

Orthodoxy: Traditionalism in a Modern Age
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Definitions:

The time is ripe for an anthology of primary sources on Orthodoxy and by Orthodox and formerly Orthodox Jews. The success of television series like *Shtisel* and *Unorthodox* and the explosion of memoirs of formerly Orthodox Jews amply demonstrate the widespread fascination with Orthodox Jews and those who leave that community.¹ News stories about Orthodox protests in 2020 against pandemic restrictions in both the United States and Israel, the relatively high support for Donald Trump in sharp contrast to non-Orthodox Jews, and scrutiny of the Hasidic educational system for boys all point to the contemporary political dimensions of Orthodoxy, beyond its character as a religious movement.² Most of these stories focus on the most extreme Orthodox groups—often labeled “ultra-Orthodox” in English, though some members of that community resent the term—whose insularity and rejection of modern culture renders them particularly exotic.³ Though the term Orthodoxy covers a broad spectrum, we chose to focus principally on these more stringent and traditionalist varieties, both Hasidic and non-Hasidic, leaving for others to tell the story of “Modern Orthodoxy.”⁴

Interest in strictly traditionalist Orthodoxy is warranted. While as recently as the 1960s scholars believed Orthodoxy to be on the wane, Orthodox Jews—and especially the Ultra-Orthodox (or “Haredi”) Jews—today constitute the fastest growing segment of the Jewish population, with increasing political and cultural clout to match.⁵ Yet representations of this population often take an outsider perspective, leaving Orthodox voices unheard and often assuming that Orthodoxy speaks in

¹ See, for example, Shulem Deen, *All Who Go Do Not Return* (Graywolf Press, 2015) and Leah Vincent, *Cut Me Loose: Sin and Salvation After My Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood* (Doubleday Press, 2014). For a review, see Tova Cohen, “How Ex-Frum Memoirs Became New York Publishing’s Hottest New Trend,” *Tablet* (January 7, 2014).

² See David Myers, ed., “The Haredi Moment: An Online Forum,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, April 2021 and the 2022 *New York Times* series by Eliza Shapiro and Brian M. Rosenthal, “How Hasidic Schools are Reaping Millions but Failing Students.” On Orthodox support for Trump, see Nathaniel Deutsch, “Borough Park Was a Red State: Trump and the Haredi Vote,” *Jewish Social Studies* 22, 3 (Spring/Summer 2017): 158-173.

³ Avi Shafran, “Swearing off the U Word,” *Cross Currents*, January 30, 2011. On the secular fascination with the 2020 Netflix series *Unorthodox*, see Naomi Seidman, “My Scandalous Rejection of *Unorthodox*,” *Jewish Review of Books* (Summer 2020).

⁴ Zev Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History* (Jewish Publication Society, 2016).

⁵ See, for example, Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (Free Press, 1955). By one estimate, Haredim will constitute nearly one quarter of world Jewry by 2040. L. Daniel Staetsky, “Haredi Jews around the world: Population trends and estimates,” *Institute for Jewish Policy Research*, May 2020, 4.

a single voice.⁶ Within Orthodoxy itself, historical perspective is often lacking, given the paucity of professional historians and the problematic perception and indeed ideology of Orthodoxy as the inheritor of a continuous and unchanging tradition.⁷

The terms Orthodox and Orthodoxy (“correct belief”) technically refer only to belief, in contrast with orthopraxy (“correct practice”). But the terms are generally understood to refer to both belief and stringent practice. As descriptors of Jews, these terms refer to those Jews who most strictly observe the strictures of rabbinic law, observing the rules about kashrut and Sabbath, marital relations and gender roles, codified in Joseph Caro’s sixteenth-century legal code, the *Shulchan Aruch* (“Set Table”), and such later code as the *Kitzur* (“Abridged”) *Shulchan Aruch* by Shlomo Ganzfried (1804-1886) and the *Mishnah Berurah* (“Clarified Teaching”) by Yisrael Meir Kagan (1838-1933), known as the Chofetz Chaim. It is sometimes asserted that Judaism is a religious tradition characterized by adherence to “deed” rather than “creed”; Orthodoxy, however, generally involves certain beliefs, for instance about the divine origin of the Torah, either verbatim, in the case of the “Written Torah” (here meaning primarily the Pentateuch), or through inspiration and guidance, as in the case of the “Oral Torah,” which is to say, rabbinic law and interpretations. In contemporary Orthodox society, pre-modern rabbinical views that do not fit this framework of belief are often censored.⁸

For all the associations of Orthodoxy with an uninterrupted religious tradition, what it meant to be “Orthodox” has dramatically shifted over time, in terms of religious, cultural, or social commitments, institutional affiliations, cultural segregation, even political views.⁹ Although initially imposed upon the community by outsiders, the term was soon adopted by its followers. The word itself reinforces the self-conception of its adherents of their own religious fidelity. Equally, it reinforces their perception that they are authentically perpetuating pre-modern Jewish forms, in contrast to their non-Orthodox competitors, a view shared by many outside their camps.¹⁰ Thus, for some Jews, Orthodoxy signifies ossified rituals divorced from moral progress, while others consider

⁶ Reference here?

