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## INSIDE AMERICAN ORTHODOXY: A SURVEY OF SOCIAL AND SEXUAL ATTITUDES

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### Three Categories of Orthodoxy / Involvement in Contemporary Life / Political and Social Attitudes / Attitudes Toward Premarital Sex / What It All Means

It is estimated that somewhere between 10 and 12 percent, or at the most 15 percent, of American Jewry is Orthodox. Of these, modern Orthodoxy, or what is sometimes called "centrist" Orthodoxy, is the largest single element. What follows is part of a formal sociological survey designed to provide a current picture of mainstream Orthodoxy in America.

#### Three Categories of Orthodoxy

The American Orthodox community may be divided into three groupings. They do not constitute groups in the sense that they necessarily have a group cohesiveness or a group consciousness, but there are three general trends that can be discerned from the data regarding religious behavior, belief, world view, and a whole variety of attitudes.

The first grouping, "nominally Orthodox Jews," are people who call themselves Orthodox, but when measured

according to their observance of certain indicator mitzvot, are by and large Orthodox in name more than in practice. Although more Orthodox than the religiously right-wing Conservative group which was used as a control, they are far less Orthodox than most of the other Orthodox Jews in the sample.

The second and by far the largest grouping have come to be called "centrist Orthodox" because they are in the center between the nominally Orthodox and those labelled "traditionalist Orthodox."

The third grouping, the traditionalist Orthodox, are modern; they do not dress in black hats and black coats. While they themselves are not haredi, they are more sympathetic to haredim than any other Orthodox Jews.

This study looked at a variety of distinctions among these kinds of Orthodox Jews, including their political, social and sexual attitudes. By and

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large, many of the things discovered about the Orthodox are taken for granted by people who have lived within that community. Anyone who has lived with the Orthodox knows that American Orthodoxy is not a monolith.

One of the themes that came forth was a basic sense of ambivalence -- about the present, about the past, about social attitudes, even about political and sexual attitudes. These are people who, on the one hand, are in favor of a high degree of integration into the society at large, and demonstrate this in a whole variety of ways. One basic principle seems to be that wherever these Jews perceived that there was a vacuum in the halakhah (Jewish law) or in the Orthodox world view, wherever there seemed to be silence, modernity rushed in, at least among two out of the three groups. To put it in a simpler way, there is a tendency among these people to be more modern than to be Orthodox. The difficulties they have with that tendency became apparent in their responses to some of the questions in the survey.

#### **Involvement in Contemporary Life**

One hypothesis to be tested was the assumption that the traditionalist Orthodox might well view engagement with contemporary affairs and contemporary life as a distraction from what to them are the genuinely significant areas of cognitive engagement, that knowing about everyday life and behavior is something that one needs to know if it is imposed from the outside, but it is not something that one embraces wholeheartedly. For them, certain aspects of the modern world may not only be seen as competing with Orthodox involvement, they may actually be perceived as dangerous in some ways. One of the elements of haredi (ultra-Orthodox) culture is a sense that the modern world is fundamentally threatening and endangering to Judaism. Moreover, popular culture, as perhaps epitomized by movies and newspapers, might also be seen as something to be eluded or at best tolerated, but not followed very closely.

Even the scientific world, considered by some as the epitome of modern progress, has always been a double-edged sword for the Orthodox. On one hand, it symbolizes the world of technological advancement, the world of success, the incarnation of universalism and rationality, and the antagonist, at least in theory, of bigotry and intolerance; that is the positive side of science, which has afforded many benefits to mankind in general and to the Jews in particular. But to more traditional Jews, science has its other side -- unbridled change, unbridled progress -- which is a challenge to the status quo and presents a threat to beliefs and religiously inspired and accepted versions of creation and history. Where the scientific method predominates, attachment to religious rituals often seems arcane and archaic. Yet many of these Jews have advanced degrees. These are people who know the advantages of science, yet they have some misgivings about its positive impact. They are both aware and to some extent frightened of the very world of which they are nonetheless a part.

