

The Role and Authority of the Rabbi in American Society

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I have a story that I think captures a good part of my approach to the topic at hand. Back in the spring of 1974, I was invited, as a professor actively engaged in studying and speaking about Israel and the Middle East, to speak at an interfaith clergy conference on the Middle East at a university in Bridgeport. I gave my talk in the morning, and was invited to stay for the day. I am a sociologist, which, as I tell my students, is a "professional *yente*" so, at lunchtime, I moved from table to table to speak with some of the conference participants as well as to listen in on their conversations. In many cases, they were discussing their various issues with their congregations, and I was struck by the fact that if I couldn't see who had a collar, a *kippah*, or neither, I was not able to tell whether the speaker was a rabbi, a priest, or a minister. The issues they faced were, essentially,

4. Although the first higher Torah learning programs in Israel were for native English speakers, they were quickly joined and soon outnumbered by native Israelis.
5. Kolech, the Orthodox feminist organization in Israel, was established only in 1998.
6. My husband, Rabbi Yehuda Henkin, observes that members of the national-religious movement in Israel have no inferiority complex regarding the *haredim*. They serve in the army, a major religious privilege as well as civil obligation, whereas the *haredim* do not.
7. Rabbi Yaakov Warhaftig, *nosh kollel* of Kollel Ariel, no relation to the Nishmat program of the same name.
8. Many *rebbeitzins* serve as adjuncts to their husbands, but not every *rebbeitzin* is capable of or interested in filling such a role in the field of *taharat ha-mishpaha*. Moreover, *rebbeitzins* are usually trained in the practice but not in the fine points of the Halakha and the *shitot* of the *rishonim* and *aharonim*. They will convey a question to the rabbi just as it is asked. A *yotzeit halakha*, by contrast, often goes beyond the question as initially posed, and raises halakhic options that the rabbi may not have considered on his own.
9. *Sotah* 22a and *Avodah Zarah* 19b: "[Horah] has felled many that is a scholar who has not reached the stature of ruling and yet rules; and great are her fallen that is a scholar who has indeed reached the stature of ruling yet does not rule.

the same. That is why I believe it is so instructive to look at religion and clergy in American society to understand the role and authority of the rabbi.

There is no single model of the rabbinic role, and we have very few empirical measures of the authority of the rabbi. Since the United States is the largest contemporary Jewish community outside of Israel and has no publicly legislated rabbinate, the focus of this paper is on the role and authority of the rabbi within a voluntary context. In order to evaluate the rabbinic role, it is necessary to view it in a comparative perspective. This paper, therefore, looks at what the evidence indicates with respect to religion and religious authority in contemporary American society before turning to American Judaism in particular.

Most sociologists of religion agree that modernization has resulted in the decline of religious authority and an increase in the privatization of religion. Belief and participation are not highly significant because they are not bolstered by other segments of society. Goldstein and Goldstein (1996) appear to have found similar developments for American Jews. Their research suggests that when Jews move to places where Jewish culture is not conflated with neighborhood norms, where there are no sanctions for intermarriage beyond, perhaps, the synagogue, and where violating ritual norms is ignored by family and friends, those who persist in maintaining the traditional norms are generally those who are personally and strongly committed, because religion no longer has power outside of the religious sphere. Many people now see themselves as just Jewish, and their Jewish participation is low because there are few consequences associated with lapsing in practice. This contrasts sharply with a residential area in which there is a relatively dense population of traditionalists. When Judaism and community/kinship are consolidated, as they would be in such an area, the religious participation net effect of subjective religious belief is increased (Rabinowitz, Kim, and Lazewitz 1992, 1995).

Until relatively recently, the authority of religion, even when not manifested in daily religious involvement, could be seen in the characteristics highlighted by the anthropologist Carl Wihers, who,

writing pseudonymously, analyzed the town of "Plainville." He described the role of religion as follows:

It is difficult in a few words to fairly assess the role of religion and churches in Plainville. The daily interests of most people... seem to be not religious at all, but work ("making a living"), sociability, and gossip. Yet religion seems to permeate the daily air, not as a stress on discriminating the "saved" from the sinners... but as a vital concern with the negations on moral conduct which the churches set up. The religious control of morals operates mainly through gossip and the fear of gossip. People report, suspect, laugh at, and condemn the peccadilloes of others, and walk and behave carefully to avoid being caught in any trifling missteps of their own. (West 1945, 162)

Social control of this sort is no longer feasible, if for no other reason than the increasing heterogeneity of communities, both religiously and culturally. In addition, with modernity's emphasis on the autonomy of the individual, there is an increasing tendency to tolerate all forms of behavior that do not directly infringe on the rights of others. This is what it meant by civil rights in the public sphere, and it contributes to privatization in the religious sphere.