⁷ Maybe quote Berel Wein or someone else here on Orthodoxy’s ancient authenticity? Or scholarship on Orthodox historiography?

⁸ Marc Shapiro, *Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015).

⁹ Jeffrey Gurock, “Twentieth-Century American Orthodoxy’s Era of Non-Observance, 1900-1960,” *Torah U-Madda Journal* 9 (2000), 87-107; Jay Lefkowitz, “The Rise of Social Orthodoxy: A Personal Account,” *Commentary*, April 2014.

¹⁰ Jonathan Sacks, *Orthodoxy Confronts Modernity* (Ktav, 1991), 2. Sacks here, and elsewhere, also presents an ahistorical monolithic view of pre-modern Jews living in isolated ghettos, a highly imagined past.

it the highest form of divine service. Both, however, tend to view it as an authentic reproduction of pre-modern religious life, with at most only superficial changes from earlier generations.

Despite a consensus (shared with outsiders) that Orthodoxy referred to a strict continuation of traditional observance, from its inception Orthodox Jews fiercely debated the boundaries of Orthodoxy and regularly excluded each other from the camp.¹¹ Though defined initially by its opposition to Reform (in Western Europe) and to Zionism (in Eastern Europe), Orthodoxy has experienced schisms between actors and factions that outsiders would widely consider Orthodox. Radicalization and splintering may be intrinsic to the formation of Orthodox communities, beginning with the emergence of what was called “neo-Orthodoxy” as a secessionist movement in German Jewish communities dominated by the Reform movement: Haredim have separated themselves from more-aculturated Orthodox communities, Hungarian extremists from mainstream Haredim, and all even more radical extremists from each other in a bid for greater degrees of religious purity.¹²

In truth, Orthodoxy is no less a product of modernity than its religious and political competitors such as Reform Judaism or Zionism. Like them, Orthodoxy was born at the end of the long period of Jewish autonomy and traditional society, in which members took the authority and authenticity of inherited religious beliefs and expectations for granted. Tradition is the lens through which premodern societies perceive the world and understand their place in it. The moment one sees the glasses, the moment one speaks of “tradition” and makes arguments to defend its authority, one no longer lives within it.¹³ Orthodoxy thus represents a range of self-conscious attempts to negotiate a Jewish identity that feels authentic and unchanged in the radically new context of the voluntary community in a post-traditional world.

In short, Orthodoxy is a thoroughly modern phenomenon, constituting a kaleidoscope of religious, political, and cultural options that opened up in the modern period.¹⁴ Orthodoxy should thus be understood not as tradition tout court but as traditionalism, a deliberate commitment to religious observance (and belief) within a broader modern Jewish landscape with many shared traits. Our selection of texts will show that Orthodox Jews, from the very outset, were compelled to contend

¹¹ Ezra Margulies, “What Do We Mean By “Orthodox” Judaism?” *Modern Judaism* 42, 1 (February 2022), pages?

¹² Menachem Keren-Kratz, “Westernization and Israelization within Israel’s Extreme Orthodox Haredi Society,” *Israel Studies Review* 31.2 (Winter 2016), 101-29.

¹³ Avi Sagi, *Tradition vs. Traditionalism: Contemporary Perspectives in Jewish Thought* (Rodopi, 2008), 5-6.

¹⁴ See, *et al*, Jacob Katz, “Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 2 (1986), 2-17; Menachem Friedman, “Life Tradition and Book Tradition in the Development of Ultraorthodox Judaism,” in Harvey Goldberg, ed., *Judaism from Within and from Without: Anthropological Studies* (SUNY Press, 1987), 235-55; Michael Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of a Tradition,” in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era* (Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), 23-84.

with, borrow from, or adapt its Jewish competitors, beginning with the Central European neo-Orthodox struggle against Reform Judaism and continuing with the challenges posed by Socialism, Zionism, and feminism. Orthodoxy emerged from the same broader context shared by all these movements, the uneven conditions of Jewish emancipation and the rise of the nation-state, which for the first time rendered belonging to the Jewish community voluntary.

