Assailed on its right by the lure of absolutism and on its left by a seductive modernity, Modern Orthodoxy as an ideological movement is wrestling with issues such as feminism, leadership, and self-confidence. Even so, it has garnered for itself a distinct and distinguished role in Jewish life. Will Modern Orthodoxy offer something essential, authentic, and coherent as it grapples with its identity?

The Future of American Orthodoxy

Jonathan D. Sarna

"In the struggle for the soul of American Jewry, the Orthodox model has triumphed," Samuel G. Freedman announced in his widely discussed volume titled Jew vs. Jew. Freedman, himself raised as a secularist, is far from alone in his analysis. In the thirty-five years that have passed since Charles Liebman, writing in the American Jewish Year Book, first pronounced Orthodoxy to be "on the upsurge" and concluded that it was "the only group which today contains within it a strength and will to live that may yet nourish all the Jewish world," Orthodoxy has emerged as the great success story of late 20th-century American Judaism. Some of its leaders proudly proclaim themselves the winners in the race to save American Judaism, and insist that non-Orthodox Jews, with their high rate of intermarriage, will have no Jewish grandchildren and no Jewish future.

History warns against triumphalistic claims of this sort. In the post-Civil War era, Reform Jews believed that they would define American Judaism. The architect of American Reform Judaism, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, called his prayer book Minhag Amerika and, given the number of synagogues that moved into the Reform camp in his day, his vision did not seem farfetched. Many in the mid-1870s believed as he did that Reform would in time become "the custom of American Jews." Of course, with mass East European Jewish immigration that did not happen and within half-a-century Reform Judaism had stagnated. Conservative Judaism, meanwhile, became the fastest growing movement on the American Jewish scene and it too enjoyed a moment of triumphalism, especially in the immediate post-World War II era. But its success proved no more long lasting. In recent decades, its numbers have declined both absolutely and relatively.

The question now is whether Orthodoxy will follow the same trajectory. History, of course, does not always repeat itself, but insiders in the Orthodox world know that their movement suffers from many "dilemmas and vulnerabilities." Indeed a symposium organized by the Orthodox Union in 1998 spoke of "a sense of triumph mixed with trepidation." I want to focus on six reasons for this trepidation. Without discounting any of American Orthodoxy's obvious strengths, anyone who is seriously interested in the future of American Orthodoxy needs to confront these issues.

Orthodoxy in America is suffering from a severe leadership crisis.

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bestriding the contemporary scene and securely mov-
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Perhaps for this reason, American Orthodox Jews increasingly can Jewish scene well enough to exercise leadership can count on indigenous leadership to

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described Modern Orthodoxy as "a movement under siege." The question, however, is not whether Modern Orthodoxy will survive—in fact, it retains thousands of adherents. The question is whether Orthodoxy itself can survive as a single movement or whether, like so many Protestant denominations that have faced similar challenges, it will ultimately polarize so far as to crack. The fact that Orthodox Judaism, unlike its Conservative and Reform counterparts, does not have any strong institutional ties binding all of its factions together makes the danger of such a schism all the greater.

Fifth, American Orthodoxy faces sweeping challenges from contemporary feminism. Jewish Action calls this "perhaps the most explosive issue facing Orthodoxy" and wonders aloud whether it "will estrange feminists and their supporters from the rest of Orthodoxy." In many communities, the answer would seem to be yes. So-called "women's issues"—whether, for example, women may organize separate prayer groups on a regular basis, or dance with the Torah on Simchat Torah, or celebrate ritually the bat mitzvah of their daughters, or wear tallit and tefillin—divide Orthodox synagogues one from another in many of the major communities where Orthodox Jews live, and have divided many synagogues internally as well. Indeed, it can be argued that these issues are to contemporary Orthodoxy what debates over mixed seating and the height of the mehitzah were to an earlier generation. Those issues turned out to be defining ones for Orthodox Judaism: in time, synagogues with mixed seating had to stop calling themselves Orthodox. Will the women's issues today prove similarly divisive? The heated rhetoric on both sides hardly hints at the possibility of compromise. The question, as Orthodoxy ponders its future, is whether "the most explosive issue facing Orthodoxy" will ultimately blow up, fragmenting American Orthodoxy in the process.

Finally, American Orthodoxy is currently mired in several ugly scandals that have undermined the credibility of some of its foremost lay and professional leaders. The mystery surrounding missing tape recordings of Rabbi Soloveitchik's lectures has already tarnished several reputations. Meanwhile, the far more serious scandal surrounding the alleged sexual misdeeds of a charismatic figure in the National Council of Synagogue Youth along with the alleged widespread cover-up that allowed him to maintain his job for years, accusations against him notwithstanding, threaten the credibility of the entire Orthodox Union. So far, the impact of these scandals has been circumscribed. The long-term damage to the movement, however, may prove more far-reaching, just as the scandals involving television evangelists did untold damage to the fortunes of Evangelical Protestantism.

Taken together, all of these "dilemmas and vulnerabilities" demonstrate that the Orthodox model has not triumphed in America. The question instead is whether Orthodoxy's unexpected rise will be followed by an equally precipitous decline. Such cycles are familiar in religion, just as they are in economics, but they are by no means inevitable. In the end, Orthodoxy's future will actually depend upon its own actions. Will it confront the challenges that it faces, or will it discover only in retrospect that success blinded it to the internal problems that ultimately proved its undoing?


**The Edah Journal**

'The Edah Journal, a new online journal, is a forum for discussion of Orthodox Jews' engagement with modernity. The inaugural issue, now online at www.edah.org, is devoted to "Orthodoxy and the Other," and includes studies of Orthodox thinkers' attempts to understand relations with non-Orthodox and non-Jews. The journal is published by the organization Edah and edited by Eugene Kom. Committed to Torah, halakhah, and the quest for kedushah, THE EDAH JOURNAL is dedicated to free inquiry and is mindful that "Truth is the seal of the Holy One, Blessed be He." The journal invites original works on halakhic, philosophic, and literary studies relating to kedushah in modern experience; the religious significance of the State of Israel; Jewish ethics; emerging conceptions and opportunities for women; Talmud Torah as an intellectual and spiritual discipline; and pluralism. Submissions to THE EDAH JOURNAL should be sent electronically to: journal@edah.org.

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