

BOOK REVIEW

Moshe Koppel, *Judaism Straight Up: Why Real Religion Endures* (Maggid Books, 2020), 195 pages.

Reviewed by
Chaim Strauchler

In bartending, the term “straight up” refers to an alcoholic drink that is shaken with ice and then strained and served in a stemmed glass without ice—unadulterated. In his new book *Judaism Straight Up*, Moshe Koppel provides us with a vigorous case for Torah living, which does not seek to align itself with modern, liberal values. Rather, he seeks to supplant them, arguing that a traditional Jewish lifestyle accords with human nature more harmoniously, and is therefore more conducive to ultimate human flourishing. The book is a passionate defense of tradition, but it must be acknowledged that Koppel is *not* serving up Judaism sans added flavors. We cannot fault him for this. It is a hazard of the form he has chosen.

The book falls into the time-honored apologetic genre. Koppel addresses it “to those who have wrestled with the problem of maintaining deep traditional commitments while engaged with a cosmopolitan society that often denigrates such commitments” (*x*). In response to criticism, apologetics in Judaism endeavor to defend Jews, their religion, and their culture. The line between an apologetic and a polemic is often unclear. It is almost completely hidden in *Judaism Straight Up*, where Koppel employs a good offense against contemporary Western society as his best defense for Torah. In identifying the ways in which Jewish norms differ from those of the dominant culture, Koppel labels the sacred norms of progressive society as “something akin to a religious order of its own” (*ibid.*) and goes on a spirited attack. He bagels, he *battels*, he battles.

As is the case with all disputations, the form reflects the complicated pattern of relationships between Jews and Gentiles through the generations, not to mention between traditional and secular Jews. In this respect, Koppel charts his defense of Judaism through the characters of three archetypal protagonists. To represent a fully lived organic Judaism, Koppel conjures a weather-worn curmudgeonly Holocaust survivor named Shimen. To present a flailing liberal-Judaism, Koppel presents Princeton-educated Heidi and all her political correctness. To attack the next generation’s woke Judaism, Koppel blesses Heidi with a white-male-privilege-decrying daughter, named Amber.

Koppel debates on behalf of Shimen's old-fashioned views against Heidi's progressive pieties. He argues that Heidi's critique of traditional Judaism is rooted in a failure to fully grasp "the nature and scope of morality, tradition, and belief necessary for *any* society to flourish" (*xvi*). Looking to both history and sociology, Koppel argues that societies need rich systems of social norms in order to cohere and survive. To remain viable, such systems must adapt to circumstances slowly and organically, and, unlike legislated law, not through sudden, theory-driven upheavals. A society's members must genuinely believe that they are part of a meaningful, directed project that will outlive them, in order to make the sacrifices necessary for that society's survival.

Along the way, Koppel performs a great service in concisely sketching the differences between Shimen and Heidi's lifestyles and belief systems. At the beginning of the first chapter he describes Shimen's routine, shaped by daily ritual observance, as well as Heidi's skepticism towards Shimen's rootedness in traditional practices. In a mere five pages, Koppel surfaces the functional difference between traditional Jewish life and the surrounding general culture in which it is now lived. These passages can be easily attached to an email explaining Jewish life to almost any outsider in a fairly comprehensive and polite way. In chapter nine, he summarizes all traditional Jewish belief in a record-setting two pages. His ordering of Jewish practice eight chapters before beliefs is intentional. Essential to Koppel's argument is that "virtues and traditions are primary and beliefs are derivative" (116).

Koppel's argument against Heidi's outlook leans heavily upon modern social research into moral thinking. He quotes American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt: "Members of more traditional communities tend to assign approximately equal importance to all three moral... 'foundations' [fairness, loyalty, and restraint]. But educated Westerners with progressive views differ. They tend to assign great importance to the first foundation, fairness, and very limited importance to the other two, loyalty and restraint" (14). By sharing social norms that manifest all three moral foundations, members of traditional communities cooperate in ways that progressives cannot.

Heidi, with her morals built upon fairness alone, undermines her society by requiring an impossible degree of detachment, encouraging bad behavior in others, and undercutting love. Uncritical support for the underdog can privilege the least cooperative and most dysfunctional actors, who leverage the moral and economic boons showered upon them to wreak havoc. Celebrating real or imagined victimhood can make it more profitable to fail, driving a race to the bottom rather than toward

TRADITION

real effort to succeed. Heidi's admirable compassion for those who find traditional family unsatisfying blinds her to the long-term consequences of low birthrates and family breakdown. When Heidi favors economic policies that mitigate inequality in the short term, she fails to recognize how this distorts incentives in ways that increase poverty in the long term.

Koppel weds his defense of traditional Judaism to a conservatism that manifests all three moral foundations: a preference for fairness (tit-for-tat), the ability to defer pleasure (what economists call a low discount rate), and loyalty to community institutions (trustworthiness signaling) (36). He suggests to truly defend (and live) Judaism one must adopt a right-wing political perspective that reinforces these moral foundations.

