

ULTRA-ORTHODOXY'S POROUS CULTURAL BORDER

Strictly Kosher Reading: Popular Literature and the Condition of Contemporary Orthodoxy, by Yoel Finkelman, Academic Studies Press, 2011, 255 pp.

Reviewed by HAIM CHERTOK

Strictly speaking, *Strictly Kosher Reading*, Yoel Finkelman's highly original study is misleadingly subtitled: its focus is not on Orthodoxy *per se* but, as we soon learn, upon Haredim. More specifically, it is about the predicament facing America's ultra-Orthodox communities as though it were a disease or impairment rather than some amorphous "condition." But more later about Finkelman's linguistic *condition*. The author's premise is shrewd and original: to shed light, as he puts it, on "the tension between isolation and acculturation in American Haredi culture" by means of a close examination of the popular literature it has engendered.

Finkelman, a lecturer on Jewish thought at Bar-Ilan University, describes in detail the recent ArtScroll, Feldheim, and Targum publishing explosion of translations and Torah commentaries for both in-group adepts and recruits to the world of ultra-Orthodoxy. These are user-friendly, attractively packaged, and authoritative but, being translations of their kind, are viewed by the American Haredi core as dumbed-down redactions, each designed to attract the maximum sales in a growth sector of the religious book market. In addition, this niche market—much of it directed at women—includes halachically sanctioned self-help books, parenting, marriage, and health guides, and endless inspirational works such as hagiographic biographies of venerated rabbis of the past.

The market for fiction, which began with the children's books, then extended itself to titles for teens—Haredi adventure for boys, cloistered "romances" for girls, and most recently novels for adults, albeit with sexuality airbrushed out. Who would have imagined a Haredi technological thriller fiction dealing with hacker terrorists who can shut down America's airports and penetrate its nuclear arsenal? Some of these novels explore Haredi issues such as how technology impinges on and threatens but simultaneously sustains this highly insular world. Taken together, this popular literature is, as Finkelman puts it, "a wonderful tool with which to examine a nexus of Haredi values that does not derive directly from the formal Jewish canon of texts..."

Indeed this popular literature, a mirror image of the secular culture that Haredim habitually deplore and whose very existence may be viewed as a standing rebuke to the Haredi tenet that everything worth knowing may be found in Torah, in Finkelman's competent hands turns into a fascinatingly fruitful resource. In his opening chapters the author describes how Haredi writers negotiate the paradox of living apart from but simultaneously embedded in the very secular society and

culture they view as immoral and whose influence they deplore. A step toward resolving this tension involves the *coalescence* of larger society's values with the teachings of Orthodoxy. Primers on healthy eating or successful marriage, for example, provide standard nutritional or marital counsel reinforced by the quaint notion that following such advice is part and parcel of spiritual and religious obligation. At the margin of acceptable coalescence lie the dangers of getting co-opted by corrupting aspects of the larger culture. Haredi writers are savvy enough to avoid turning out material explicit about sexuality or sanctioning postmodern marriage, single parenthood, or the like. In any event, Haredi publishers would never accept it, a process Finkelman labels *filtration*. Haredi purveyors of pop psychology, on the other hand, do cautiously introduce techniques borrowed from mainline psychology and psychiatry.

Subverting the hardline Haredi rhetoric about strict separation, this shifting borderland between popular Haredi culture and the music or literature regnant in American society is in fact porous. Finkelman acutely formulates ultra-Orthodoxy's quandary: "in order to monopolize [the Haredi market] effectively, producers must copy styles and genres that exist in general culture in order to limit Haredi consumption of the even worse general culture....Yet, one cannot imitate an existing genre without following its existing codes and unwritten rules, which may well [*may well!*] reflect values foreign to ideal Haredi norms."

Almost exactly midway in his study, a similar predicament informs a chapter dealing with Haredi historiography which romanticizes the memory of East European Jewry as a living ideal, views early-twentieth-century American Judaism as spiritually vacuous, and glorifies the band of hero-rabbis who reinvigorated ultra-Orthodoxy in alien America. In the course of deconstructing mythopoeic reifications masquerading as *history*, the tone of Finkelman's study shifts gradually but ineluctably from descriptive to critical analysis. This becomes most pungent in a devastating chapter when he weighs the triumphalist sureties of Haredi theology against the ambiguities that inform the hard-won postulates of Modern Orthodox theologians such as R. Aharon Lichtenstein, against the living testimony of *ba'alei teshuvah* concerning the acquisition of faith in God, against the complexities of elitist medieval Jewish thinkers such as Sa'adia Gaon: "For Sa'adia...reason can lead to the truth of God, but only with great difficulty, lifelong effort, and the danger of error waiting at every step.... In contrast, contemporary Haredi popular theology postulates that one can easily find truth using reason.... One who does not see that [i.e., the truths of Judaism] must be blinded by ulterior motives." By the end of his illuminating study one senses that Finkelman is struggling to contain his disdain for the simplistic, accusatory smugness he uncovers undergirding the certainties of a way of life that, thinking so well of itself and having achieved so much seeming success, is blind to the immensity of its privations.

I am pleased to note that this book's textual apparatus is first-rate: clear and

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useful notes, a full bibliography, and an intelligently wrought index. Less to the good is Finkelman's style which is wooden and, especially in the book's early, expository sections, tediously repetitious. And what is one to say about a writer who on p. 36 writes that he will employ "Haredi popular literature as a lens through which to examine tension between isolation and acculturation...," who repeats the lens metaphor on p. 37, again on p. 41, and yet once more on p. 43? Or "embattled" (28) followed one sentence later by "embattlement" (29)? Or "the wise advise [sic] of the sages..." (82)? I could go on. Suffice it to say that Finkelman has a tin ear and there are too many distracting infelicities in his text, a real pity because it is well researched, cuts what is to my knowledge new ground, and has considerable merit.

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THE STATE OF THE JEWS: A MULTIFACETED ANALYSIS

The State of the Jews: A Critical Appraisal, by Edward Alexander, Transaction Publishers, 2012, 248 pp.

Reviewed by SARAH SCHMIDT

In *The State of the Jews*, Edward Alexander, professor emeritus of English at the University of Washington, has collected twenty-seven previously written brief essays in an attempt to make a strong case primarily against Jewish intellectuals who never seem to question their almost automatic equation of Judaism with liberal values, those who have forgotten that the primary duty of the Jewish people is to survive. Most of the essays are book reviews published originally in American journals and newspapers, mainly in the *Chicago Jewish Star*, and together they form a strong indictment of liberal beliefs in general, and particularly of those opposed to the survival of the Jewish people. In the process Alexander takes aim not only at the usual suspects—Noam Chomsky, Tony Judt et al.—but also at “the Pharaoh who knew not Joseph,” in the guise of American president Barack Obama.

Alexander's overall thesis stems from a quote by the prophet Ezekiel: “And [I, God] shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land...” By the state of the Jews, therefore, Alexander means the Land of Israel, the