

Orthodox, Diverse Yet Alike

Examining different sects of religious shows similarities

By LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN

One of the things that strikes me every time I am in Israel is the disparity between the nature of the Orthodox communities of the United States

PERSPECTIVE

and Israel. There is a general assumption by many people that the Orthodox in both countries can be divided into the Modern Orthodox and the Haredim, usually translated as Ultra-Orthodox, and that those labeled by these sobriquets in these two very different environments truly must be equivalent. Both of these assumptions are false. Understanding how and why these communities are so different is a tremendous help in grasping the religious issues that separate Israel and the American Jewish community and that periodically lead to major public spats.

American Modern Orthodoxy

Modern Orthodoxy in the United States may be looked at from one of two perspectives, ideology or practice. From the point of view of ideology, Modern Orthodoxy supports attainment of high levels of secular education at universities. Further, it believes strongly in the sanctity of the State of Israel and its religious significance. From the perspective of practice, while strict Modern Orthodox adherents observe in a

those in the more rightwing groups but who accept the importance of a wider secular education and the resulting interaction with the world around. The males of this group (and this is even true of some to the right of them) mostly do not cover their heads at work, and maybe not even in the street. They eschew traditional hats, except some wear them on Shabbat.

Day School education through high school is considered essential for this group. Virtually all high school graduates go off to spend a year or two in Israel before college. This experience is regarded as formative in terms of preparing students for continuing either at Yeshiva University or at the various colleges with large Orthodox student populations. Allegiance to their Israeli yeshivas continues throughout life as this time in Israel is considered a formative experience.

Institutionally, this group draws most of its rabbis from the Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University and they are organized in the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA). Their synagogues are organized through the Orthodox Union (OU) and the Young Israel movement. Open Orthodoxy, to which other Orthodox leaders have raised many objections, would be regarded by most as the left of the American Orthodox spectrum. The decision of this



A replica of 770 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, the Chabad headquarters, located in Kfar Chabad, Israel.

Dati-Leumi community are about half as many as in the American Modern Orthodox group.

It should be noted, however, that Dati-Leumi participation in higher education is not much different from that of the so-called secular public. It is simply a reality that many fewer Israelis pursue college and university studies than do American Jews.

Further, the absence of liberal arts and general studies requirements in Israeli universities, which are for the most part structured on the European system, means that for most students secular education may not include the humanities and social sciences that help to shape the world outlook of American Modern Orthodox Jews.

Israeli National Religious Jews divide according to certain lines: on the left you have the group called Dati-lite who are in many ways like the more liberal Modern Orthodox American Jews we have described.

Then there is a larger group of Dati-Leumi who, in contradistinction to their American counterparts, are virtually universal in male attendance at daily services. Further, and of course this is a result of living in a Jewish state, almost all Dati-Leumi males wear kippot full-time, almost all of which are knitted and not black.

A further division is between settlers and urban bourgeois Dati-Leumi who tend to be less to the political right regarding opposition to a Palestinian state and the demand for increased settling of Judea and Samaria. Further, not all the married women in the bourgeois group cover their hair all the time and some wear only slight coverings.

Certain settler groups take

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extremely strong negative positions regarding materialism and are highly opposed to compromise positions taken by the religious parties.

A further subgroup on the National Religious right is termed Hardal, meeting Haredi-Leumi. These are strongly nationalistic Jews whose lifestyle is essentially a combination of Haredi halachic

standards with right-wing, sometimes extreme, nationalism.

The stricter Dati-Leumi, most of whose males participate in the Hesder yeshiva program, combining yeshiva study with army service, strongly support settlement activity and are generally opposed to the two-state solution. Orthodox women are exempt from army service completely.

This exemption is accepted by most National Religious women who choose instead one or two years of "National Service" known in Hebrew as Sherut Leumi. About a quarter of National Religious Orthodox women serve in the regular army and this has been a source of great controversy within this community.

For the stricter Dati-Leumi, covering the hair by married women and observance of traditional laws of modesty, including wearing of skirts, is virtually ubiquitous.

However, as distinguished from women to the right of them in what is generally called the Israeli Haredi population, almost none of the National Religious women wear stockings regularly and most prefer kerchiefs or hats of some kind to wigs (sheitlach, singular sheitel), unless they work in certain types of occupations for which such coverings are unacceptable.

