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Of Metrology and Mimesis

There are texts so central, so seminal to their disciplines that they are revisited and retaught to successive generations of scholars, mined over and over for new insights and new interpretations. Even after the revisionists have had their turn, after legions of young graduate students have sharpened their analytical claws by scratching at the lacunae in the argument or elisions in the analysis, the texts stand, and, under scholarly scrutiny, continue to yield new insights.

In the history of science, the academic field in which I was trained, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is such a text. Everyone, it seems, has had a go of it over the past five decades—one scholar wrote an analysis of the twenty-one different, and inconsistent, ways Kuhn uses the word "paradigm" in the text[1]—and yet it remains a foundational work that graduate students read and scholars engage. (And of all of the canonical texts in the history of science literature, it is the one with which non-specialists are most likely to be familiar.)

Professor Haym Soloveitchik's "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy" plays that role for students and practitioners of contemporary Modern Orthodoxy. Its importance to those seeking to understand the American Orthodox community was evident when it was first released in 1994, when it garnered enormous attention among serious Modern Orthodox thinkers (or anyone seeking to be seen as one). And its significance as a work of history and sociology of our religious community has endured, despite both the passage of time and the many critiques of its analysis.

I trace the arc of my own intellectual and religious evolution in the varied responses that this text has evoked in me, and continues to evoke, as I have re-encountered it over the decades. As I write this, I have to laugh at myself—what a strange relationship to have with one long and idiosyncratic paper that melds personal narrative with academic analysis. But so it is.

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I first read "Rupture and Reconstruction" as an eighteen-year-old student in Beth Jacob of Jerusalem, an elite haredi women's seminary. My parents' home was and is haredi by institutional affiliations, intellectual and open. My mother had read the essay and, recognizing its importance as a commentary on and critique of the American Orthodox world, sent it to me in Jerusalem. In the days before scanning and emailing, this meant painstakingly photocopying its 60-odd pages and airmailing them to my dormitory. I read the essay, and circulated it among like-minded friends. (At one point, a teacher of ours denounced a pernicious and harmful work circulating among the student body, whose ideas were dangerous. I listened apprehensively, expecting at any point to be fingered as the disseminator of heresies. It turned out that she was referring to some quack diet book that was making the rounds.)

That year, I was privileged to spend time with the late Rabbi Nachman Bulman and his wife, Rebbetzin Shaindel Bulman. Rabbi Bulman, a man not easily characterized in a sentence, ranged widely across the Orthodox world in his learning, teaching, and institution-building. Over a Shabbat meal in his apartment in Maalot Dafna, R. Bulman shared his thoughts about "Rupture and Reconstruction": "He's 90% right," he said. "And he's 100% wrong."

That characterization, of an analysis that captured the lyrics, but missed the tune, of haredi life, resonated with me, with the way I read the article as a (very) young adult ensconced, even if at its left-er edge, in the American haredi world. While Soloveitchik's analysis of the mimetic and text-based traditions was novel and powerful, his description of the contemporary haredi world as substituting law-book scrupulosity for lack of genuine religious feeling did not accord with lived experience. Around me I saw people serving Hashem with commitment, devotion, and *yirat shamayim*; the tendency towards halakhic stringency came from a desire to best fulfill the will of God, rather than as a poor attempt to fill the void left by lack of viscerally-felt religious experience.

