

THE
MAKING
OF
HAREDIM



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Introduction

A book published in the Haredi community claimed that Orthodox Judaism—and specifically, Haredi Judaism—is the traditional approach to Judaism, which started with Moses.¹ In my previous paper, “The Novelty of Orthodoxy,” I explained how Orthodoxy was, in many ways, a new approach to Judaism, which began with R. Moses Sofer as a reaction to Reform and the Enlightenment. But Haredi Judaism is itself a novelty vis-à-vis the Orthodox Judaism which preceded it. This paper will explore the nature of Haredi ideology and will demonstrate how it can be rated as distinct from its predecessors.²

Neo-Orthodoxy, Center Orthodoxy and Ultra-Orthodoxy

Orthodoxy began early in the nineteenth century, but by the latter part of that century there were several distinct streams. At one extreme there was neo-Orthodoxy, with ultra-Orthodoxy at the other end of the spectrum. But there were also a large number of people who were at various points in the middle of the spectrum, including such figures as Ketav Sofer and R. Moses Schick.

¹ Yechezkel Hirshman, *One Above and Seven Below: A Consumer's Guide to Orthodox Judaism from the Perspective of the Chareidim* (Jerusalem: Mazo Publishers 2007).

² Michael Silber has already written “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of a Tradition,” in Yosef Salmon, Aviezer Ravitzky, and Adam S. Ferziger, eds., *Orthodox Judaism: New Perspectives* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press 2006) pp. 297-344. But by his own admission, he deals primarily with the extreme right-wing of the Orthodox world that began in nineteenth-century Hungary. I will be focusing upon the broader and more recent phenomenon of Haredi Judaism.

Neo-Orthodoxy emerged in Germany under Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) and in Hungary under the German-educated Rabbi Dr. Ezriel Hildesheimer (1820-1899).³ Hildesheimer created the first yeshivah to include secular Gymnasium studies in its curriculum, and also sought to establish a rabbinical seminary. The neo-Orthodox supported the full integration of Jews into modern society (while maintaining themselves as a distinct community), dressed in the manner of gentiles, and adopted German as the language of rabbinics.

Orthodoxy in its most extreme form developed in northeast (“Unterland”) Hungary, under Rabbi Hillel Lichtenstein (1814-1891), Rabbi Haim Sofer (1821-1886) and Rabbi Akiva Yosef Schlesinger (1837-1922).⁴ Moshe Samet argues that it was a reaction to the extreme religious crisis, resulting from a large population of new immigrants, the migration from traditional villages to the towns, and increased prosperity.⁵ Michael Silber argues that it was precipitated by a fourfold crisis involving compulsory secular education, linguistic acculturation, pressure to adopt a Magyar national identity, and the spread of synagogue reforms.⁶

In my paper “The Novelty of Orthodoxy,” I concluded that there were three definitive characteristics of Orthodoxy: its traditionalism, segregationism, and attitude to halachah (of canonization and stringency); I rejected a fourth category, opposition to secular knowledge, as being insufficiently developed. With ultra-Orthodoxy, the first three took on new significance, and the fourth clearly emerged as a distinctive feature.

The traditionalism and segregationism of the Orthodox occurred vis-à-vis the Reform movements. But for the ultra-Orthodox, the stimulus for their reactionary policies was no longer the Reform movement (who were already considered a lost cause), but rather the neo-Orthodox, and the target of their policies was the center group who were sliding to the left. The 1865 *pesak din* of Michalowce, which was effectively an ultra-Orthodox manifesto,

³ Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy,” pp. 33-37.

⁴ Silber, p. 37.

⁵ Moshe Samet, “The Beginnings of Orthodoxy,” *Modern Judaism* Vol. 8, No. 3 (Oct. 1988), p. 259.

⁶ Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy,” p. 25.

prohibited any form of change to synagogue design and prayer services—but the examples that it specified were those being practiced in Pressburg by the center-Orthodox rather than those practiced by Reform.

