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“ The State of Israel... will guarantee freedom of religion and conscience...”
Israel's Declaration of Independence (May 1948)

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Editorial

May 23, 2016

Dear Friends,

Never did I anticipate that the conclusion of my career would so closely imitate the beginning of my career. At the beginning I studied the forces of modernity that changed medieval Judaism in Western culture, including the rise of Zionism. At the conclusion I am watching these same debates seemingly unfold before my eyes: Can and how will Judaism accommodate modernity? What is the proper mix of tradition and American culture? What will be the Jewish nature of a Jewish State? Of course, 45 years ago I would neither have believed the resurgence of ultra-Orthodoxy, nor that some ultra-Orthodox carry two cell phones: one kosher and one not so much. (Ok, that's an historical anachronism, I know.)

RECOMMENDED HEBREW LINKS

- [\[Click for:\] The Reform Enemy: Articles about the battles against the Reform - Rabbi Shlomo Aviner](#)
- [\[Click for:\] Why Don't Secular Israelis shout out? "They don't feel sufficiently suffocated" - The Marker, Haaretz](#)



Response to: 'The Challenge of Conversion in Israel' by Rabbi Chuck Davidson

By Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer, RRFEI Member

B"H

Holy Hevra,

Rabbi Davidson rightly criticizes Dr. Fisher [\[in the previous RRFEI bulletin\]](#) for referring to the people under discussion as "non-Jews."

Unfortunately, he, every bit as much as Dr. Fisher, seems to acknowledge and accept Orthodox hegemony. When he refers to these 400,000 people as "non-Halakhically Jewish Jews," he declares, in effect, that the Orthodox understanding of Halakhah is the only one. Perhaps I should not be surprised. The language used in Israel equates "religious" with "Orthodox"; why should there be a distinction



Today's newsletter samples elements in those debates as they are occurring today. [Rabbi "Yitz" Greenberg's excellent analysis of contemporary Orthodoxy \[link\]](#) traces the forces and attempts to be both Jewish and modern in the Haredi and Modern Orthodox worlds. [The Haaretz interview this weekend in The Marker with Guy ben Porat \[link\]](#) is a superb analysis of Israel's struggle with religion, a continuation of the theme from last week's newsletter. The article is in Hebrew, and an insightful and balanced analysis of the way Israelis see the Haredi vs. Hiloni cultural battle, while providing an answer to the question of why Israelis are not as upset as one might expect with religious coercion in Israel.

[Rabbi Aviner's contempt for liberal Judaism \[link\]](#), his classification of liberal Jews as akin to Christians in status, demonstrates such a different approach to amcha that it's valuable to remember that this battle, fought over 200 years ago by the Hatam Sofer, rages once again in Israeli culture and among politicians.

Rabbi Zev-Hayim Feyer's response to Rabbi Davidson's article from last week about conversion, which acknowledged that

between "Halakhah" and "Orthodox Halakhah"?

And let us note that conversion by rabbis not on the "approved list," even if the procedure is according to the strictest Orthodox standards, are equally not recognized by the Orthodox authorities in Israel.

On behalf of those of us throughout the world who are religious and not Orthodox and who observe Halakhah in other than an Orthodox understanding thereof, I would suggest a different expression, a bit unwieldy but more accurate. Let us call them "Jews nor recognized by Orthodoxy."

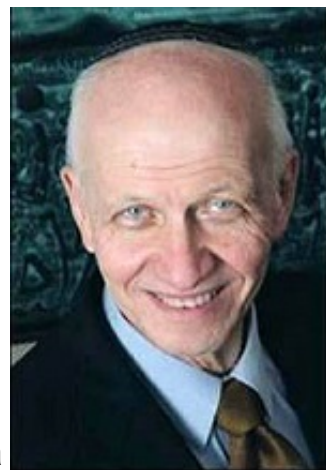
*Shalom,
Zev-Hayyim Feyer
Rabbi, Jewish Renewal*

Can Modern Orthodoxy Be The New Center?

A repositioned movement can be critical to the future of American Jewry, by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

[Read FULL article>>](#)

The Pew Report on American Jewry has left the widespread impression that the liberal religious denominations are in trouble while Orthodox Judaism is thriving. Upon analysis, however, the Orthodox picture is more complicated. The charedi, or ultra wing of Orthodoxy, has surged in the past half-century while Modern Orthodoxy has had a near-death experience. Today there is a revival of the progressive wing of Orthodoxy but it is under fire from traditionalists. I believe the entire Jewish community has a major stake in the outcome and should get involved to assure a positive result.



