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HOW ZIONISM IS RECONSTRUCTING AMERICAN ORTHODOXY

Professor Haym Soloveitchik’s magisterial article, “Rupture and Reconstruction” is usually remembered for documenting Orthodoxy’s shift to the right, exemplified by the increased size and attention to the *shiurim* of *matza* required at the seder. The article became a watershed because it confirmed that, notwithstanding the claims of simply adhering to tradition, the *humrot* introduced first into haredi and then Modern Orthodox practice in the latter half of the twentieth century were indeed of recent vintage. That this thesis was presented by a member of the family associated with these shifts, and one who bears the name of one of its most important progenitors, underscored the cultural significance of the article’s publication.¹

“Rupture and Reconstruction,” however, is about far more than *humrot*. For Soloveitchik, the real shift centers on a re-orientation of what it means to be religious. Prior to the “rupture” described in the article, Judaism was not an identity one wore, but a description of what one was. Halakha always shaped the contours of Jewish life, but it was life as embedded and modeled in the home and community (a “mimetic culture”) that structured the framework of existence. Modernity, argues Soloveitchik, made us wealthier and more comfortable with consumer culture, and presents an intellectual climate where even the devout experience God less viscerally than our forefathers. How then, does one connect to the divine? In Soloveitchik’s telling, through increased attention to the technical halakhic parameters of everyday religious activities. Recitation of *berakhot* on common foods, or wearing *tallit katan*, transitioned from familial and familiar associations of “what Jews do,” into overtly “religious acts” defined by punctilious adherence to the textual tradition reflected in the *Magen Avraham*, *Mishna Berura*, or any of the newly emerging halakhic works exemplified by a two-volume treatise on *sefirat ha-omer*.² The core of Soloveitchik’s thesis might be rephrased as: “From

the day Europe was destroyed, God can only be found within in the four cubits of halakha.”³

In many ways the interceding years have yielded additional evidence of this trend. Glatt kosher meat, once the province of a pious few, has become the standard—as non-glatt meat is virtually unobtainable in the American kosher marketplace. More recently, concerns over the presence of bugs in vegetables, fruits, and even water, offers an easy update of Soloveitchik’s narrative regarding the *shiurim*. As a family friend who entered observance in the post-war South once noted to me, “When I was younger, the vegetables were kosher and we worried about the meat. Now the meat is kosher and they tell me to worry about the vegetables!”

Despite Orthodoxy’s near-inevitable nostalgia for times past, there is little doubt that baseline observance and halakhic knowledge has increased dramatically. The Orthodoxy of parking a car two blocks away from shul on Shabbat to walk the last tenth of a mile no longer exists. *Daf yomi* is a pervasive part of the Orthodox infrastructure and terms such as *le-khaTehila* and *be-di’aved*, *de-oraita* and *de-rabbanan* are within the functional vocabulary of many Orthodox Jews.

And yet, my sense is that the movement Soloveitchik described has largely plateaued. Now in its third generation, the reconstructed American Orthodoxy has created its own mimetic culture shaped by homes, yeshiva day schools, shuls, youth groups and summer camps, all buttressed by Orthodox entertainment and popular media. *Halav Yisra’el*, widespread *sha’atnez* checking, and using a mirror to adjust the placement of tefillin—all unknown to earlier swaths of American Orthodoxy—are now reflexively transmitted via communal practice.

Nevertheless, at least to my eyes, these no longer reflect the central locus of religious striving and identity.

Reconstructing Orthodoxy

While the process of “*humra*-tization” may have slowed, the existential question raised in “Rupture and Reconstruction” remains. In a world where the experience of God is inevitably mediated by technology and comfort, where observant Jews easily enter and exit mass society, and where partners at white-shoe law firms can wear black hats on Shabbat or even for a weekday *minha*, what defines Orthodox Jewry? How is its religious devotion channeled and expressed?

There is more than one answer to this question,⁴ but one of the most dramatic shifts is how within segments of the Orthodox community, religious intensity has transitioned from private acts of halakhic scrupulosity

to the public identification with the State of Israel and affirmation of its religiously redemptive character.