Table 1 summarizes the responses to questions that indicate actual participation in contemporary culture. The first question asked was "During the work week, how often do you listen to or watch news broadcasts or read the daily newspaper?" The second question was "During the last year did you go to any R- or X-rated movies?"

In both of these instances, the participation was nearly equivalent across all four observance groups, the fourth group being the non-Orthodox control group. Roughly 9 out of 10 in each of the four groups said they viewed, heard and read about the news every day. In other words, these were not people who were out of touch with the contemporary world in any sense.

Between 57 and 72 percent of these four groups said that they had attended a somewhat risqué movie in the last year. What is noteworthy is that the more traditional respondents in the sample were no different in this respect than their more

TABLE 1: INDICATORS OF CONTEMPORARY INVOLVEMENT AND COMMITMENT BY ORTHODOXY

Question	Response	Non-Orth.	Nominal	Centrist	Traditionalist
During the work week how often do you listen to or watch news broadcasts or read the daily newspaper?	Every day	86	89	86	94
During the last year, did you go to any R- or X-rated movies?	Yes	69	57	72	64
It is important to learn and know about matters of contemporary life...	Strongly Agree	62	55	54	41
	Agree	37	43	42	54
The past is largely irrelevant to the present...	Strongly Disagree	46	54	66	80
	Disagree				
In principle, there are no fields of scientific inquiry a good Jew should not pursue...	St. Agree & Agree	88	84	81	75
	St. Agree	37	33	26	17
My children should learn about the theory of evolution in school	Agree	56	56	59	57

modern, even non-Orthodox counterparts. Most saw no problem in viewing these movies, regardless of the degree of nudity, violence, or language that was not the kind of language they themselves would use. They felt they could go and they did.

Despite the absence of significant and consistent variation in modern cultural engagement as exemplified by following the news or going to all kinds of movies, differences were to be found in stated attitudes to contemporary life. Questions were asked to elicit perspectives on the past and the present. The first asked for reactions to the statement: "It is important to learn and know about matters of contemporary life." As might be expected, agreement, meaning answering either "agree" or "strongly agree" to this near platitude was almost universal among all groups. However, when one looks at the "strongly agree" answers, one sees the differences begin to surface when analyzing the fervency of their agreement. The non-Orthodox were substantially more likely to strongly agree than were the traditional Orthodox -- 62 percent versus 41 percent

-- with the other two groups scoring in between -- 55 and 54 percent. In other words, the non-Orthodox were more enthusiastic about participation in contemporary affairs, while the more traditional group had some hesitation about expressing such an unqualified commitment to contemporary involvement.

Even more substantial differences appeared in response to the question: "The past is largely irrelevant to the present." Here only a minority -- 46 percent of the non-Orthodox -- firmly disagreed, as contrasted with the vast majority -- 80 percent -- of the traditionalists. In other words, they said that it was relevant. There is clearly a sense here of a different attitude toward the past among the Orthodox as compared to that of the non-Orthodox.

One of the reasons for questions of this type was to make certain that the respondents were revealing their true attitudes. One of the problems with studies of the modern Orthodox is that there is sometimes an effort on their part to present a public face that is very different from the private face, so questions had to be

designed in order to get past that.

Finally, the centrist, nominally Orthodox and non-Orthodox respondents had less trouble adopting the modern, perhaps characteristically American, ahistoric view of the world, one which sees the present as largely detached from the past. Americans are a very ahistoric people who hold the notion that history really began in 1492, or even later, that it all began in America, and that America is the center of the world. To have an attitude that says that the past is not irrelevant to the present in America is really to swim against the stream.

For traditional Jews, of course, the infusion of meaning and Divine purpose into the course of events from the past and to the present and onward to the future is a central sustaining tenet of Jewish belief and practice.

Finally Table 1 displays responses to two questions on attitudes towards science. The vast majority of the respondents from all four groups agreed that in principle there are no fields of scientific inquiry a good Jew should not pursue. In this, these Orthodox Jews showed themselves to be influenced by their educational backgrounds, which are weighty. Among men

in this sample almost two-thirds of the self-identified Orthodox had a post-graduate degree, over 80 percent had a college degree. The differences in education by traditionalism were minor. Even the traditionalists had a high degree of higher education. Overall, the non-Orthodox slightly outscored the traditionalist Orthodox, 88 to 75 percent, in strong support of the pursuit of unbridled scientific research and inquiry.