Following is an analysis of American Orthodoxy in the last five decades and a case for why a strengthened progressive Orthodox movement can strengthen Jewish institutional and communal life.

Israelis do not feel the lack of conversion options as a great hardship, reminds us that the Jewish world is very broad indeed. We ought not forget the variety of approaches to halakhic authority in world Jewry, particularly in North America.

Let us know what you think by writing to organizers@rrfei.org, or see our FB group at: [FB group \[link\]](#).

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The Split

Modern Orthodoxy, which sees itself as fully halachic while also embracing secular knowledge, suffered a precipitous decline in numbers in the past half-century. In 1960, as Pew and other researchers found, about one quarter of the older generation of American Jews identified as Orthodox. During that decade a number of liberation movements --women's, black, gay -- were launched. Multiculturalism flourished; anti-Semitism plummeted. As major beneficiaries of the expanded liberalism and acceptance, Jews shifted to the left – not just politically but also to less observance, toward the more liberal denominations, to less religion altogether, toward maximum integration in society, and consequently, more intermarriage.

Orthodoxy offered a mixed response...

Many Modern Orthodox jumped into the new cultural currents – and not a few shifted to the left and even out of the community. Other Modern Orthodox were shocked by the new cultural revolutions and moved to the traditional side to insulate their children. The Modern Orthodox communal leadership moved to the right, adopting more traditionalist values and policies in their yeshivot and institutions...

The Orthodox percentage in American Jewry fell steadily. The low point was in the 1990 National Jewish Population Study in which only 7.7 percent of American Jews declared themselves to be Orthodox. Despite that fact, the Orthodox establishment was proclaiming its growing strength as well as its higher standards.

...

[Read FULL article>>](#)

Losing Its Way

Having lost its way and its self-confidence, the Modern Orthodox leadership increasingly yielded to ultra-Orthodox policies and leaders. Modern Orthodox rabbis left the denominationally mixed boards of rabbis in their communities. On the national level, the Synagogue Council of America --where Orthodox, Conservative and Reform were

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officially and jointly represented – was allowed to die. The sexes were separated in more day schools. Over the decades, conversion was tightened to require total observance from newcomers to the faith. The Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), the largest group of Orthodox rabbis, suffered membership losses as a number of Modern Orthodox synagogues lost nonobservant members and closed. Other shuls were lost to Conservative Judaism, while still others were challenged financially by the creation of separatists' charedi-style "shtieblach" (informal congregations), whose low budgets – many did not have a rabbi or other paid staff – were appealing.

...

[Read FULL article>>](#)

The Growth Of Ultra-Orthodoxy

While Modern Orthodoxy weakened over the last 50 years, ultra-Orthodoxy found its way and was immensely strengthened in America. Assertive leadership by European rabbinical greats, such as Rabbi Aharon Kotler, who headed Beth Medrash Govoha, one of the largest yeshivas in the world, in Lakewood, NJ, and total dedication to institutional upbuilding yielded great results. As in Israel, where the government of Israel funded this wave, in America major underwriting from non-Orthodox Jews fueled this growth. Much of the funding came to support outreach to baalei teshuvah (returnees to tradition). This work was much heralded, though the actual numbers were quite low. With a combination of high birth rates and relatively low exit rates, the ultra-Orthodox population exploded...

...

[Read FULL article>>](#)

The Rebirth Of Modern Orthodoxy

While the 2014 Pew study showed Modern Orthodox numbers down, the communal core is of high quality, with much strength. Its synagogue affiliation and Jewish identity rates are high and strongly positive, as are its birthrates and

network of day schools and camps. Modern Orthodoxy also became the group with the highest level of academic and advanced degree education. Historically, higher income and education statistics skewed toward the more liberal denominations and integrated Jews.

...

A new infusion of an invigorated Modern Orthodoxy that meets the best intellectual, moral and spiritual standards of postmodern culture is a critical ingredient for the strengthening of the center of affiliated Jewry. Much of Modern Orthodoxy's practices and associations can be adopted or adapted to shore up non-Orthodox Jews' lives and community. This strengthening is a sine qua non for survival and renewal of American Jewry.

The time is now to support and invest in a rebirth of Modern Orthodoxy. Such an investment will yield a major return in depth and vitality for the rest of American Jewry and the state of Israel.

[Read FULL article>>](#)

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Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel represents a broad spectrum of Jewish belief and practice, and champions the values of religious freedom and equality fundamental to World Jewry, in partnership with Hiddush for the realization of these principles in Israel and the Diaspora.

Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel

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