

Orthodoxy and the Arts

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Writing in the Jerusalem Post last week, **J.J. Gross criticizes American Orthodox Judaism for neglecting the arts**, in stark contrast to Israeli Orthodoxy. "How," he asks, "can a society that crams the classes of law schools and medical schools barely yield a single poet or painter?" Considering, but rejecting an economic cause for this difference, Gross concludes that American Orthodox Jews avoid the arts out of fear.

Gross offers no evidence whatsoever to support his rash and rather cruel characterization of American Orthodoxy -- he cites not a single survey or study, nor any other shred of evidence save his own intuition to support his conclusion that American Orthodox Jews are cowards. Nor, for that matter, does he even cite any actual evidence to support his premise that Orthodoxy in America neglects the arts. Absent any actual evidence, we must approach even this observation with great skepticism.

I must admit that Gross's intuition is not completely out of step with my own. It does *feel* rare to see prominent American artists who are Orthodox Jews, and some of the most prominent exceptions to this rule (Matisyahu, Andy Statman, and, **more recently, Shyne**) were secular artists *before* they were Orthodox Jews. But to compare America to Israel based on the prominence of Orthodox Judaism among artists is unfair. Consider the fact that, in Israel, Jewish holidays are national holidays, and so involvement in performing arts need not entail ignoring holiday observances as necessarily as it does in the US. More importantly, however, when the population of the entire country is majority Jewish, then the majority of artists will also be Jewish, and some proportion of those will also be Orthodox. In America, however, where Jews make up only 3% of the population, and Orthodox Jews a minority of those, to expect to see enormous numbers of prominent Orthodox Jews in any field is a bit unfair by the sheer population numbers.

Arguments aside, however, if Gross wishes to promote greater engagement with the arts among Orthodox Jews (without resorting, as he does in his article, to insult), I heartily concur. I was happy to read **this New York Times piece** on an Orthodox Jewish dance performance in Israel. I also hope to see the new film "Romeo and Juliet in Yiddish" (see coverage in the **Jewish Week**, **Tablet** and **WNYC**.) This film takes place in the Hasidic world, but it was made by actors who left that community, and one might wonder whether a Yiddish presentation of Shakespeare might open up an interest in theatre among some number (however small) of Hasidim still within their own communities.

Indeed, it can be argued that Orthodoxy, with its manifold rituals and its insistence upon physicalizing and enacting the spiritual, should be a natural ally with the arts. Rabbi Chaim Brovender is notable for **pursuing this alliance**, and just days ago Rabbi Simon Jacobson, **writing on Chabad.org**, cited the discipline of music as the perfect analogy for the discipline of Torah. Orthodox artist **Chasiah T. Haberman has argued** that her painting is spiritual work.

Finally, it should be noted that there is more Orthodox Jewish arts activity than may be known. Not all art is pursued professionally, or as part of a campaign to achieve

fame; many Orthodox Jews pursue artistic activities as hobbies. **Asya Vaisman notes** that there is a secret world of Hasidic women's songs, hidden from the world of men. **ATARA, the Arts and Torah Association for Religious Artists**, hosts **a list of opportunities** for Orthodox performing artists -- both women and men -- to perform without running afoul of Shabbat or *kol isha*.

Since I offer no more evidence than does J.J. Gross, I am not making a claim about the degree to which American Orthodox Jews are engaged in the arts. It is a fascinating topic which, I think, deserves some real attention from serious social scientists. But I do believe that, however much (or however little) American Orthodoxy currently engages with the arts, more artistic opportunities and cross-fertilizations can only be for good. Whether we are professional artists or hobbyists, feeding our creative selves can bring us endless joy, and make us better Jews, better Americans, and better people.