

Dr. Erica Brown is the scholar-in-residence of The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. She is the author of *Return: Daily Inspiration for the Days of Awe* (OU/Maggid) and the forthcoming *Happier Endings* (Simon and Schuster).

## A STRICTLY KOSHER REVIEW

Years ago, I was in the home of a haredi family and noticed that they had a “kosher” encyclopedia of animal life. In a private moment, I asked the mother why she needed a haredi guide to this information. “The kids love animals, but we didn’t want them to know *everything*.” She said the word “everything” in a whisper, from which I was to infer that the children were not to know how animals mate and reproduce, information they could have easily derived from a close reading of *Tanakh*.

This filtering of information among the ultra-Orthodox is not surprising. The rise in power of the religious right in America is covered in Robert Putnam and David Campbell’s comprehensive tome: *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. There they identify five trends in American life in the 60s and 70s that fueled a counter-movement within many religious denominations: great society liberalism, the Civil Rights movement, changing gender norms, Supreme Court decisions that widened the separation of church and state, and moral decadence coupled with sexual permissiveness.<sup>1</sup> The aftershock of these changes promoted evangelical conservatism, and it is easy to understand the rise of the religious right in Orthodoxy within this counter-cultural revolution. Taking back control of what its adherents listen, watch, and read became, in the decades that followed, a haredi mandate eventually leading to the kosher animal encyclopedia.

Yoel Finkelman covers these acts of filtering and more in his book *Strictly Kosher Reading: Popular Literature and the Condition of Contemporary Orthodoxy*.<sup>2</sup> The sub-title is somewhat misleading since he touches only lightly on branches of Orthodoxy outside of the haredi variety and

<sup>1</sup> Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 114-116.

<sup>2</sup> Yoel Finkelman, *Strictly Kosher Reading* (Boston: Boston Academic Studies Press, 2011).

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uses hasidic and *Modern Orthodox* commitments mostly as a foil for the haredi construction of the published word, from history to fiction. Finkelman, by his own confession, is modern Orthodox and a lecturer at Bar Ilan University, as well as a teacher of Talmud. He has done his research carefully and waded through haredi children's books, hagiography, theology and the action thriller (until I read his book I had no idea there were haredi action thrillers) and compares this burgeoning print material to those of Protestant evangelist Christians and against itself, looking for collusion and subversion, ways that these trends are both similar and dissimilar.

Using the work of well-known sociologists of religion, Finkelman discusses haredi commitments as an outgrowth of post-World War II American Jewish life that has succeeded because of its capacity to self-sustain its messaging, offering wherever possible an ultra-Orthodox content alternative to news and entertainment. In his words, "Freedom of religion not only challenges faith, but also creates opportunities for faith."<sup>3</sup> The very fear-inducing mechanisms that can challenge and dilute faith commitments, like newspapers and the Internet, become vehicles for the transmission of a haredi agenda. An "us versus them" approach to the outside world has generated the need to borrow frameworks from the "them" and fill in the blanks with devout language, at times subtle, at times direct, that suggests a larger battle to preserve a more innocent, even pious culture. Sociologist Christian Smith suggests that minority religious groups strengthen themselves precisely by defining who they are not and by maintaining a perception of being embattled: "... religious communities thrive not so much despite being embattled, but *because* they are embattled."<sup>4</sup> The fight-back psyche of the religious right becomes a powerful tool in the armament of Orthodoxy.

This understanding differs from one of Jeremy Stolow's suppositions in *Orthodox by Design: Judaism, Print Politics and the Artscroll Revolution*,<sup>5</sup> which claims that it is openness, not the desire for insularity, that prompted the fast growth of haredi print messaging: "... modern conditions of voluntary affiliation, and of easy access to vast storehouses of knowledge – thanks specially to accelerating rates of print matter – have dramatically altered the expression of religious authority, both for those who seek to

<sup>3</sup> *Strictly Kosher Reading*, 29.

<sup>4</sup> Finkelman mentions Smith's fourth chapter of *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1998), 30.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Stolow, *Orthodox by Design* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

assert it and for those who are presumed to fall under its sway.”<sup>6</sup> The top-down rabbinic approach of authority has been blurred somewhat by a bottom-up media encounter with complete strangers who provoke and disagree, tangling the normative expectation of control in the haredi enclave. Stolow’s book is cited in Finkelman’s footnotes but without explaining how the two books differ, a noticeable omission since the latter was published only a year earlier.

The American haredi enclave has created a comfortable social envelope for the individual, such that “he or she will venture outside the enclave as little as possible.”<sup>7</sup> Finkelman deals mostly but not exclusively with American Haredim and literature in the English language, believing that American Haredim are generally less extreme in their outlook than their Israeli counterparts. He contends that popular culture saturates life and is a medium through which groups construct contemporary thought and practice; Haredim confront modernity on Orthodoxy’s own terms, even if adherents do not always live up to the ideals in that social construction. Why listen to popular music with its distorted values when you can listen to a similar melody but with lyrics that affirm your own values? Questions like this present the continuous tension of mediating between isolation and acculturation, the tiresome process of selective choices.

Yet the method is not foolproof, as Finkelman demonstrates again and again. A haredi book on parenting, for example, deals up-front with spanking. It recommends that parents opt for a gentle tone and learn anger management, understanding that the repercussions of spanking can have a long-term negative impact on a child’s religious development.<sup>8</sup> This modern approach, however, does not coalesce with verses from Proverbs or a myriad of rabbinic statements (see, for example, BT *Moe’d Katan* 17a) – from the Shelah to the Gra – on how sparing the rod is a mistake. This willful ignoring is not lost on Finkelman, who also turns to haredi guides for couples that recommend companionate marriages and provide suggestions for what is to be done to preserve a love relationship, a far cry from the pre-arranged marriages of Eastern Europe. Books that show that only true happiness can be found in a Torah lifestyle also assume, as Finkelman writes later, that happiness is a goal for “Torah-true” Jews. But this misses the point of halakhic commitment. Its objective is to provide meaning and acceptance of the Divine yoke of commandedness;

<sup>6</sup> *Orthodox by Design*, 65.