In contrast, the question on the far more religiously sensitive issue of teaching the theory of evolution uncovered much more dramatic differences. Everybody is for it but not with great fervency, and the least fervent are the traditionalists.

#### Political and Social Attitudes

Table 2 records political and social attitudes by degree of Orthodoxy. Apparently, the Orthodox are a conservative exception to the rule that says American Jews are liberal. Even though liberal is a dirty word in America today, when one looks at the way Americans vote and the attitudes that Americans take, most Jews are still liberal. While among all Americans self-proclaimed conservatives outnumber liberals by a 3-2 ratio, among Jews

TABLE 2: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ATTITUDES BY ORTHODOXY

Question	Response	Non-Orth.	Nominal	Centrist	Traditionalist
Homosexuality is wrong...	St. Agree & Agree	40	64	66	92
The government should give aid to non-public schools...	St. Agree & Agree	34	46	65	75
The government should not pay for abortions.	St. Disagree & Disagree	66	56	55	36
A wife should make her own decisions even if she disagrees with her husband...	St. Agree & Agree	78	71	65	46
The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) should be passed	St. Agree & Agree	61	48	47	29
Affirmative Action should be used to help disadvantaged groups...	St. Agree & Agree	48	46	44	37
The death penalty should be abolished...	St. Disagree & Disagree	62	61	60	59

the proportions are reversed.

One of the areas in which this liberalism has become an issue has been in the conflict between traditional religious norms and contemporary latitudinarian attitudes, for example, attitudes regarding homosexuality. The Torah and Jewish tradition appear unequivocal in their condemnation of homosexuality as an abomination. In contrast, the last two decades have witnessed a growing gay rights movement in the United States including at least two gay synagogues. The movement's leaders have argued that homosexuality should be freed of the stigma once attached to it and that it presents a perfectly valid, respectable and legitimate life style choice. In response, many rabbis and other American religious leaders have criticized the growing acceptance of homosexuality in the larger society, while expressing sympathy for homosexuals as individuals. As might be expected, Orthodox rabbis in general have been in the forefront of the opposition to the gay rights movement, while in contrast, the Reform movement has sanctioned homosexual synagogues by including them in their movement, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. In recent research, Jews nationwide overwhelmingly endorsed the liberal notion that homosexual individuals should have the same rights as other people. However, a substantial minority felt troubled by the rise in the visibility of homosexuality. These discrepant views can be accounted for by the strong commitment on the part of most Jews to restricting the activities of the government in what they regard as the private sphere. As a minority seeking integration into the larger society, Jews do not like the idea of the larger society enforcing its moral standards and so they have an interest in official tolerance of non-conforming groups which is what leads them to support the idea of gay rights in America. It is as if to say that if the society can accept and the government can protect the free exercise of homosexual civil rights, than the position of Jews, a less stigmatized minority, is that much

more secure.

However, a commitment to official tolerance of homosexuals may have little connection with one's private opinion of them, the latter being often affected by deeply-rooted religious and cultural values. When the respondents in this study were asked whether they thought homosexuality was wrong, 40 percent of the non-Orthodox replied yes, a proportion strikingly similar to the response to this question of all Jews nationwide in a recent survey of general Jewish attitudes. As one would expect, the proportions agreeing that homosexuality is wrong were significantly higher among the nominally and centrist Orthodox groups, 64 and 66 percent, and almost unanimous, 92 percent, among the most traditional. One perspective from these findings focuses on the strong correlation of Orthodox traditionalism with a moral condemnation of homosexuality. If one is really Orthodox, one cannot be in favor of homosexuality, and the more Orthodox one is, the less in favor of it one is. Yet there is another way of looking at this data. Over a third of the centrist and the nominally Orthodox refrained from endorsing the straightforward view that homosexuality is wrong. This means, in effect, that there exists a sizable minority of people who claim to be Orthodox repudiating an unambiguous normative view of traditional Judaism in favor of the more latitudinarian modern view. One-third of a group who are much more Orthodox than the general population are not willing to say that homosexuality is wrong.