The major exception here would be American Israeli women who

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way similar to those to the right of them, the community includes many who do not necessarily follow Orthodox standards of modesty, including covering the hair for married women, who may participate in certain mixed activities eschewed by those to their right, and whose style of dress typifies that of the American upper middle class to which they belong.

Essentially, we can say that the Modern Orthodox divide into two groups in North America, those who are in this community because of its toleration of some halachic leniencies (even violations) and a second group of those who aspire to the very same halachic standards as

group to discard the adjective "open" and to define itself as "modern," indicates its desire to maintain a place within the mainstream Modern Orthodox community.

Israeli Dati-Leumi

The group often assumed to be equivalent in Israel is that generally termed Dati-Leumi, National Religious. Because of the different economic circumstances, and the need for army service, at least for males, fewer Israelis in this group have completed university or college education than those in the American Modern Orthodox community. In fact, those reaching the level of a Bachelors' degree in the

Orthodox

may continue to wear sheitlach, having been accustomed to doing so in America. Almost none of the males of this group, except rabbis, wear suits on Shabbat. The largest number of Dati-Leumi Israelis vote

On the other hand, certain stringencies that are the norm in Israel are treated much more leniently in the US, for example, requiring Chalav Yisrael Kosher supervised fresh milk and requiring that baked goods only be made by Jews.

American Yeshivish

many secular degrees earned by Yeshivish Jews, male and female, may have heavy doses of transfer credit of yeshiva or seminary studies counted towards the degree. Nonetheless, degrees are valued as a means of training for occupations, and the expertise of those who hold degrees is valued by people seeking services, even beyond health services. There are some American Yeshivish circles that completely avoid higher secular education but studies show these to be the minority.

Yeshivish males generally wear white shirts, even during the week, and dark suits. They are of course distinguished by their black hats, which have become a uniform. Like Hasidim, they wear black cloth or velvet kippot. The married women almost all wear wigs to cover their hair at all times and strictly observe modesty rules, including for the most part wearing stockings.

The men attend minyan certainly every morning and evening, and attempt to make the afternoon service as well, depending on work schedules. They virtually all participate in regular Torah study sessions at synagogues or yeshivahs.

Where in America, all Orthodox Jews only eat Glatt Kosher, Yeshivish will in many cases only eat Chalav Yisrael, milk and milk products that are rabbinically supervised from the milking. Such products are unanimously required by the Hasidic Jews. Like modern Orthodox Jews, Yeshivish Jews are total Israel supporters, although this support is not buttressed theologically. For this group, yeshiva study for men and seminary for women in Israel for one or two years is considered now de rigueur, although the Yeshivish students usually go at a later age than the Modern Orthodox.

Israeli Lita'im

What might be considered the equivalent of this group in Israel, the Lita'im ("Lithuanians"), is actually radically different. To a great extent, this is caused by the fact that in Israel there is a universal military draft that can only be avoided by yeshiva deferments, that are eschewed by the Dati-Leumi but that, until recently, had been near universal for Haredim. Recently, there has been an increase in Haredi military service. However, this increase has been mainly around the edges, and has yet to permeate the mainstream Lita'i or Hasidic populations. All Israeli Haredi women are exempted

from army service and do not do national service.

The Lita'i type Orthodox males and American Yeshivish both wear black hats but increasing num-

well. In many cases, the women work, even in modern technological careers. The economic status of these Jews is way below that of the American Yeshivish, so many of whom are involved in business, medicine, law, etc., similar to their Modern Orthodox neighbors.

On the other hand, Lita'im and Hasidim in Israel, unless they discharge

army service obligations at a later age, tend to be unable to climb above a kind of subsistence economy as a result of their long years of study in the yeshiva. However, contrary to the prevailing false assumption, the majority of Israeli Haredi men do work for a living.

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bers of the Israeli equivalents wear long coats, like those of Hasidic Jews. Many of them have peyos (side curls) which in America are almost entirely limited to Hasidic Jews.

Universal yeshiva until the age when army service is no longer required is practiced by most Lita'im and by most Hasidim as



Gov. Andrew Cuomo meets with Orthodox leaders in Boro Park. The leaders have lobbied for aid to Yeshivas. The issue has been controversial for decades, but Cuomo has expressed support for some aid to religious schools.

for the Habayit Hayehudi (Jewish Home) Party but many vote for Likud.