For Koppel, Heidi's cosmopolitan society lacks the spirit of self-sacrifice needed to withstand the barbarians at the gates, and Koppel represents those barbarians with Heidi's own daughter Amber. Amber does not share her mother's notions of fairness. She campaigns for a broad regime of morally charged dos and don'ts that Koppel equates with primitive superstitions reasserting themselves. "For Amber, the sin of contaminating Mother Earth with her carbon footprint can be expiated with symbolic offsets, but the sin of white privilege requires—and indeed is being increasingly met by—grueling public confessions. Holdouts can be publicly shamed and shunned... a form of sacrifice" (47). From a political perspective, Amber's black-and-white thinking groups the world into victims and oppressors and requires her to hate the State of Israel. Amber's radicalized version of Heidi's liberal ideology undercuts the very freedom that should be at its core.

For Koppel, Amber becomes the greatest argument against Heidi. This is unfair. Koppel's Shimen is not blessed with progeny (who survive the Holocaust), through which he might be similarly judged. Shimen stands like a Disney hero—an orphan without living relationships to past and future. This is especially ironic given Koppel's argument that Shimen's culture is more organic, connected, and existentially resilient than Heidi's.

Koppel lands some solid punches against Amber's intersectionality. Yet, he does not give contemporary anti-racism the justice it requires. He dramatically describes Jews as the wokes' messiah-killers, that is, opponents of the messiah of old-collapsing-hierarchies amidst an equalizing-world-government. It is the Jewish ethos of waiting patiently for a messianic era, amidst our own distinct moral system, which constitutes this modern "deicide." Yet, with this caricature, Koppel does not take Amber (and the many potential readers who share her views) seriously enough. Racism does persist. Koppel would do better to acknowledge injustice and to position Shimen as an advocate of gradual improvement, while remaining

suspicious of the inevitable injustices that revolutions beget. Had Koppel so chosen, the character of Shimen, from his long experience with some of the twentieth century's worst atrocities, could have been an articulate mouthpiece to put this forward.

In developing arguments against Haredi and liberal Orthodox Judaism, Koppel generates characters, Yitzy and Ben, not linking them biologically or otherwise to Shimen. Koppel contrasts Yitzy's obsessive religious signaling to the cognitive-dissonance created by Ben's hypocritical, Heidi-like cosmopolitan assumptions. He discusses their Jewish identities and potential assimilation without reference to the role anti-Semitism might play in their destinies. Koppel then introduces Yossel and his progeny to serve as Shimen and Heidi's Israeli foils—as well as two Israeli religious characters to mirror the American Yitzy and Ben. In so doing, he paints the Israeli religious culture, seemingly with neither an Internet connection nor anywhere to assimilate, with an implausibly thin brush.

The Israeli characters are less fully developed than Shimen and Heidi and leave the impression that they were not drawn from real-life models. Koppel acknowledges (and excuses) this, “The character sketches presented here, like those of Yitzy and Ben above, will necessarily be briefer and less finely drawn than those of Shimen and Heidi, but I'm hopeful that the narrative benefits of introducing these characters will outweigh the costs of stereotyping them” (166). Unfortunately, Koppel's hopes here are about as well-meaningly naive as something Heidi might have dreamt. In playing with stereotypes, Koppel detracts from his primary message and weakens his “dear reader's” trust; something that a successful apologetic/polemic demands. He takes wasteful potshots; Yitzy's “sons and sons-in-law speak English, Yiddish, and Hebrew, but might be hard-pressed to complete a sentence in any of the three” (183). What is Koppel's prediction for the next generation? He imagines futures for his stereotypes' children: “Of Ben's three children, one son is no longer affiliated with a Jewish community and another is a member of a Reconstructionist LGBT community; Ben's daughter has gone *yeshivish* and lives in the religious Jerusalem neighborhood of Ramat Eshkol [with her kollel husband]” (182). Is he working off a Ouija board or are there population studies that he is hiding from his readers?

Koppel lauds the comfortable fluidity within Kohelet, the Jerusalem conservative think-tank he heads:

Most of the people... are in their 20s and 30s. One grew up in a hasidic family... but now self-defines as non-religious and is beginning an academic career. One woman grew up in a non-observant family and was active in

TRADITION

the peace movement and is now religiously observant and an expert on and sympathizer with the hard-core of the settler movement. Another woman grew up in a traditional Sephardic family and remains unself-consciously traditional while writing a doctoral thesis on the transmission of religious folklore (184–185).

Not to detract from these complex, real-world Jewish identities, and how comfortable the people who hold them are with themselves and others, but similar examples can be found in North America. Is their proximity to Koppel and his getting to know them personally not a factor in how differently he treats them from his one-dimensional Yitzy and Ben cutouts?

The stereotypes are troubling because Koppel's analysis is otherwise so sharp. Koppel is engaged in battle with Western norms that his readers have absorbed along with their mother's milk. His authorial integrity matters. He should not squander it with not fully-realized characters and cheap insults.