Religious Zionism has long been a central plank of Modern Orthodoxy. But writing the early 1990s, Soloveitchik pointed to the Holocaust—rather than either Israeli statehood of 1948 or the Six-Day War of 1967—as the twentieth-century events with the greatest impact on Orthodox religiosity of preceding generations. Likewise, “Rupture and Reconstruction” generally hews to an older framework which contrasts Zionism with Orthodoxy—rather than the more contemporary account where the two are closely entwined (78-81).

My understanding of what has changed is as follows: Two generations ago, even amongst its adherents, Zionism was viewed an *experiment within Judaism*. Some of the Orthodox supported it, others were outright hostile, and the rest engaged with varying degrees of caution and ambivalence. Today, *Israel has come to define Judaism* even—or especially—for Orthodoxy, which increasingly views the State of Israel as its spiritual center and normative core.

To be sure, these shifts correspond to significant social and demographic changes within Israeli society itself⁵ and are further enabled by structural, familial, and technological developments that draw American and Israeli communities closer together. In this essay, I leave analyzing the Israeli side of the equation to others and focus on how the halakha-centric identity of American Orthodoxy has transitioned into one where affiliation with the religion, culture and wellbeing of Israel plays an increasingly dominant role.

“Rupture and Reconstruction” is a thoroughly researched article supported by over 100 analytical footnotes. Nevertheless, Soloveitchik concludes his introduction stating, “[a]s all these facts are familiar to my readers, the value of my interpretation depends entirely on the degree of persuasive correspondence that they find between my characterizations and their own experiences” (65). What is true of the original applies, *kal va-homer*, to this short reflection. Though long on anecdote and short on data, my hope is that these remarks ring true enough to offer a first step towards understanding the shifting religious dynamics of our community.

Expanding Orthodox Zionism

At the outset of “Rupture and Reconstruction,” Soloveitchik notes the relatively stable division between the religious Zionism of Modern Orthodoxy and “the haredi camp” which “remains strongly anti-Zionist

[or] at the very least, emotionally distant and unidentified with the Zionist enterprise” (64). Over the past two generations, these once-clear lines have eroded as the right-wing Modern Orthodoxy has merged with the more worldly quadrants of the Yeshiva world. While this group draws much of its religious language and imagery from classical haredi culture, its members are often professionals who work comfortably in secular environments and are at ease in bourgeoisie society. *Mishpacha* and *Vogue* are delivered to the same address. For our purposes, the most interesting result of this convergence is how this community can support conflicting approaches to Zionism that only a few decades ago seemed unbridgeable. A “Modern Yeshivish” community can feature events with uniformed IDF officers and the anti-Zionist rebbe of Toldos Aharon on the very same Shabbat.⁶

The impact of this convergence reverberates beyond “Modern Yeshivish” circles. For as the centrality of Israel has migrated from the once “modern” segments of Orthodoxy to its more traditionalist spheres, Orthodox Jews of all stripes have become increasingly comfortable framing their religious identities via reference to Israel.

National Affiliation

To take one example, a generation ago, when a promising American student in an *hesder* yeshiva consulted his rebbe about the choice between spending the college years at Yeshiva University or entering army service followed by university studies in Israel, he was typically guided to pursue the former course. This inevitably decreased the chance the young man would build his life in Israel. But owing to the religious pitfalls presented by army service, and the assumption that even *Bar-Ilan* could not hold a candle to YU as a *mekom* Torah, the tradeoff was deemed acceptable.

Today, service in the IDF is increasingly seen as religiously strengthening, rather than a religiously dangerous—if civically necessary—undertaking.⁷ More and more, even top American students choose to enter military service following a year or two in Israeli yeshivot (including non-*hesder* programs that cater only to American boys) and then make their way in Israeli society. Moreover, even a largely secular Israeli university such as IDC in Herzliya is now seen as a legitimate landing pad for young Modern Orthodox students. In the past, Orthodox communities were at best ambivalent about a young adult pursuing army service or secular college in Israel. Today, shuls routinely commend them for casting their lot with the Jewish people.