Privatization and personalization are so strong in contemporary culture that they even influence patterns of religious fundamentalism. Thus, Linda Kramer, a born-again Christian in Ohio, when asked why she goes to church and whether church attendance is a requirement for religiosity, responded in terms of her own "growth." As she put it, "You don't have to go to church. I think the reason I do is because it helps me grow. It's especially good for my family, to teach them the good and moral things. To see that families can operate as a unit" (Roof 1993, 105; emphasis added). As religiously committed as she is, Linda values religion for what it does for her own spiritual growth and that of her family. Roof found this emphasis on personal spiritual growth to be representative of the quest of the religious returnees in his study (Roof 1993, 191-194).

This pattern is not unique to Christian returnees. In three

separate studies of male and female newly-Orthodox Jews, *baalei teshuvah*, the psychological and sociological benefits or functions, especially those of order and meaning, almost invariably had the greatest attraction for them. In Danzger's study of newly-Orthodox men (1989) and in the studies of Davidman (1991) and Kaufman (1991) of newly-Orthodox Jewish women, there is hardly any mention of theology or articles of faith. Overwhelmingly, and somewhat ironically for a group and system whose name derives from "ortho" and "dox," meaning "correct belief," it was not the articles of faith, per se, that attracted them but what the religion did for them. Davidman, for example, found that it is often a personal crisis that leads women to turn to Orthodoxy, which would appear to reaffirm Peter Berger's thesis (1967) of the significant role that religion plays as a shield against anomie. It was precisely the sense of order and meaning that they saw Orthodoxy Judaism as fostering, that attracted these returnees. They were attracted to Orthodoxy's system of order and meaning in general, and especially to the meaning it had and continues to have for them as women.

As for American Judaism as a whole, Charles Liebman offers an analysis of the increase in ritual among the Orthodox and the flourishing of ceremonial behavior among the non-Orthodox. Rituals, he argues, are *mitzvot*, commandments, whereas ceremonies are symbolic acts, which derive from and appeal to personalism, voluntarism, universalism, and moralism. He focuses on the non-Orthodox, who constitute about 90 percent of American Jewry, and details how they are creating a uniquely American Judaism by both reinterpreting and transforming traditional rituals into ceremonies as well as by producing entirely new ceremonies, all of which are performed within the context of the aforementioned modern doctrines or "isms." These isms, he concludes, "now have become major dimensions or instruments through which American Jews interpret and transform the Jewish tradition" (Liebman 1990; Liebman and Cohen 1990, 123).

Robert Wuthnow (1988) analyzed the "restructuring" of American religion, in which there has been a distinct decline in religious authority and intensification and a broadening of the ideological

divide between liberal and fundamentalist religion. Institutionally, one of the manifestations of the decline of religious authority is the declining significance of denominations as institutions. Denominational organizations are still significant, but this does not mean that the denominations are. Rather, as Demerath and Williams (1992) suggest, the decline of religious authority in modern society may, at the very same time, have sparked a growth in the influence of religious organizations in a number of much more narrow areas. Be that as it may, the extent of the control of the denominations over their members is evident in the degree to which the members determine religious belief and in the ease with which Americans transfer denominational allegiance. In terms of the former, there is evidence from numerous studies that individuals increasingly arrive at their own religious beliefs (McNamara 1992; Roof 1993, 1999; Eisen and Cohen 2000; Waxman 2001). The predominance of individual choice in religious matters and the increased switching indicate that the power of denominations to win and preserve loyalty has been greatly reduced.

Tom Smith (1991b) suggests that net religious change may be due to a number of factors, including immigration, marriage, and fertility. Focusing on the three major American religions, he finds that Catholics have benefited from both migration and fertility, but they have the largest loss due to religious mobility. Protestants lose from both migration and mobility, and fertility has been a negligible factor. Jews lose the most because immigration is a not as great a source of strength as it was, mobility is a negative factor, and their fertility rate has been and can be expected to continue to be low. Although he does not state it explicitly, he implies agreement with Greeley that American religious patterns are basically stable. Greeley himself (1989, 10) argues that the empirical data indicate stability, and since there are no "social indicators which can be used to measure changes (if any) in these symbol systems," we can only rely on the data for our perceptions and interpretations of the religious condition.