Hatam Sofer had already introduced the idea of canonizing the *Shulchan Aruch* and elevating the status of customs to laws, and rabbinic laws to Scriptural laws. This was taken even further by Maharam Schick;⁷ and yet even Schick balked at the extraordinarily excessive way in which the Michalowce *pesak din* invented new prohibitions and threw around the charge of idolatry as a halachic category.

Opposition to secular studies was mentioned by Hatam Sofer as a sort of vague position-point, to which he himself certainly did not strictly adhere.⁸ Center Orthodoxy, while not idealizing secular knowledge like the neo-Orthodox, had quietly adopted a fairly relaxed attitude in practice. But ultra-Orthodoxy implemented Hatam Sofer's statements in the most extreme manner, insisting that secular studies were absolutely forbidden even for the purpose of obtaining a livelihood.

The Twentieth Century: Convergence and Novelty

Orthodoxy, neo-Orthodoxy and ultra-Orthodoxy were precipitated by the Enlightenment and emancipation at the turn of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, different forces were in progress, and there were two causes in particular of a new approach to Orthodoxy.

First was the organization of secular Jews into political enterprises and in particular the Zionist movement.⁹ Since the second half of the nineteenth century, Jews across Europe had started to organize their communal life on a national scale. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

⁷ Thus, while Hatam Sofer permitted the abrogation of *metzitzah b'peh* due to it being merely a medical practice, Maharam Schick insisted that it was *halachah l'Moshe miSinai*.

⁸ Meir Hildesheimer, "The German Language and Secular Studies. Attitudes towards Them in the Thought of the Hatam Sofer and His Disciples," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, Vol. 62 (1996), pp. 129-163

⁹ Alan L Mittleman, *The Politics of Torah: The Jewish Political Tradition and the Founding of Agudat Israel* (New York: State University of New York Press 1996).

had launched such an enterprise for Orthodox Jews in Germany. But the most powerful such political organization to emerge was Zionism, with its multinational reach, prestigious World Congresses, and its influence in Palestine. For Orthodox Jews, it was especially galling that this secular, political nationalism presented itself both to Jews and to the world as the official defining movement of the Jewish People. And its Orthodox branch, the Mizrahi, posed a threat to other versions of Orthodoxy.

This led to the various Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox groups settling their differences and coalescing into their own international movement: Agudat Yisrael. Still, it got off to a shaky start, and would likely have disappeared completely were it not to have received a motivational boost by the Zionists. The 10th Zionist Congress, meeting in 1911, resolved to actively spread its secular-nationalist ideology throughout the diaspora. Bitterly disappointed, four representatives of the Mizrahi left the party and joined the efforts to build Agudat Yisrael. With this new infusion, coupled with the increasing threat of the Zionists, Agudat Yisrael was launched.

As we shall see, the origins of some features of Haredi Judaism, such as Daat Torah, can be traced to this period. Indeed, the term “Haredi” itself, which appears in the Bible to describe those who tremble at the word of God,¹⁰ was widely adopted at this time as a description of this group. But the second and far more significant factor in the development of Haredi Judaism was the Holocaust. The destruction of European Jewry was not only the destruction of traditional communities, but of the very structure of traditional community life. Orthodoxy rebuilt itself after the Holocaust in both the US and Israel, but now it had new features. The historian Jacob Katz termed it “Reconstructionist Orthodoxy,”¹¹ but this term has not caught on. Haredi Judaism is a common term used to describe this new incarnation of Orthodoxy.

¹⁰ Isaiah 66:5 and Ezra 10:3.

¹¹ Katz, “Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective,” p. 13.

Features of Haredi Judaism

I. The Ascent of the Yeshivah

The yeshivah had already started to evolve in the eighteenth century, from a small institution that trained young men for their role in the local community, to major institutions that grew apart from the communities in which they were located. But it was in the twentieth century that this transformation became complete.¹² Yeshivot did not only cease to serve the needs of the local community, but on the contrary, communities sprang up around yeshivot in order to serve *them*. Today, new micro-communities are sometimes based on the former yeshivah affiliations of their members: thus, synagogues are known as “Alumni of Hebron,” “Alumni of Mir,” “Alumni of Chaim Berlin,” etc.