Yet, the failures of these later characterizations, by contrast, shed light on Koppel's success with Shimen and Heidi. Those two might have been effectively deployed in a novel—meeting on a Manhattan street and striking up a screen-worthy good old New York shouting match. They feel that real.

In regards to such characters, it is worth recalling a Jewish apologetic, authored by a novelist. Herman Wouk's *This Is My God* was written over 60 years before Koppel's effort. His book's goals, very different from *Judaism Straight Up*, are reflective of the time in which he authored it. Wouk sought "to sketch the faith so as to give the interested reader information and pleasure, using what writing skill I have learned to keep from boring him with detail, or with my own not very relevant theories" (Wouk, 17). Amazingly, Wouk includes an old crusty Jew (his grandfather) in his exposition of Judaism:

My grandfather had not been in America a week—he was staying in our apartment, of course—when he came to me carrying a vast brown book. "*Za Rabotu*" [Russian for "Get to work!"], he said. He sat me down at a table before the book and stood over me as he opened it. I stared in stupefaction at the massive columns of meaningless consonants. "Read," said my grandfather (193).

Wouk has a "Heidi" in his book, as well. Although, he does not give her a name—he too finds within this young woman an easy foil for his arguments:

Book Review

Not long ago, in a fashionable suburban home, I fell into a parlor discussion of religion. I try to avoid these because they almost always end with my sitting silent while my interlocutors enthusiastically explain to me what is wrong with Judaism. The usual gist of the explanation is that pork is unhealthy only in hot countries, that religion is a matter of ethics and not of ceremonies, and so forth. This particular argument was pleasanter than most, because the person setting me straight was a pretty seventeen-year-old girl, a college sophomore, and it was no strain to smile at her with good humor as she went about her work (43).

In noting these similarities, it is worthwhile to also underline the differences between these two works. Koppel writes of an America about which half its population believes that it must be made great again. Wouk wrote to American Jews who needed permission to distinguish themselves from a confident culture into which they sought to acculturate if not assimilate. Koppel writes against a blue-state America whose hypocrisies are mocked every morning, noon, and night by radio talk show hosts and cable news talking heads—if not from the podium of the White House press briefing room itself. In 1959, Wouk attempted to instill confidence in a nascent American Orthodoxy, over which sociologists had begun to recite *Kaddish*. Koppel relishes reciting *tzidduk ha-din* upon Heidi's vanishing liberal Judaism, if not upon all of an American Judaism that he sees a generation away from a similar fate.

In this regard, Koppel provides a more sophisticated explanation for the red-stating of Orthodox Judaism than is available at even the fanciest of *fleishik* Kiddushes. Koppel argues that the communal norms cherished by Shimen protect freedoms by empowering community members to care for one another. By contrast, Heidi replaces community with state regulations, diminishing liberty rather than promoting it. The abandonment of cohesive religious communities does not beget a secular paradise of freedom and equality but a dystopia where “transnational secular elites prosecute ‘sin’ and persecute religion” (111). To this reading, politics becomes the rootedness of tradition against the imperialism of cosmopolitanism. To vote against growing state power is to vote in favor of the traditional community.

What would R. Jonathan Sacks say to Koppel? The late and lamented rabbi spoke about the same cultural climate change over which Shimen and Heidi disagreed. In a lecture to the Chautauqua Institution, in New York in July 2017, he argued:

Religion can do one of three things. Number one, it can attempt to conquer society. That is the radical Islamist version. Number two, it can

TRADITION

withdraw from society. That is the Benedict option.... Or number three, it can attempt to re-inspire society, to do what Will Durant called giving people a new form of human hope and new courage to human effort. If we adopt the first option, the radical anti-Western option, we will move straight away into the dark ages. If we adopt the second option, we will survive the dark ages, but they will still be dark. But if we adopt the third option of being true to ourselves and yet engaged in the public square, we have a chance of avoiding the dark and of countering cultural climate change. By religion... I mean simply religion as a consecration of the bonds that connect us, religion as the redemption of our solitude, religion as loyalty and love, religion as altruism and compassion, religion as covenant and commitment, religion that consecrates marriage, that sustains community and helps reweave the torn fabric of society.

Perhaps, R. Sacks would have made a compelling character in *Judaism Straight Up*. He certainly would have drained the cup dry. His vision is different from Shimen and Heidi in that he is not selecting from an array of cookie-cut ideological options. R. Sacks did not find himself in a situation; he made his situation. He called upon us likewise to create our situation with our choices. Engagement may not guarantee that we can change the cosmopolitan ethos—yet it presents a locus of control that can be described as something more than balancing commitments upon the “small plateau at the top of the ridge” (163). Perhaps, it is worth entering the arena of ideas with the Torah in one’s hands and raging against the cosmopolitan storm. R. Sacks showed that it could not only be done: It can be done without anger. It can be done with honor. It can be done with great success.

Chaim Strauchler, rabbi of Shaarei Shomayim in Toronto, is an associate editor of TRADITION.