Many others, however, argue that despite the continuing value that Americans place on religion and their continuing belief, there

indeed appear to have been some dramatic changes in the institutionalized religious sphere. Precisely what they mean, however, is subject to varying interpretations. To a significant extent, the American changes are part of the larger "culture shift" analyzed by Ronald Inglehart (1990, 1997), the initial indications of which in the United States were first observed by Daniel Yankelovich (1974). Yankelovich found a pattern of new values, a "new morality" that manifested itself in three major areas: moral norms, primarily in respect to sex and gender, authority, and religion; social norms, primarily dealing with work, family, and marriage; and those norms that emphasize self-fulfillment as opposed to obligations to others. He suggested that the source of the new morality was to be found in the impact of the Vietnam War. Intriguing as his suggestion is, it does not explain why that war should have had such a profound impact on American society, greater even than the two world wars.

Inglehart's surveys and analyses are much more comprehensive, reveal much broader international patterns, and are characterized by a much deeper sociological explanation. In his analysis of survey data gathered in twenty-five industrial societies, primarily in Western Europe and the United States, between 1970 and 1986, Inglehart (1990, 3) argues that "economic, technological and sociopolitical changes have been transforming the cultures of advanced industrial societies in profoundly important ways." Following Maslow's (1954) "need hierarchy" according to which the needs for food, shelter, and sex are on the lowest rung and must be satisfied before a person can move up the pyramid to its apex, self-actualization, Inglehart maintains that individuals are most concerned with the satisfaction of material needs and threats to their physical security. "Materialist" values, which are characteristic of societies that are less secure economically and otherwise, Inglehart avers, are values that emphasize material security. In the area of politics, these would focus on such needs as strong leaders and order. In the realm of economics, the values emphasize economic growth and strong individual-achievement motivation. In the area of sexuality and family norms, the emphasis would be on the maximization of reproduction within the two-parent family. And within the realm

of religion, the emphasis is on a higher power and absolute rules. However, once the basic material needs are satisfied and physical safety is assured, people strive for "postmaterialist" values that entail the satisfaction of more remote needs, many of which are in the spiritual, aesthetic, and interpersonal realms. Their focus becomes self-fulfillment and personal autonomy, rather than identifying themselves with their families, localities, ethnic groups, or even nations. The "culture shift" is manifested in a declining respect for authority and increased mass participation, an increasing emphasis on subjective well-being and quality-of-life concerns, an increasing emphasis on meaningful work, greater choice in the area of sexual norms, declining confidence in established religious institutions and, as well, declining rates of church attendance, and an increasing contemplation of the purpose and meaning of life. This shift, which entails a shift from central authority to individual autonomy, took place in postmaterialist society, that is, the West, in the late twentieth century. Inglehart's thesis helps explain the decline in the fertility rate in Western countries in the latter part of the twentieth century, and especially the specific decline in the American Jewish fertility rate. It follows that when postmaterialist sexual and family norms become prevalent, we can expect a relatively low fertility rate. One problem with the thesis as far as this is concerned is that the low fertility rate of American Jews is not limited to the latter half of the twentieth century (Goldscheider 1967).

For institutionalized religions, this has meant that they can no longer count on traditional allegiance. For one, religions' ability to locate us and to provide order and meaning is greatly diminished in modern society and culture. As Peter Berger (1967) puts it, the intricately interrelated processes of pluralization, bureaucratization, and secularization, which are endemic to modernity, have greatly shaken religious "plausibility structures." Although "a rumor of angels" prevails, it is but a "rumor" in modern society, and it co-exists with a "heretical imperative"; that is, the pluralistic character of modern society impels us to make choices, including religious choices. We are no longer impelled to believe and act. We choose, even when we choose to be religiously orthodox. From the standpoint of traditional

religion, that is heresy, because, as Berger points out, "the English word 'heresy' comes from the Greek verb *hairein*, which means 'to choose.' A *hairetis* originally meant, quite simply, the taking of a choice." Where there is pluralism and choice, there is also "radical doubt" (Giddens 1991, 181–208).

It is not simply within the confines of the religious sphere that bureaucratization and pluralization have occurred along with modernization. Modernization entails bureaucratization and pluralization in all structural and cultural spheres. Durkheim (1893/1984) already alluded to this in his analysis of the shift from mechanical to organic solidarity, which entails the pluralization of the social structure and concomitant functional integration in place of the traditional cultural integration.