The number of people studying in the yeshivot grew tremendously. By the mid-twentieth century, the majority of young men in the Haredi world were spending their formative years in yeshivot. This was facilitated by the superior economic situation of the world in general and of Jewry in particular, as well as by the rise of the modern welfare state.

II. Authority of Roshei Yeshivah over Community Rabbis

Related to the rising prominence of the yeshivah was the changing nature of rabbinic authority. Traditionally, it was community rabbis that were the rabbinic leaders; and even *roshei yeshivah* had typically also served in such communal positions, either concurrent with their role as Rosh Yeshivah or at other times. Hatam Sofer was not only the dean of the Pressburg yeshivah; he was also the rabbi of the city, as was his son Ketav Sofer. Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski, a founder of Agudath Israel, was the rabbi of Vilna. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, the “Hafetz Haim,” was the rabbi of Radun before opening a yeshivah there.

But in the twentieth century, *roshei yeshivah* with no current or prior communal roles gradually took on much greater authority and began to function as overall leaders of the ultra-Orthodox community. The Council of Torah Sages of Agudath Israel, who were originally mostly either community rabbis or those with experience in such roles, are today

¹² Menachem Friedman, “Life and Book Tradition in Ultraorthodox Judaism,” pp. 241-244.

virtually all *roshei yeshivah* who have never functioned in any such role. Another example of the transfer of rabbinic authority from community rabbi to *rosh yeshivah* is that it used to be unthinkable for a wedding to be performed by a *rosh yeshivah*; today, it is the norm.¹³

It seems that there were several reasons for this change. One was the general breakdown in communal structure that occurred in the twentieth century and was exacerbated with the Holocaust, thereby weakening the authority of communal rabbis. Another was simply that as the yeshivah became the single most important institution, the head of the yeshivah *ipso facto* became the single most important person. Yet another reason may be that as the ivory-tower isolation of the yeshivah became seen as more important for “pure” Torah study, those at the heads of those towers became viewed as more authentic repositories of Torah wisdom than rabbis who were tainted by communal involvement.

III. Living Tradition Vs. Book Tradition

Tradition has always been an important part of Judaism. But before the twentieth century, it referred to the *living* tradition—the daily practice of Judaism as transmitted from parent to child. True, there were sometimes elite figures who differed in their private practices, and it was not unknown for their personal customs to spread. But, by and large, the mechanism of transmission was via family and community life.

With the rise of the yeshivah, this was replaced by a new type of tradition: the book tradition.¹⁴ This involved studying the legal texts of previous generations in order to determine correct Jewish practice. The conclusions drawn often superseded family and community custom.

¹³ Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz reports that in the 1960s, he asked an elderly Jew from Mir whether it was the Rosh Yeshivah of Mir or the rabbi who would act as *mesader kiddushin*. The man replied, “*Aza narishe frage fun ah yungerman—vos hut ah rosh yeshivah tzu tohn mit siddur kiddushin?* (What a foolish question, young man—what does a Rosh Yeshivah have to do with *siddur kiddushin?*)” He also records Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, the “Ponovezher Rav,” making a similar statement. (*Mishpachah* Pesach 5771 supplement, pp. 51-52).

¹⁴ Menachem Friedman, “Life and Book Tradition in Ultraorthodox Judaism,” p. 244-247; Hayim Soloveitchik, “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Tradition* vol. 28, No. 4 (Summer 1994) pp. 64-131.

The changing role of the yeshivah alone would probably not have sufficed to abandon living tradition in favor of book tradition. But there was another factor in this process: the Holocaust and the subsequent dispersal shook the living tradition from its foundations. The subsequent rebuilding of Jewish life elsewhere meant that different traditions clashed with each other, which weakened them. All this made it much easier for the book tradition, derived from the ever more important yeshivot, to become dominant.