Cultural Affiliation

Perhaps more surprising is the growing Orthodox appreciation of Israeli culture. The Israeli song *Halleluyah* won the Eurovision contest in 1979. Though hardly the product of Orthodoxy, the Hebrew song is undeniably Jewish and revolves around the central refrain from *Tehillim*. There is little sense, however, that American Orthodoxy identified with this accomplishment or saw much of themselves in this song. Though political Zionism may have been cheered on from the sidelines, for much of Orthodoxy, the culture of secular Israel was much more of a “they,” than an “us.” Contrast with Neta Barzilai’s winning entry to the 2018 Eurovision, *Toy*. The song is largely in English and—to put it delicately—presents a far less Jewish message than *Halleluyah*. Yet by 2018, the American Orthodox blogosphere proudly reported on Israel’s (“our”) victory in the Eurovision. Notwithstanding the obvious halakhic qualms many have with listening to this song or embracing its flamboyant songstress, since winning Eurovision was good for Israel, it is good for the Jews.

Past generations of Orthodox American Jews took pride in the success and accomplishments of other American Jews, whether Orthodox or not. Everyone knew which cultural icons, business titans, and intellectuals were Jewish even in the era when names were commonly Anglicized, such that watching film or TV was inevitably accompanied by arguments over which actors were members of the tribe. Today, American Orthodoxy is interested in culturally significant non-Orthodox Jews to the extent they support Israel. If they do, their non-observance, while never condoned, can be effectively excused. But if they are indifferent (and certainly, if hostile) to Israel, then neither their cultural Judaism nor ritual observance lays claims to the hearts and minds of most Orthodox Jews.

Now consider the opposite case. The cultural and professional icons of early-state Israel were rarely on Orthodoxy’s radar screen, particularly in its more traditional settings. Today lectures about “Start-Up Nation” are regularly features of the shul circuit and even secular Israeli tech entrepreneurs are held out as exemplars of inspirational *Jewish* success.⁸ Israeli military leaders, once the living embodiment the scorned *kohi ve-otzem yadi* ethos of Zionism, are celebrated as representing Jewish strategic and technological ingenuity.⁹

Religious Affiliation

The centrality of Israel for American Orthodoxy also penetrates its religious identity. “Rupture and Reconstruction” was published shortly after the Rav’s death and within a few years of the passing of R. Moshe Feinstein

and R. Yaakov Kamenetsky. In their lifetimes, American Orthodoxy had little need to look eastward for rabbinic guidance or inspiration, and, other than for a select few, Rav Kook was an unknown entity in the United States. Today, whether one sits at the liberal end of Modern Orthodoxy or the opposite pole of the haredi world, Torah, and Jewish authenticity, increasingly flow forth from Zion. While there are many differences in the worldviews of R. Zalman Nechamia Goldberg, R. Yehuda Henkin, R. Chaim Kanievsky, R. Mosheh Lichtenstein, R. Yosef Tzvi Rimon, R. Shlomo Riskin, R. Daniel Sperber, and R. Asher Weiss (to name a wide cross-section), each has an American constituency that looks to leadership in Israel for rabbinic guidance.

Nor is the Israel-centrism limited to halakhic expertise. Two generations ago it would have been inconceivable for the most important Modern Orthodox publishing house to be located just outside Baqa and not in Brooklyn. Yet Koren Publishers, owned and largely staffed by American *olim*, has become the custodian of Modern Orthodoxy's canonical literature. Koren not only publishes many of the Rav's posthumous works, but also reissued the two volumes that formed the foundations of intellectually engaged Modern Orthodoxy of the past generation—R. Norman Lamm's *Torah U'Madda*, and the collection of essays which appeared as *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures* (edited by R. Jacob J. Schacter).