As a modern phenomenon Orthodoxy has had to contend with the intellectual challenges of the Enlightenment, science, and secularism, and with the cultural challenge of the more sexually permissive cultures within which Orthodox communities live, or who organize gender roles and family life differently. Orthodoxy, despite its vaunted traditionalism, was and is by necessity innovative, constructing new theological discourses to understand its place in a transformed world, new tools to compete in the religious and cultural marketplace, new educational and social practices of cultural reproduction, and new political stances and actions. Given the ideological commitment to traditionalism, these novelties are often underplayed or not recognized as such. This is the story we will trace in the volume, which follows the tensions between traditionalism and its broader context and charts the developments that emerged from their productive clash.

While this volume will use the term Orthodoxy, we are acutely aware that the terms used to describe Orthodox Jews or Judaism are diverse and contested, including haredi, Hasidic, yeshivish, ultra-Orthodox, traditional, Modern Orthodox, frum, Torah-true, and others. The term Orthodoxy is among those imposed on the community by outsiders, although (unlike “ultra-Orthodoxy”) it was soon enough accepted by those to whom it referred.¹⁵ Haredi, the Israeli parallel to “ultra-Orthodox,” fails to reflect the fuller transnational story we hope to tell. Given the lack of a universally accepted term for the type of particularly stringent and anti-modern traditionalism that is our major focus, we have reluctantly accepted Orthodox as the term we will use in the title, with a descriptive phrase that will serve to more closely identify our topic. And while we aim to avoid acting as gatekeepers to determine what counts as Orthodox Judaism, and include a range of voices within this category, Orthodox discourse itself is often focused on just these charged questions of who or what counts as Orthodox (“observant,” “Torah-true”) Judaism.¹⁶

Our table of contents is organized chronologically and geographically, reflecting certain familiar temporal and geographic contours to the narrative of Orthodoxy alongside other areas of

¹⁵ Jeffrey Blutinger, “‘So-Called Orthodoxy’: the History of an Unwanted Label,” *Modern Judaism* 27, 3 (July 2007), 310-328.

¹⁶ Tanya Zion-Waldoks, “‘Family Resemblance’ and Its Discontents: Towards the Study of Orthodoxy’s Politics of Belonging and Lived Orthodoxies in Israel,” *AJS Review* 46.1 (April 2022).

modern Jewish history. Initially a product of the unique conditions of Jews in Central Europe of the nineteenth-century—an acculturating, upwardly mobile Jewish population moving from an autonomous to a voluntary corporate community—Orthodoxy soon spread elsewhere in the Jewish world, manifesting itself in a range of forms. In Eastern Europe, Orthodox Judaism radically reshaped the social structure of the existing traditional masses, creating an umbrella category that brought together former rival ideologies, Hasidism and Mitnagdism, as two arms of strict Orthodoxy now united in the struggle against a common enemy.¹⁷ Within this context, Orthodoxy emerged as a culturally innovative and variegated force, at once borrowing from and competing with ideological opponents on issues such as political activism, Zionism, and education.

After the Holocaust, two major centers of Orthodoxy emerged, in Israel and North America, and our volume reflects the unique character and concerns of these centers. Orthodoxy is indeed a global phenomenon and no longer a strictly Ashkenazic one, as our selections demonstrate. Along with the sections that group sources by geography and historical context, we also identified a few other themes that are not confined within these categories, including a section on Orthodox iconoclasts (choosing one each from Eastern Europe, Israel, and the United States) and another that addresses the boundaries between Orthodoxy and what lies outside it, through the voices of those who joined Orthodox communities and those who left them.

Only a small percentage of our selections are on Hasidism, given that a few excellent anthologies focus on such sources.¹⁸ We do include Hasidic voices where they contribute to the narrative of the volume, the tensions between traditionalism and the modern context. Within the constraints of our project, we focus on providing important sources that express Orthodox traditionalism (including Hasidism) as a modern phenomenon.

Overview of contents

We begin with Orthodoxy's foundations in Central Europe as a religious movement responding to Reform. Moshe Sofer (known as the Hatam Sofer, 1762-1839) is the most important ideologue of the more stringent model of Orthodoxy, one opposed to modern innovations and fought acculturation by elevating custom and ritual stringency to the level of biblical law, especially as promoted by his student Akiva Joseph Schlesinger (1838-1922). The psak of Michalowce in Hungary

¹⁷ Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I the Jews: The Transformation of Jewish Society in Russia 1825-1855* (Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 148-54.