IV. Daas Torah

One of the most fascinating novelties of haredi society is the concept of “Daas Torah.” This was not created in modern times *ex nihilo*; it evolved out of earlier mystical notions of the Torah containing all wisdom.¹⁵ However, it took these notions much further, both in scope and authority.¹⁶ To be sure, traditionally, leading Torah scholars were consulted on numerous issues. But, for most of history, political and communal leadership was in the hands of positions such as kings, exilarchs, and *parnassim*, rather than the leading rabbinic authorities. Furthermore, it was generally the case that, even for rabbis, wisdom in non-Torah-specific areas was understood to be commensurate with experience in those areas.

Daas Torah, however, presented the opposite notion: that the ultimate guidance on *all* areas of life—even social and political decisions with no obvious connection to Torah—is provided precisely by those who are the *most* cloistered from the world and have only been immersed in Torah. Daas Torah also presented itself not as advice, but as obligatory commands that must be followed. A further significant characteristic is that in contrast to the time-honored approach of rabbinic responsa, Daas Torah presents its conclusions without any explanations, halachic or otherwise.¹⁷

¹⁵ Benjamin Brown. “The Da’at Torah Doctrine: Three Stages” (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 19 (2005) pp. 537-600.

¹⁶ See Gershon Bacon, “*Da’at Torah ve-Hevlei Mashiah*,” *Tarbiz* 52 (1983) pp. 497- 508.

¹⁷ Consider the following refusal by Rabbi Moshe Sherer of Agudath Israel to the OU in response to a request for an explanation of the 1956 *pesak din* against participation in the Synagogue Council of America: “Does one have faith and recognize the authority and dependability of the *gedolei Torah* who issue the *psak din* or not? If one lacks faith in their competence and sincerity, then all the halachic sources in the world are meaningless.” – Jonathan Rosenblum, *Rabbi Sherer*, p. 199. His son, Rabbi Shimshon Sherer, said at the 89th Agudah

When did the modern phenomenon of Daas Torah arise, and what lay behind its emergence? The concept was first introduced in Hassidic circles in the late nineteenth century as a technique to reaffirm rabbinic authority in light of the modern challenge of individual autonomy.¹⁸ The first statements about Daas Torah in non-Hassidic communities are found in the early twentieth century, and seem to be related to the founding of Agudat Yisrael. Significantly, during the formation of Agudat Yisrael, it accepted a proposal submitted by the Hasidim that the verdicts of the Torah sages would be provided without any justifications.¹⁹ It is argued that the concept of Daas Torah had to be developed in order to justify this modern political structure from an Orthodox perspective, and, perhaps more importantly, to render it superior to other Jewish organizations—in particular, Zionism and Mizrahi.²⁰ Others suggest that the strengthening of the role of rabbis in non-Torah decisions at that time may have been a reaction to the Zionist approach of restricting rabbinic authority to laws of kashrut and similar such narrow provinces.²¹

Yet it is also argued that while all this accurately describes the initial development of the modern concept of Daas Torah, it only really took off in non-Hasidic circles after the Holocaust. This appears to be linked to the aforementioned factors in the development of Haredism—the weakening of traditional Jewish communities and tradition, and the rise in prominence of the yeshivah and especially of the Rosh Yeshivah.²²

V. The Evolution of the Kollel

Historically, the term “*kollel*” referred to communal bodies or to communities. But in the nineteenth century, it was given to a new type of institution, in which married men were

convention that “we need not explain [the Gedolim’s] Daas Torah positions” (Source: <http://youtu.be/-eev33ZyRkhA>)

¹⁸ Mendel Piekartz, *Hasidut Polin* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1990).

¹⁹ See Matthias Morgenstern, *From Frankfurt to Jerusalem: Isaac Breuer and the History of the Secession Dispute in Modern Jewish Orthodoxy* (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2002) pp. 57-58. This was insisted upon by the Hasidic rebbes that were joining the organization.

²⁰ Gershon Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition: Agudat Yisrael in Poland, 1916-1939*.