Even Yeshiva University, long the polestar of Ameri-centric Orthodoxy, is increasingly gazing eastward. In 2017, R. Dr. Ari Berman (himself an *oleh* who earned his PhD in Israel) delivered his inaugural address as YU's newest president. While the majority of the speech hewed to themes traditionally associated with YU (though notably lacking any reference to the "Torah *u-Madda*" motto), in discussing Israel, R. Berman broke new ground. "Israel," he explained, is "now an economic powerhouse and major resource specifically in areas of innovation."¹⁰ Not content to see Israel only as an object of *tefilla* and recipient of *tzedaka*, R. Berman celebrated YU's STEM-centric affiliations with Israeli universities, touting how YU students were poised to obtain "high-level internships in the start-up and hi-tech industries in Israel." Once upon a time, Israeli Torah centers turned to American communal institutions for economic support. Today Modern Orthodoxy's pre-eminent Torah center looks to Israel to provide for the economic success of its graduates.

Political Affiliation

Finally, as Orthodoxy has grown in size and influence, it has developed a political voice distinct from (and often at odds with) the organizations

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that dominated Jewish political engagement for most of the twentieth century. Much of this surrounds pro-Israel activism, as what were once synagogue brotherhoods and men's clubs have transitioned into Israel Action Committees. Further, the percentage of AIPAC's Orthodox attendees seems to grow ever year. The year "Rupture and Reconstruction" was published, it was difficult to gather a minyan for *minha* at AIPAC, by contrast, videos posted on social media from the past few conferences show hundreds attending *shaharit* services. Whether online or on campus, being pro-Israel is part of the Orthodox brand, and a clear marker of communal affiliation.

There is no doubt that Israel faces considerable security and diplomatic challenges. But this has been the case since the state's creation, and today Israel has fewer existential fears than in decades past. The emergence of Orthodoxy as the vanguard of Israel activism seems less correlated with an assessment of Israel's security concerns *per se*, and more about how American Orthodoxy conceives of its own mission and priorities.

In many ways, the difference between these two paths for Orthodoxy harken back to the century-old fissures between religious Zionism—centered on national affiliation with *Am Yisrael* living in *Eretz Yisrael*—and more classical expressions of *frumkeit* that stressed personal piety and halakhic scrupulosity. In a similar vein, R. Mosheh Lichtenstein recently contrasted his own theology, which, based on that of the Rav, his grandfather, focused on the existential relationship between the individual and God, and the approach of one of his co-*rashai* Yeshiva at Har Etzion which places greater emphasis on the redemptive relationship between God, the land, and the nation.

While few of the enumerated shifts conflict with halakha (indeed, many complement observance), to the extent Soloveitchik saw undertaking *humrot* as a new expression of religiosity, communal passions seem to have gravitated elsewhere. Intentional or not, celebration of Israel's (post?) secular military, cultural, and economic prowess cannot but cast strict halakhic compliance as less of a defining marker of Jewishness, especially when measured against Orthodoxy's traditional reticence of all things Israeli for exactly these reasons. Likewise, the shift in the relative appreciation for army service and "real life" in Israel over time spent in YU's bet midrash, reflects a subtle attitudinal change in the relative value of these activities.

Finally, engaging the political sphere not only displaces resources and attention from religious practice to political activism, but also shapes the image Orthodoxy presents to itself and the larger world. In service of shared political objectives, contemporary Orthodoxy is more willing to

overlook the halakhic chasm between it and non-Orthodoxy, as well as the theological chasm between Jews and their non-Jewish allies—Christian Zionists foremost amongst them. Though none of these factors impacts Orthodox observance *per se*, the ability to downplay, overlook, mitigate, and side-step these differences points to a delicate re-ordering within the hierarchy of Orthodoxy's values.

A Modest Note of Caution

Taken together, these changes signal a return to nationalist and political themes emphasized in Tanakh and long favored by religious Zionists. But whereas from the 1920s and even through the 1980s, many within Orthodoxy saw Zionism as an experiment within Judaism, as the State and its culture mature, there is little doubt that the center of the Jewish future is located in Israel.

Nevertheless, even positive developments entail tradeoffs, and there is some danger of American Orthodoxy subcontracting its religious passions and identity to a place it may love but in which it does not live. Though our eyes turn towards Zion in prayer, Israeli Orthodoxy is nourished by a mass Jewish culture, along with ideas and realities that are not replicable in the diaspora. Religious life, however, cannot be lived vicariously. Taken too far, the laudable centrality of Israel can lead American Orthodoxy—and Modern Orthodoxy in particular—to become overly reliant on a religious culture it will never fully understand and inevitably distort.