It was decades later, after having read works like Shulamith Soloveitchik Meiselman's *The Soloveitchik Heritage: A Daughter's Memoir* and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's "The Eastern European Era in Jewish History,"[2] that I began to grasp what Soloveitchik had seen from the back among the old European Jews of his father's shul and the profound, shattering rupture that attended the old world's destruction. I felt a glimmer of understanding of what had been lost with that world; heard a faint echo of the "thick culture" of Eastern European Jewish life; realized what yeshivish Brooklyn in the 1990s could never approximate, let alone replace. There is, I know still, deep religious devotion and intense feeling

behind the quest to find the ideal way to observe God's Law. Doubtless as a result of my upbringing and my family connections—not in the tribal sense, that I am loyal to my people, but because my sense evidence disproves it—I have no patience for the lazy Modern Orthodox bashing of haredim and their *humrot*. (And that is even before we consider whether the Modern Orthodox world is well-positioned to throw halakhic observance stones. "A *humra*," a teacher in that same haredi seminary once not-entirely-inaccurately observed to us, "is just a *siman* in the *Shulhan Arukh* I haven't heard of yet.") But I have a greater grasp now than I did then about what that rich, textured, immersive Jewish world was like, and how far from it all of us, haredi and Modern Orthodox alike, are.

My second encounter with "Rupture and Reconstruction" came as a graduate student in her twenties studying the history of science. My life had not taken me along the paths expected—I was neither a physicist nor was I any longer living in the haredi world. (I did not yet, however, identify as Modern Orthodox. "The land was ours," Robert Frost wrote, "before we were the land's.../ Possessing what we still were unpossessed by/ Possessed by what we now no more possessed.") Unconnected to my doctoral research, I wrote a short paper on the intersection of historical metrology (the study of measurement systems, their development and dissemination) and halakha. In contemporary terms, the question we ask about halakhic measurement units is just how big they are: Is an *amma* 18 inches? 20? 22? To an historical metrologist, a more interesting question is: how does someone in one place convey what his *amma*, or his *revi'it*, is, to someone living in another place, if each uses a different measurement system, and neither knows the other's?

In the course of my research, I came to think that one of the stories that serves as an evocative referent for Soloveitchik's entire argument—the refusal of Hafetz Hayyim's grandson to use Hafetz Hayyim's *kiddush* cup, for fear that it did not hold enough wine (see n. 11)—was not actually a story about the evolution of halakhic practice from the mimetic to the text-based at all. It was, instead, a story about the transition from specific local measurement systems to standardized systems that could travel across time and space. In the first case, I can only know what my local *revi'it* is. The second case allows multiple *revi'it* measurements to exist in the same place at the same time. (To an academic with an analytical hammer, I suppose, everything is a nail. Years removed from the academy I still see the history of science and technology everywhere.) I might not easily be able to compare your description of a *revi'it* in your imperial units to my description in my imperial units, but once we were both using the metric or other standardized system, it was easy enough to compare

the two, and to decide, out of an abundance of caution, profound awe of God, or both, to use the larger one. Perhaps Soloveitchik, too, was seeing everything as a nail, refracting all change in Orthodox practice through the lens of his alliterative analysis, when other explanations, other historical lenses, might serve as well, or better, to account for particular phenomena.

I am now in my 40s, an educator, a non-academic researcher, a once-and-perhaps-future rebbetzin. I am ideologically part of the Modern Orthodox wing of the Modern Orthodox community.[3] I now read "Rupture and Reconstruction"—I teach parts of it to my students, telling them that every thinking American Modern Orthodox person has to have read and engaged with it—both as a trenchant critique of our community, and as a primary text about the time in which it was written, with obvious, even glaring, blind spots.

Most striking to me now is Soloveitchik's delineation of the shift in the locus of rabbinic authority from the pulpit or the community to the study hall. I have taught, for the last decade and a half, in two different, large, co-ed Modern Orthodox high schools. The majority of our students attend secular colleges; they learn Talmud in co-ed classes; they will be challenged, externally and internally, by the egalitarian moral universe of college campuses; they have largely assimilated those egalitarian values themselves when it comes to homosexuality and, to a lesser extent, feminism. The senior rashei yeshiva who stand as the halakhic decisors for our community are inhabiting a vastly different social, cultural, intellectual, and moral world. I do not know how long such a disconnect between a community and its leadership is sustainable, or what "not sustainable" in this context even means. Does it mean that some people leave Orthodoxy? Stay Orthodox in body but not in mind?