To account for the departure from the point of view mandated by biblical law by such a large number of relatively observant Orthodox Jews, one must assume that the effective influences of modernity are greater than many would have imagined. But the tolerance of homosexuality by some of the non-traditionalist Orthodox who are nevertheless substantially more observant than the North American Jews is but one of the deviations from the classic ethos of Orthodoxy that were encountered in the sample population.

Another question which revealed differences in social attitudes was "The government should not pay for abortions." It was asked in this way so it could be compared with an identical question asked of the general population on another survey. Here again, the non-Orthodox disagreed twice as strongly -- 66 to 36 percent -- as the traditionalist Orthodox.

**Attitudes Toward Premarital Sex**

Table 3 details attitudes on the question of sexual license. The most notable differences here were between young and old more than between men and women. One of the most salient and central changes to accompany the transition from traditional to modern society, whether it be in eighteenth century Europe or in developing countries of the contemporary Third World, has been the significant liberalization of sexual behavior and attitudes. The sexual revolution of the 1960s was marked by increases in the legitimization of eroticism, declines in the age of first sexual intercourse, as well as growth in the instances of and permissiveness toward premarital and extramarital sexual relations. Premarital sexual relations were

also strictly limited by Jewish law and tradition. But as life and attitudes towards sex have changed, so, like everyone else, the Jews have changed. In the studies of today's sexual behavior, Jews generally are reported to have the most liberal attitudes of all American religious groups. Orthodox Jews, though, have a reputation for far more conservative sexual attitudes. Now as differences have been noted between the traditionalists in the sample and the centrists and the nominally Orthodox, the same kinds of differences would be expected in sexual attitudes -- a conservative attitude among the traditionalists while the other Orthodox, the centrists somewhat and the nominals even more, would be subject to intense countervailing liberal pressures.

What is being investigated here is to what extent what Orthodox Jews have come to call the "tefillin date" has become a reality in the modern Orthodox community. The "tefillin date" means that a man goes on a date and takes along his tefillin because he will be staying overnight. Since he is Orthodox he is going to pray in the morning so he takes his tefillin along.

TABLE 3: DISAPPROVAL OF PREMARITAL SEX BY ORTHODOXY AND AGE

Question	Response	Non-Orth.	Nominal	Centrist	Traditionalist
Would you approve or disapprove of premarital sex in each of the following circumstances:					
If the couple is...					
Engaged	Disapprove				
Old (36+)		23	33	60	
Young (18-35)		3	17	46	92
Dating Seriously	Disapprove				
Old (36+)		33	57	72	
Young (18-35)		8	23	59	97
Just Friends	Disapprove				
Old (35+)		65	68	85	
Young (18-35)		20	41	79	100
Casual Acquaintances	Disapprove				
Old (35+)		77	82	93	
Young (18-35)		58	55	81	100

According to the data, the tefillin date may be a very real part of contemporary modern Orthodox life, at least in America. To assess the accuracy of our images of traditionalist sexual conservatism and the others' incipient liberalism with the implicit tension for those Orthodox caught in the middle, the following question was asked: "Would you approve or disapprove of premarital sex in each of the following circumstances -- if the couple is engaged to be married, dating seriously, just good friends, or casual acquaintances?" The differences between men's and women's responses was very small but tending in the direction of women expressing disapproval somewhat more often. However, the divisions between those respondents over 35 and those under 35 were substantial and significant. This is important to note because one of the current hypotheses about modern Orthodoxy is that the young people are more frum (religious in thought and deed) than the older people, and in fact they are in lots of ways, but sex may be the exception to the rule. However, the possibility remains that while they are all for it, they do not actually do it.

The results are presented separately here for the older and younger members of each Orthodox grouping, except for the traditionalists since the respondents to this question among that grouping were mostly 35 years old or younger. This is an interesting fact in itself because only the younger traditionalists were willing to answer questions like this.