For those who embark on *aliya's* leap of faith, our community offers nothing but praise. But for those who stay back, our communal *avoda* cannot merely be derivative of what happens in Israel. Israel should remain important. But if we believe God placed us here for a reason, we have a responsibility to employ the challenges and opportunities of *galut* to forge our own existential connection to Him.

¹ Indeed, among the most notable lacunae in “Rupture and Reconstruction” is the lack of attention to the author's own family in instigating the shift from memetic to textual conceptions of halakha. While Hafetz Hayyim, Hazon Ish, Bnei Brak, Borough Park, and the Lakewood Yeshiva are presented as important nodes in this story, loudly absent are figures such as R. Hayyim and R. Velvel Soloveichik, or locations such as the town of Brisk. Likewise, the Yeshiva of Volozhin is discussed mainly in the context of its early years under the influence of the Gra and R. Hayyim of Volozhin, while little is said of its later years when R. Hayyim Soloveitchik and his students who

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popularized the “*Brisker Derekh*” flourished. The author’s father, the Rav, is only referenced once in a passing footnote (n. 98, via citation to *Al ha-Teshuva*), such that neither *Halakhic Man* nor any of the Rav’s Talmudic or philosophical lectures are taken as evidence of either the cause or effect of the transitions detailed in the essay. Reticence towards discussing one’s family in public is understandable. But whether one focuses on the haredi or modern variants of Orthodoxy, it is hard to explain the impact of the centralization of religious authority in *yeshivot* and their heads, the “enshrinement of texts as the sole source of authenticity,” the shift between “religion as received and practiced” and religion “as found (or implied) in the theoretical literature,” “the policy of maximum position compliance,” or how Torah study became “essential for the Jewish identity of the individual” without recourse to these central figures of the Brisker dynasty.

² See n. 8, discussing the 630-page work on *sefirat ha-omer*, a topic that “rarely, if ever, rated more than a hundred lines in the traditional literature.”

³ Cf. *Berakhot* 8a which states that “Since the day the Temple was destroyed God has nothing in this world, save the four cubits of halakha.”

⁴ Another response is how the neo-halakhicism described by Soloveitchik has been eclipsed by neo-hasidism. See for example discussions in the forthcoming volume on *Contemporary Uses and Forms of Hasidut* (Urim, 2019).

⁵ See, for example the data and analysis in Camil Fuchs and Shmuel Rosner, *#Israeli Judaism: A Portrait of a Cultural Revolution* (Jewish People Policy Institute, 2018).

⁶ Such an occurrence took place in November 2009 in one of the large synagogues in the Five Towns; see Meyer Fertig, “Toldos Avrohom Yitzchok Rebbe draws blog spotlight to Lawrence,” *The Jewish Star* (November 3, 2009).

⁷ By way of example, a recent induction of hesder students into the IDF’s Golani brigade was marked by a siyum on a tractate of Gemara along with singing and dancing typical of religious celebrations.

⁸ Maayan David, “Over the Moon,” *Mishpacha* (June 5, 2013) and Michal Ish-Shalom, “Ships in the Night,” *Mishpacha* (July 1, 2015).

⁹ See for example, the very positive assessment of army service in *Mishpacha* magazine by one of the leading English-speaking writers of the haredi world, Yonasan Roseblum, “A Professional Army for Israel,” *Mishpacha* (June 27, 2012): “To an ever-growing extent, the most important soldiers in today’s IDF are not in the elite combat units, but those in technical and intelligence units. As *Start-Up Nation* describes, much of the impetus for Israel’s astounding high-tech success and innovation has its roots in the years of regular army service.” See also Aharon Granot, “8200 Secrets,” *Mishpacha* (August 12, 2015), which extolls the virtues of the IDF’s 8200 intelligence unit.

¹⁰ *Investiture Speech of R. Dr. Ari Berman*, Yeshiva University (September 10, 2017), available at www.yu.edu/tomorrow/speech.