²¹ Brown, *idem*.

²² Lawrence Kaplan, “Daas Torah: A Modern Conception of Rabbinic Authority,” pp. 12-13.

paid a stipend to continue their Torah studies. The first such institution was founded in 1879 by Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin (Salanter) in Kovno, with the support of Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor. But it differed from the modern kollel in several significant ways.²³ The studies were focused on halachah rather than Talmud and culminated in rabbinic ordination.²⁴ The students also apprenticed to community rabbis, learning how to deal with halachic questions and procedures. There was a three-year limit to the program, by the end of which the student was to have acquired a rabbinical post; some were being prepared to be *rashei yeshivah*, but most to be community rabbis. The students were spread amongst different study halls and supplemented their studies with local adult education, so as to strengthen the local communities and gain experience in “practical rabbinics.”²⁵ The Volozhin yeshivah sought to open a kollel for ten men, and specifically stated that it was “to prepare them to render halachic decisions for the Jewish community,” and that the limit was five years of study.²⁶ The network of Noveradok kollels later established by Rabbi Yosef Yoizl Horowitz was likewise specifically oriented towards training rabbis and strengthening Torah study in local communities. Similarly, in the Slabodka kollel that was established after World War I, members had to make a commitment from the outset that after five years they would gain ordination and fill a rabbinical post.²⁷

In marked contrast to all these was the type of kollel first established by Rabbi Aharon Kotler in 1943, in Lakewood, New Jersey.²⁸ There was no time limit placed upon studying there, because its purpose was fundamentally different from all those kollels that preceded it. Its goal was to have the study of Torah being performed “for its own sake,” as per the

²³ Adam S. Ferziger, “The Emergence of the Community Kollel: A New Model for Addressing Assimilation,” (Bar Ilan University 2006), pp. 16-19; Nathan Kamenetzky, *Making of a Godol*, pp. 343-357.

²⁴ It is unclear, however, to what extent this was motivated by a desire to avoid Russian demands for rabbinic training in government-sponsored seminaries, and also to assist in fundraising purposes.

²⁵ This term was used by Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, as cited in *Making of a Godol* p. 357.

²⁶ Advertisement in *HaMeilitz*, 1886. Reproduced in Menachem Mendel Plato, *BiShevilei Radin*.

²⁷ Yonsaon Rosenblum, *Reb Yaakov*, p. 90.

²⁸ This may have been preceded by the opening of a kollel in Gateshead, England, in 1942; however, I have not yet been able to determine the extent to which the Gateshead kollel was aimed at producing rabbinic leaders.

innovative definition of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin.²⁹ The students were specifically not to involve themselves with the local community, and not to be preparing for a role in the rabbinate or the wider community. But the wider community was expected to provide financial support for this and similar institutions, based upon the new concept of the innate value of the Torah study. All this in turn also required innovations regarding the halachic permissibility of such financial support; for while some precedent could be found in isolated opinions, it certainly went against the normative approach. The Hazon Ish is alleged to have invoke the emergency clause of “A time to act for God; overturn the Torah,” in light of the destruction of Torah Judaism in the Holocaust. This remained operational even after the number of Torah students vastly exceeded anything in pre-war Europe. The ultimate step in the evolution of the kollel, which spread in the latter part of the twentieth century, was its presentation as an expectation of *every* young man in the Haredi community. In more moderate Haredi circles in the United States, this is only expected for a year or two following marriage, while in the rest of Haredi society in the US and Israel it is expected to continue for at least a decade or two, if not indefinitely.

VI. Acceleration of all Orthodox Features

Finally, I would like to propose that many of the features initiated by Orthodoxy, in the eighteenth century, were accelerated so much in haredi society that these differences in degree can now effectively be considered as a difference in kind and thus as a specific feature of haredism.