¹⁸ Norman Lamm, ed., *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary* (Ktav, 1999) and Ariel Evan Mayse and Sam Berrin Shonkoff, eds., *Hasidism: Writings on Devotion, Community and Life in the Modern World* (Brandeis University Press, 2020).

banned nine areas of religious innovation that rendered a synagogue forbidden to enter, most of them tolerated or celebrated by the acculturated “neo-Orthodox,” such as sermons in a non-Jewish language, rabbis in Christian clerical robes, choirs even if male, and others. It quickly became an informal manifesto of ultra-Orthodoxy. Although Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) is associated with neo-Orthodoxy and its commitment to social and cultural integration, he remains an important founding figure for Orthodoxy as a broad phenomenon, and particularly its hardliners' insistence on separating from the non-Orthodox. In 1877, in a text reprinted here, Hirsch celebrated that Germany finally allowed Orthodox Jews to form a separate Jewish community in the same local as Reform-dominated ones and argued that doing so was a core requirement of being “Orthodox.”

The path to modernity developed differently in Eastern Europe. Here Hasidism – the modern mystical movement led by charismatic, dynastic “rebbe” (or “tzadikim”) – remained strong, as did non-Hasidic “Yeshivish” communities led by equally charismatic rabbinic leaders whose authority stemmed from their command of rabbinic law and their control over major religious academies. Israel Salanter (1809-1883), who developed the Musar movement to nurture moral sensitivity and commitment to Divine service in the face of modernization, is a third pillar of early Orthodoxy in Eastern Europe. In all cases, the Hungarian tendency to resist acculturation, secular education, and integration dominated, but not its demand for segregation from other Jews. Jews here continued to occupy a unique and far poorer socio-economic role in a region barely past feudalism, one which remained a multi-ethnic society in which millions of Jews maintained their own language (Yiddish) and a far more robust ethnic identity. The German model of an integrated, Orthodox religious denomination barely took hold here and Reform even less so. In fact, most Jews remained ritually observant – though not necessarily “Orthodox” – into the twentieth century. Instead, when Jews started to modernize towards the end of the nineteenth century they did so via secular politics – Liberal, Socialist, and Zionist. As a result, Orthodoxy emerges as a political rather than a purely religious movement. In this different context Orthodox Jews develop different Orthodox forms than further West.

A related focus that runs throughout the volume is Orthodox politics, an important dimension of traditionalism in the modern age in each of the contexts we explore. Thus, we provide a number of sources associated with the Orthodox political party Agudath Israel, founded in 1912, as well as a wide spectrum of voices asserting the proper relationship between traditionalism and Zionism or providing Orthodox perspectives on socialism, pacifism, and the internet. Rather than choosing selections that clearly continue earlier trends in Jewish exegesis, philosophy, halakhah, or mysticism, we feature Orthodox voices directly contending with the challenges of modernity, including modern historical events, particularly the Holocaust. The Holocaust affected Orthodox Jews and Orthodoxy

disproportionately, and a section in this anthology is devoted to how Orthodox thinkers contended with that cataclysmic event.

In all cases, we looked for a diversity of perspectives. This is a challenge, given that Orthodoxy is hierarchical and public voices and faces are generally male. Moreover, it is generally charted through Ashkenazic historical lineages. Scholarship on Orthodoxy often simply reproduces these structures, but we were committed to including those voices typically neglected and marginalized both in Orthodox life and the scholarship on it. Sarah Schenirer (1883-1935), sometimes credited with rescuing Orthodoxy at a moment of great peril, is an obvious choice for inclusion, but we also sought other voices that might speak to other dimensions of Orthodox life, for instance the charismatic speaker Esther Jungreis (1936-2016), instrumental in the *ba'al teshuva* (“returning” to Orthodoxy) movement of the second half of the twentieth century, or Esti Shusan (b. 1977), a Mizrahi feminist activist in the Israeli Haredi scene who published under a male pseudonym in her early journalistic career. As our table of contents shows, we also included sections on Orthodox iconoclasts and on the boundaries of Orthodoxy, with voices of those who joined it and those who left.

Along with providing a basic resource on some of the most interesting and important writings about Orthodoxy, we hope to tell a story about a contemporary phenomenon and its historical roots, roots that are often forgotten for the reasons we have spelled out. Some of the older sources documented here will thus lend historical resonance to contemporary phenomena, demonstrating, for instance, that the *ba'alei teshuva* of the post-Holocaust era had precursors in an earlier time. Other selections, however, represent “roads not taken,” options and innovations that were once part of an Orthodox landscape of thought and practice, but which are now mostly forgotten—interwar Polish Orthodox Socialism, for example.¹⁹ The volume is not intended to be definitive and cannot encompass every Orthodox writer of interest. But we hope that it will demonstrate some of the breadth and depth of a field, and a way of life, often mistakenly seen as narrow, monolithic, or unchanging.

¹⁹ See Ilan Fuchs's forthcoming work on Agudah socialism.

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