One of the distinguishing marks of Israeli Orthodox Jews is the types of rabbinical supervision they require. Many of the Dati-Leumi Israelis accept the standard rabbinic certification that is required in all public contexts in Israel.

However, many members of this group, in varying permutations, require Mehadrin (literally, "those who are strict") supervision. This can be provided by the local or chief rabbinate or by separate organizations that are based in the Haredi community.

All Israeli Haredim require these Mehadrin certifications. To illustrate the disparity between America and Israel, note that to maintain the standards followed by American Kosher certifying agencies, including those under Modern Orthodox leadership, one would have to for the most part avoid the regular Israeli Chief Rabbinate certification on food establishments, meat, and some dairy products.

In America, to the right of the Modern Orthodox is the Yeshivish. While the self-image, and even the outside image, of this group is as part of Haredi Judaism, they have many similarities to the right side of the Modern Orthodox spectrum.

This group, as its name indicates, sees the yeshiva, the advanced rabbinical academy, and study in it as the central core of Orthodox life. It is organized primarily around yeshivas that are regarded as to the religious right of Yeshiva University, such as Yeshiva Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn, Ner Israel in Baltimore, and the Lakewood Yeshiva. But unlike the Hasidic Jews to the right of them in the U.S. or the so-called Lita'im ("Lithuanians," derived from the geographical area in which the large modern yeshivas developed) in Israel, who are mistakenly believed to be the Israeli equivalent of American Yeshivish, the educational, occupational and financial characteristics of the Yeshivish group are much closer to that of the Modern Orthodox.

This is true, despite the fact that

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In some cases, the total secular education of these people amounts to reading and writing in Hebrew and arithmetic. For them, the entire curriculum tends to be Torah study, whereas the equivalent in the US will have full secular education from nursery through high school, even if less time is devoted to secular studies than in a Modern Orthodox school. Females, however, do get better secular education than males in all Israeli Haredi groups.

Israeli Sefardim

Whereas in America, Sephardic Jews tend to divide according to the same lines as their Ashkenazic brethren, this is not the case in Israel. Closely linked to the Israeli Lita'im is the Sephardic Haredi group who are the core supporters of the Shas party. They are widely described as ultra-Orthodox, but differ from many Haredim in that the vast majority of Sephardic Haredim have served in the army. Younger Sephardic Haredim, however, are avoiding army service in great numbers as a result of the vehement opposition of their yeshivah heads. This group has come into being in the image of the late Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef who successfully led a re-surgence of strict Sephardic Orthodoxy and Sephardic pride.

From its inception, the Shas party has been strongly involved in Israeli government affairs and takes positions on foreign relations and security related matters, seeing itself as a full partner in the state. Its stricter adherents tend to dress like Israeli Haredim, hats and suits for men, head covering for married women, except that many if not most follow the ruling of Rabbi Yosef that forbids the use of wigs and insists on hats or kerchiefs. This group includes as well many who in their appearance resemble more the strict Dati-Leumi group, even while voting for Shas and sending their children to Shas affiliated schools.

American Hasidim

When it comes to Hasidim, it is necessary to realize that this is a wide spectrum, reaching from more modernized to less modernized groups, and from extremely pro-Israel positions to positions that are negative about the state, both on the theoretical and practical level.

Further, most of the major Hasidic groups have competing

sub-groups within them, besides differences between Israeli and American versions.

The spectrum in the US ranges from the very pro-Israel and quite modernized Chabad Hasidim, through groups like Bobov and Belz, who along with the Yeshivish group are organized around Agudath Israel, an overall Haredi umbrella group. The largest group of Orthodox Jews in America is Hasidim, with the anti-Zionist Satmar group the largest within the

women tend towards navy and black clothes, and many wear symbolic hats or kerchiefs on top of their sheitlach. Whereas Chabad women will wear regular stockings, for most of the other groups thicker, nontransparent stockings are required. This is the group of American Orthodox Jews that is growing at the largest rate, as a result of the very large families that are so common.

Further, in the US, Hasidic Jews are increasingly involved in the general business world even if they for

knowledge of the secular world tends to be much less for Israeli Chabad men. Chabad women, for the most part, complete the standard Israeli high school education. Because of the international character of Chabad there is much more exposure to English for both men and women.

Among Hasidic Jews, Israeli Chabad is unique in having an arrangement that brings the vast majority of young men into army service. However, Chabad has

successful within the American political process.