<sup>7</sup> Finkelman, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Although a similar notion appears as an observation in the Talmud, the author Finkelman questions does not present this idea as authentically Jewish.

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it is not designed as a touchstone for personal satisfaction (even if it accomplishes this).

Finkelman cites the ethos of Eastern Europe that the American haredi community tries to imitate with nostalgia, dress and general *yeshivishness* but veers from this when the ethos goes against contemporary trends that currently serve or appeal to the community, like the light diet offered in haredi cook/diet books and nutrition manuals that stay away from heavy kugels and *shmaltz*. Cookbooks present another way to affirm the haredi ideal of the nuclear family by only using women as authors, who should, to the financial degree possible, be the mainstay of the home. Although there are many women writers of haredi literature, it is hard to find a visual image of women (and sometimes even girls in children's books) in this genre.

The haredi community must negotiate the fine lines between a voluntary but authoritarian commitment that surface in myriad ways in everyday living. The social norms set up by the community are only informally enforced, but the social expectations are so strong that those in positions of power have to figure out what will keep people in and what will push them away. Books that cannot toe this line, and critique the community or its authorities are dismissed and pulled from the shelves, whether it is a Natan Slifkin book on the integration of science and religion science or R. Nathan Kamenetsky's book, *The Making of a Godol*.<sup>9</sup> In the case of the latter, the story is much more complex. As R. Kamenetsky found out in the harshest of ways, even presenting facts without critiquing the community was met with withering reproach.

In general, haredi publications take one of three approaches to secular culture: denial of any influence, acknowledgment of influence and a defense of legitimacy (which means that authors have to show how a trend is authentically Jewish) or valuing secular trends that seem to be superior to traditional ones, an approach that must be managed carefully since it can lead to people straying from the path. In the world of haredi fiction, criticisms of the community cannot be made directly but are sometimes made through innuendo or in the mouths of non-observant characters or *ba'alei teshuva*. Some female haredi writers, Finkelman observes, push the envelope on this. Finkelman uses the example of novels of teenage dropouts with insensitive fathers who criticize sons unable to live up to haredi scholarly ideals, thereby marginalizing them in the community.

<sup>9</sup> Nathan Kamenetsky, *Making of a Godol*, (Jerusalem: Ha-masurah Publishers, 2002).

In areas of theology, the tendency to stress *emuna pesbata*, simple faith, without any a posture of questioning has resulted in a dearth of books and articles in this area until recently; now that rabbis and leaders struggle with a higher drop-out rate, books on theology have become more important. The few books in this area present religion in simplistic terms; any cloud of doubt is to be managed by seeking out rabbinic guidance. Assuming the theological constructs of haredi literature, Finkelman does a comprehensive job on the mixed messaging about evolution and science related facts. Science is used to bolster belief until it contradicts belief. Why not then ignore science altogether? “Haredi Judaism wants the prestige and authority of scientific discourse but without accepting the conclusions that scientists themselves reach. Authors want science to be authoritative enough to offer demonstrations and proof, but to be questionable and flawed enough to be rejected.”<sup>10</sup>

For all the book’s provocation and interest, the structure of the book would have been more compelling had Finkelman began with the chapter on theology and worked his way to the more whimsical aspects of haredi fiction. Haredi children’s book and novels make more sense once a theological construct is in place. But these points are all relatively minor given the book’s accessible style and well-researched assumptions.

At the end of *Strictly Kosher Reading*, Finkelman boldly concludes that “...we need fiction. Perhaps even lies, to construct our communities.”<sup>11</sup> All social constructs are on some level an act of the imagination. I wonder what a haredi reading this book would think of the lies Finkelman uncovers that are needed to construct his or her world. I wonder, too, if a Haredi might question the *Modern Orthodox* movement’s lies and contradictions, its near lack of any filtering today. One of the reasons Finkelman could write this book is that there *is* a body of literature that actually supports an ideology that one can critique. It may be antithetical to the *Modern Orthodox* movement to have such a construct, but in its absence *Modern Orthodoxy* has become, in the last decades, more of a comfortable lifestyle than an ideological commitment.

Finkelman includes only one illustration, which appears in his preface. It is a reprint of two pages of Baruch Chait’s children’s book, *The Lost Treasure of Tikun HaMiddos Island*.<sup>12</sup> It depicts an island where the haredi side is clean, well-patrolled, and a bastion of goodness. On the

<sup>10</sup> *Strictly Kosher Reading*, 131.

<sup>11</sup> *Strictly Kosher Reading*, 191.

<sup>12</sup> Baruch Chait, *The Lost Treasure of Tikun HaMiddos Island*, (Jerusalem: Feldheim: 2001).

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non-Orthodox side, the buildings are all run-down, dogs and people change places, and everyone looks miserable. It is not hard to make sense of the author's agenda. But what would a Modern Orthodox Island look like that would make it robustly different from a regular island? Our island may look more sophisticated on the surface, but the firm, vibrant and passionate commitment to faith in the Tikun HaMiddos Island is enviable. I often wonder what sociologists would write about if there were no more Haredim or Amish people. We might just have to hold up a mirror to ourselves.

Entering a mikveh one cold winter evening long ago, I saw a haredi attendant quickly slip her romance novel into a desk drawer as I entered the room. That was then. Today there is strictly kosher romance. Whether or not it is good mikveh reading, I cannot say.