For example, consider the Orthodox opposition to using the tools of academic, scientific study in order to evaluate halachic practice. At the Passover seder, Hatam Sofer nevertheless used celery for *karpas*, based on looking at cognate Semitic tongues.³⁰ Contrast this with the approach of Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach—far from an extreme Haredi figure—regarding *maror*, where he states that the historical evidence against horseradish is entirely inadmissible. This in turn is largely attributable to the fact that “external” sources of

²⁹ See Norman Lamm, *Torah LiShmah: Torah for Torah’s Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and his Contemporaries*.

³⁰ Responsa Hatam Sofer, *Orach Chaim* 132.

knowledge were less threatening in the era of Hatam Sofer than they became later, when not only did the information become more threatening, but the methodology used to obtain that information was threatening traditional modes of study.

As another example, when Agudat Yisrael evolved from Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's *Freie Vereinigung*, the spectrum of its members included many adherents of Rabbi Hirsch's *Torah Im Derech Eretz* school. But the Torah-only approach eventually took over, such that at the 200th birthday celebration of Rabbi Hirsch in Kehal Adath Jeshurun in Washington Heights, Hirsch's descendant Samson Bechhofer lamented that the community had adopted Lakewood-style Orthodoxy as the goal for its children—whereupon the rabbi, Yisroel Mantel, walked out, and later announced that only Hirsch could make *Torah Im Derech Eretz* workable, and today one must instead follow the (non-Hirschian) Gedolei Torah.³¹

But can this spread and acceleration of an existing approach really be considered a qualitative difference? I propose that it can, in certain circumstances. As an analogy, in the animal kingdom there is the phenomenon of a “ring species”—where, as one moves east, there are variants within a species which can interbreed with each other, but by the time one reaches the easternmost variant, the variations have accumulated to the extent that it cannot interbreed with the westernmost variant. The difference in degree has thus become a difference in kind. This occurs with Orthodoxy as follows: Taking Hatam Sofer as the first Orthodox figure, we see that his policies were eventually implemented to such an extreme degree that they ended up disqualifying Hatam Sofer himself.

As one example, while Hatam Sofer made a number of statements of general opposition to secular studies, he himself extensively studied many of the sciences, including mathematics, astronomy, and geography, as well as history and philosophy.³² While some of this knowledge came from books that he read, much of it came from formal studies of these topics when he lived in Mainz as a young man. Yet in a biography of Hatam Sofer by his

³¹ Elliott Resnick, “Controversial Moments At Rav S.R. Hirsch Memorial Celebration,” *The Jewish Press*, June 25th 2008. The longtime president of KAJ, Dr. Eric Erlbach, promptly resigned.

³² Meir Hildesheimer, “The German Language and Secular Studies. Attitudes towards Them in the Thought of the Hatam Sofer and His Disciples,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, Vol. 62 (1996), pp. 153-154, 160.

great-great-grandson, he is described as devoting himself exclusively to Torah in this period; and in other works, he is described as being entirely opposed to any study of the sciences.³³ Orthodoxy had evolved so much that Hatam Sofer himself could no longer qualify, and his life-story had to be revised accordingly.

Conclusion

Orthodoxy and neo-Orthodoxy emerged as a response to Reform, while Hungarian ultra-Orthodoxy emerged as a response to both Reform and neo-Orthodoxy. Today, however, Reform is not a serious threat to most Orthodox Jews. Instead, Orthodoxy is reacting to different movements and trends, resulting in a different type of Orthodoxy; or, to be more precise, several different types of Orthodoxy.³⁴ However, it is meaningful to broadly speak of three distinct categories emerging in the twentieth century: Modern Orthodoxy, Religious Zionist Orthodoxy, and Haredi Orthodoxy. The latter had its nascent roots in the early twentieth century, but emerged more clearly as something distinct from its predecessors after the Holocaust. In its most distinctive characteristics—the prominence of the yeshivah and Rosh Yeshivah, the notion of Daat Torah, the role of the kollel, and its extreme traditionalism—it is markedly a new approach to Judaism.

³³ Hildesheimer, p. 161.

³⁴ Cf. Ravitsky, *Dimensions*, p 395.

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