From a somewhat different theoretical perspective but with much the same implications for our purposes, Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) highlights the increasing institutional compartmentalization and isolation in modern society, in which such institutions as family, education, and religion, among many others, become separate, autonomous spheres, and their authority prevails over individuals only in that sphere, and only to the degree that an institution's authority exists. The prevalent tendency in modern Western society to distinguish between the private and official behavior of political leaders is a good example of this compartmentalization. This contrasts sharply with the institutional integration of traditional society, within which such a distinction was untenable (cf. Berger 1961, 219–229). In any event, pluralization and compartmentalization result in the modern individuals having plural identities and, in contrast to societies characterized by mechanical solidarity and integrated culture in which identity was ascribed, plural identities that are achieved, and that the individual constructs.

Pluralization and compartmentalization entailing the religious sphere are the highlight of modern society, as manifest in the separation of church and state, and religious demopolization and pluralism have resulted in what Peter Berger (1967) called the religious free market and "religious free enterprise," in which there is a society of voluntary consumers to whom religious institutions must engage in

market research and religious outreach. Accordingly, the emergence of postmaterialist society means that even though individuals may continue to be concerned with spiritual matters, indeed, they may be even more concerned with spiritual matters today, they are much less compelled to retain membership in a particular denomination. There has developed a much greater tendency for religious switching than existed in "materialist" society.

This may help explain some of the contrasting patterns of American Jews, especially Jewish baby boomers. As I indicated in my previous Orthodox Forum paper (Waxman 2000), there has been, in the past decade or two, an increased interest in the spiritual realm both in the larger society and among American Jews, particularly the baby boomers. As the largest age cohort and at the typical age when families are established, baby boomers represent a major, if not the most prominent, cohort of consumers in American society and culture, and those in the media are particularly apt to cater to the interests of the baby boomers. The prevalence of books and television programs on spiritual topics suggests a serious interest in this area. At the same time, there is a lower degree of institutional loyalty among baby boomers, and that may be why so few of the Jewish baby boomers are synagogue members. The tendency for nonmembership in synagogues is not limited to any denomination. It is prevalent among almost a quarter of the Orthodox baby boomers, the vast majority of whom do observe the religious rituals. It is even more prevalent among Conservative baby boomers, where almost 60 percent are not synagogue members, and their Reform counterparts, among whom more than 70 percent are not members. These individuals may not be synagogue members, but they still define themselves as belonging to a religion, Judaism, and they do identify denominationally.

There is some debate over the extent and significance of inter-religious switching in the larger American culture. For our purposes, an important finding over which there is little or no debate is that the more distinctive the sect or denomination, the less likely it is that adherents will switch (Greiley 1989, 122; Iannaccone 1990; Hadaway and Marler 1993; Sullins 1993; Stark 1994). This suggests

that switching would be less common among the more religiously distinct and traditional denominations than among the more religiously liberal and modern ones.

Be that as it may, the pattern of denominational switching

among Jewish baby boomers, that is, switching between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, is much more complex. On the one hand, the vast majority, 93.3 percent, were born Jewish, which means there was relatively little interreligious switching among them (Waxman 2001). On the other hand, the data point to a significant rate of intra-religious denominational switching among Jewish baby boomers. Thus, of those who in 1990 identified as Reform, about two-thirds (64.8%) reported that they had been raised Reform, 68.1 percent of the Conservative reported that they had been raised Conservative, and 78.2 percent of the Orthodox reported that they had been raised Orthodox. And when we looked at the current denominational affiliations of those raised in a particular denomination, we found that of those reporting that they were raised Orthodox, 35.2 percent were currently Orthodox; of those raised Conservative, 58.8 percent were Conservative; and of those raised Reform, 87.9 percent were Reform.¹ These data are evidence of a significant degree of intra-religious denominational switching, and would appear to indicate that, perhaps for Jews even more than for Christians, denomination is an achieved status, that is, a status that derives from membership in a voluntary group, as the result of one's own choosing, rather than an ascribed status into which one is born. Perhaps this is one of the ways that America's Jews reconcile the inherent tension between particularism and universalism in Judaism.