There are several patterns that are particularly noteworthy. First, for all levels of Orthodoxy the younger respondents consistently reported more indulgent attitudes toward the practice of premarital sex than their older counterparts. Second, among all but the traditionalists, disapproval rates declined dramatically as the hypothetical relationship between the couple becomes more intimate.

Among younger Orthodox respondents in the centrist category, while the vast majority disapproved of premarital sex between casual acquaintances and nearly as

many withheld approval for those who were just good friends, only slightly more than half were against premarital sex between those who were dating seriously, and less than half disapproved of an engaged couple engaging in sex. Moreover, the centrists were by no means alone in this response. Those under the age of 35 in the nominally Orthodox category display the same pattern except that they are even more permissive. In this group less than a quarter opposed premarital sex for those dating seriously and only 17 percent disapproved of it between the engaged couple. Indeed, barely half of the young nominally Orthodox challenged the practice of sex between casual acquaintances. Now the Orthodox standard clearly does not sanction premarital sex and these people know it. Only among the traditionalists were found the uniform attitudes toward premarital sex that would be expected from those Jews who call themselves Orthodox.

While the young appear to be more liberal on matters of premarital sex than those over 35, the older respondents are by no means paradigms of restrictiveness. To be sure, most seem to draw the line on premarital sex at all levels, yet significant minorities registered their approval. Nearly a quarter would not disapprove of sexual relations between those who are dating seriously and 40 percent did not disapprove of it between the engaged. So these attitudes are not only among the young, they have found their way into the Orthodox community at all levels.

Clearly while there is evidence of restraint here, liberal attitudes toward premarital sexuality which have become a hallmark of modern American life have made inroads in many precincts of Orthodoxy, except those identified as traditionalists. These people are Orthodox, but if their grandparents saw their Orthodoxy, they would have great questions about the extent to which they really are Orthodox. According to many Orthodox rabbinical figures and lay leaders, the ethos of Orthodoxy is reflected all too faintly today. They have expressed increasing concern

with what they view as the decline in morality, by which they mean a departure from traditional norms and standards in the family and family-building spheres.

#### **What It All Means**

How is the Orthodox community likely to respond to this survey? The traditionalists are likely to say, "This proves what we have been saying all along. The minute you make contact with the modern world, you undermine yourself. It is the end of Orthodoxy, and this is the proof." The centrists are going to say, "This proves what we have been saying all along, you can be Orthodox and you can still be in the world." In other words, both will use the evidence to prove that their way of life is right.

The findings here are indicative of what has been happening among the general population in America or in the West, for that matter. The non-Jews or non-Orthodox in America would look at this data and say that these people are really conservative, or identify them as the liberal fringe of the radical right.

It is also reasonable to expect that the same phenomenon described here would be found among fundamentalist Christians as well. The young Bible college kids are probably not as permissive as their non-Bible college friends, but certainly are much more so than their forebears were. Or to put it in a metaphorical way, the road that everyone has been walking on in the last generation has been moving distinctly towards greater permissiveness. The Orthodox continue to be on the right side of that road but the road is moving leftward.

In conclusion, it should be noted that

while variations in attitude and outlook may be found that distinguish among the Orthodox and between them and other Jews, these variations may not always be supported in action. That is, people often claim to believe one thing while they in fact do another. Although one may be tempted to conclude from such contradictions that these people are less than honest with themselves and others, this apparent hypocrisy is not a quality unique to Orthodox Jewry by any means. So what is important here is not whether there exist some contradictions between stated beliefs and actions, but rather the persistent claim that these people have to being traditional in outlook. The extraordinary thing about modern Orthodox Jews is not that they claim to do one thing and do another, but that they continue to make that claim in spite of the fact that they do something else. Even if the assertion of an Orthodox ethos puts them in contradiction with themselves and the way they live, many of these Jews continue to make that assertion. This is an extraordinary thing because it suggests that there are people who choose to present themselves as more Orthodox than they really are. In a world where most people choose to present themselves as up-to-date, in fashion, in vogue, flexible, and forward-looking, the fact that some people adopt the opposite public face is noteworthy.

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