, might well identify a midrash that appears in one version in the Yerushalmi but in a different version in the Bavli, and those differences can be explained at least in part by changing religious sensibilities, different political concerns, or shifting socio-economic conditions. At least in my experience this is not viewed as destructive manipulation of the tradition, but is rather precisely those kinds of things we expect to see, at least if we are attuned to the methods of intellectual history.

What an individual or community consider evil censorship depends on what they assume about the integrity of the written and oral tradition, the nature of authorship, the role of educators, the task of publishers, the concept of canon, and notions of truth. And these are in turn colored by the technologies and institutions through which ideas and texts are formed, distributed, and consumed. What one community calls a lie another calls

<sup>1</sup> Entering a printing shop in a Haredi neighborhood, I asked the cashier what she thought about the stack of advertising posters for a Hassidic Yoga class, with its integration of Judaism and Eastern religions. She told me she thought it was fine, since the teachers would be sure to remove any traces of idolatry from their classes.

## *Book Review*

education; what one individual sees as manipulation another imagines as the fluidity of tradition; one text's plagiarism is another's reworking of older sources. Or, in more contemporary terms, when do contributors to Wikipedia edit and when do they censor? Why do some readers feel inspired by hagiography (even when they know it is less than true) and others feel cynical about the same phenomena? Answers to these questions in turn raise further questions about the meaning that readers make of texts. How do readers make sense of texts, particularly sacred texts, particularly when those readers suspect or know that the texts have been edited or censored? These are important questions for making sense of phenomena related to censorship and for understanding how religions come to modify their sense of tradition. But Shapiro, frustratingly, does not really speak to them, which leaves his readers without conceptual tools to understand these phenomena in broader context.

This does not take away from the important contribution which Shapiro makes not only to scholarship on Orthodoxy's treatment of its sacred literature, but to the public conversation that he has started about what we, as observant Jews, expect from our teachers, authors, and publishers. These are crucial matters, and Shapiro's skill at pushing the community to address them exemplifies the contribution that academic scholarship can make to the public good.

*Dr. Yoel Finkelman is Curator of the Haim and Hanna Salomon Judaica Collection at the National Library of Israel.*