This, rather than some more general lack of commitment or half-heartedness, was actually what Jay Lefkowitz described in his essay on Social Orthodoxy. Lefkowitz's "article that launched a thousand sermons" is often read as a critique of people who practice Orthodoxy (more or less) without religious seriousness or thought. But he is very clearly discussing a different group—those who find Orthodoxy meaningful as a community and way of life, but cannot accept its teachings about gender and sexuality, egalitarianism, modern scholarship. The former read is flattering to the sermonizers. The latter is a profound communal challenge.[4]

Will the Social Orthodox seek out other sources of halakhic decisions, in the United States or more likely in Israel? Do their own halakhic deciding using the Internet? Stay very passionate about these issues until they have a couple of kids, are swamped by the demands of the everyday, and life pressures kick in, quieting their critiques? Further, I have no idea

whether there are more people in this camp, or in the increasingly-pulled-to-the-right camp that Soloveitchik portrays. His descriptive sociology is powerful and enlightening, but this conversation dearly needs social science data.

And most glaring is Soloveitchik's (acknowledged) failure to describe these countervailing forces pulling Orthodoxy to the left—not the forces of halakhic laxity and can't-really-be-bothered-ism, but the principled forces of ideological egalitarianism. These forces push back against the movement of halakhic authority into the bet midrash, as they challenge the entire edifice of rabbinic authority in our community.

At the time that he wrote, the push for full integration of LGBT Orthodox Jews into the Orthodox community was not yet a movement to be reckoned with, but women's push for greater inclusion, voice, authority, and participation in Orthodoxy was well underway, and he entirely failed to address or account for it. "Not his topic," I suppose one might aver, but missing such an important phenomenon compromises the broader analytical framework. Is this thing that he says is happening actually the thing that is happening? Is it one thing that is happening among a number of equally-powerful opposing things (a far weaker claim than the one Soloveitchik makes), or is Orthodox feminism itself another manifestation of a (different) attempt to reconstruct after the rupture? Soloveitchik's failure to engage with the lived experience of Orthodox women, for whom the mimetic tradition is idealized and participation in the text-based tradition is largely—at the decision-making level, entirely—foreclosed, both undermines the breadth of his argument and reveals the blinders that obscure his vision. That a leading Orthodox academic writing in the pages of a leading Orthodox publication could produce and publish what purported to be an analysis of the development of postwar Orthodoxy without ever considering that it neglected the experience of half of American Orthodox Jews illustrates the extent to which the men who shape our communal discourse blithely used "Jews" to mean "Jewish men." I wish I thought this would be different today. Unfortunately, I do not.

In its scope, the range of issues it touches on, the common cultural memes it generates, the frame it provides for thinking about our community and its development, "Rupture and Reconstruction" is a work of signal importance for our community. Its descriptions continue to resonate and its framing continues to be generative a quarter of a century after its publication. That does not surprise. What does, perhaps, is the extent to which it has accompanied me from BJJ to SAR, from Brooklyn and Jerusalem to Riverdale and Washington Heights, from bought-in *kollel* wife to Orthodox feminist—having something to say to me all the while.

[1] Margaret Masterman, "The Nature of a Paradigm," in Lakatos and Musgrave, *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 59–89.

[2] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Eastern European Era in Jewish History," in Deborah Dash Moore, ed., *East European Jews in Two Worlds: Studies from the YIVO Annual* (Northwestern University Press, 1990), 1–21. This paper, originally delivered as a talk at YIVO on January 5, 1945, chills in its discussion of Eastern European Jewry in the present tense at a time that those communities had already been eradicated.

[3] In his 2000 exploratory presidential campaign, the late Democratic Sen. Paul Wellstone of Minnesota, by some measures the most liberal member of the Senate during his tenure, joked, "I represent the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party."

[4] Jay P. Lefkowitz, "The Rise of Social Orthodoxy: A Personal Account," *Commentary* (April 2014).