I have tried here to lay out some sense of the fundamental differences between groups of Orthodox Jews along two different axes. The first is that of the spectrum moving from those who are more modern and more integrated into the surrounding society to those who are more closed off and see themselves as separatists resisting the trends of the overall society.



Students at the Hebrew Academy of Nassau County, a Modern Orthodox day school.

Hasidic community. These Jews can generally be distinguished by their long coats, and Sabbath finery featuring for most of them fur hats known as streimlach.

Chabad needs to be distinguished as not only more open to the general culture but also because of its distinctly pro-Israel stance as well as its enormous outreach activities. Further, the dissemination of Jewish mysticism remains much more

the most part are absent from professions that require secular education. There is now a movement to increase the secular education of Hasidic children in New York State and there actually may be some improvement in this regard.

Israeli Hasidim

One can argue that there is little difference between the Israeli and American Hasidic groups within the same Hasidic court. But this is not

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prominent in Chabad than in other Hasidic groups. While many of those who participate in American Chabad activities resemble more the Modern Orthodox in their personal lives and observance, the actual Lubavitcher Hasidim, whether involved in outreach or in other occupations, do differ greatly from other Hasidic groups. During the week American Chabad men wear dark suits, most white shirts but many do sport colored shirts. Chabad Women wear stylish clothes and wigs. In this respect, they resemble the American Yeshivish except that most of the latter do not have beards and of course Lubavitcher men all do.

In some Hasidic groups of Polish, Beyelorusian and Hungarian origin,

really true. Both Israeli Hasidim and Lita'im share the closedness towards the secular world that we have described. American Hasidim tend to be much more involved in business and even professions than Israeli, and even though they have much less secular education than Modern Orthodox or Yeshivish, it is much more than would be found in the Israeli context, even for Lita'im and Sefardi Haredim. One cannot compare the total lack of secular education beyond reading, writing and arithmetic among Israeli Hasidim to the American situation, deficient as it is. Further, most Israeli Haredim never study English in school.

Israeli Chabad shares most of these characteristics. However,

sought an arrangement that would allow this service to be delayed until after age 26 and fulfilled in special units.

One has to clearly distinguish Satmar with its anti-Israel ideology and its Israeli ally Neturei Karta, and some small groups allied with them, from the mainstream of Hasidic groups in Israel who accept the government, vote in elections, and feel that they have a stake in what the state does. The Lita'im and Hasidic groups actually constitute two small political parties that run as one, Yahadut Hatorah (United Torah Judaism, UTJ). It generally represents all of Ashkenazic Haredim.

In this respect it is almost the equivalent of American Agudath Israel except that Agudah represents Sephardic Haredim as well as Ashkenazim. Members of UTJ actually serve in the cabinet so that they cannot be seen as anti-Zionist.

They term themselves "non-Zionist," because they reject the idea that the State of Israel represents in any way a religious or messianic phenomenon. But they do indeed see themselves as loyal participants in the state who seek to influence its government through the normal legislative and governmental processes, albeit usually for the self-interest of their group. In this respect, they resemble American Hasidic groups that have been highly suc-

The second axis is the geographic one, America versus Israel. (We apologize to our European coreligionists since including them would have made this even more complex.) The combination of political, social, and religious aspects of living in a Jewish state causes all kinds of differences to come to the fore between groups that might otherwise be considered to be similar. It is impossible to understand what is going on in either community, American or Israeli, without realizing that everything is always more complex and diverse than meets the eye.

One can write a similar article on Israeli Hilonim (so-called "secular" Israelis) and American Jews who are either unaffiliated, Reform or Conservative who for some unknown reason are often lumped together as parallel to one another.

Any serious discussion would immediately lead to the deconstruction not only of the assumed unity of each group but of the possibility of comparing diverse segments of Israeli and American Jewish society.

The Bible tells us that the Jewish people in biblical times was divided into twelve tribes (really thirteen with the split of Joseph into Ephraim and Manasseh). Our tradition teaches that when the Jews crossed the Red Sea each tribe had its own path through the waters.

Whether we agree or disagree with this or that approach to Judaism or with the lifestyle of this or that group, we have to recognize that, as we tried to show here, the Orthodox community is a very varied group of groups.

Indeed, in a strange, almost mystical way the Jewish people retains an amazing unity while being enormously diverse within.

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