One indicator of the authority of clergy is their occupational status or prestige. Tom Smith (1991a) argues that survey data reveal that the occupational prestige of clergy did not change between 1964–65 and 1989. However, the evidence with respect to seminary enrollments suggests a different picture. There are loud voices of concern among both Protestants and Catholics over the declining numbers of enrollees in seminaries. For example, the entire *March/April* 2001 issue of *Congregations*, the official publication of the Alban Institute, a predominantly Protestant interfaith organization,

was entitled, "Young Clergy: Where Are They?" It presents data indicating the declining enrollments, especially among Episcopalians and Presbyterians, and offers efforts at analysis of the phenomenon (Wical 2001, 6 ff.). The Louisville Institute's associate director quotes a friend who explained the decline:

The reason that young people do not want to be pastors is that they see all too clearly the limitations of the pastoral life, not its opportunities. Its opportunities may in fact exist for some people who have the personality and desire for it... those who are truly called. But why in the world would a talented young person commit to a life of low salary, low prestige, long hours, no weekends, and little room for advancement? (Wood 2001, 17)

Among Catholics, the decline is even more serious. As Stark and Finkle (2001, 169) put it, "For the past three decades, a rapid decline in Roman Catholic religious vocations has been under way in North America and most of western Europe." On the basis of their analyses of varieties of Protestants and Catholics, they argue that it is the religious liberals who are losing but that the religious traditionalists are growing. As they put it, "to generate and sustain religious virtuosi requires constant reinforcement from an equally committed community of peers, firm belief in divine appreciation of the relevant sacrifices, and special levels of worldly recognition of virtue" (Stark and Finkle 2000, 190).

It should not be surprising, therefore, that not only has there not been a decline in enrollments at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) over the past several decades; there has actually been a significant increase. According to its administrator, Rabbi Chaim Bronstein (personal communication, 2003), RIETS has experienced significant and steady increases in enrollment since the early 1980s. In addition, there have been significant increases in the percentages of enrollees coming from outside Yeshiva University. Approximately 20 percent now come from elsewhere, including Ivy League universities and *yeshivot* of *baalei teshuvah*. It might be argued that the institutional ideology of a synthesis

of Torah and worldly knowledge emphasizes the value of learning for its own sake and for enabling every individual, in whatever occupation, to grow in Torah knowledge, and that ordination, therefore, is not career-related. However, the available data indicate otherwise. For example, an analysis of those ordained between 1998 and 2002 indicates that only 21 percent planned to enter totally secular professions. Another 7 percent planned careers in the Jewish organizational field. The majority planned to enter the pulpit rabbinate (16%), Jewish education at the primary, secondary, or post-high school level (52%), or the chaplaincy in either a hospital or a university setting (3%).² It must be pointed out, however, that only 16 percent expected to enter the pulpit rabbinate. We have no data on the percentages of previous classes entering the pulpit rabbinate, so it cannot be determined whether there has been any change in the patterns, but nevertheless, there is a small percentage of ordainees who do plan to become pulpit rabbis.

With respect to Reform Judaism, both the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the temple and synagogue organization, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the rabbinic organization, have expressed concern about the shortage of Jewish professionals, especially rabbis (Yoffie et al. 2000; see also Heller, Rips, and Bergman 2002). It should be noted, however, that the "critical shortage" may not necessarily be linked with declining seminary enrollments but rather with the rapid growth of Reform congregations, which outpaces the growth in the number of ordained rabbis. Indeed, data on Rabbinic School admissions at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) indicate that enrollment declined from approximately 1970 to the mid-1980s, remained more or less steady from the mid-1980s to the end of the century but has increased steadily since then. Enrollment went from forty-one in 1999–2000 to seventy-six in 2002–2003 (Schneider-Shapiro 2003). Although some view this increase as related to the state of the economy and the shrinking job market, especially at the professional level, Rabbi Roxanne Schneider-Shapiro, national director of admissions and recruitment for HUC-JIR, attributes the bulk of the increase in enrollments to expanding opportunities in the rabbinate

proper as well as in related arenas, such as day schools, camps, and Jewish organizations (Weiner 2003). Again, however, it appears that only a small minority plans to enter the pulpit rabbinate. The Jewish Theological Seminary of America began admitting women to its rabbinical school in 1984, and since then women have constituted 30–40 percent of the classes. Nevertheless, the overall number of rabbinical students has not increased significantly (Jack Wertheimer, personal communication, 2003).³ According to Wertheimer (2003), non-Orthodox American Jewry, especially Conservative Jewry, is facing a severe "rabbi crisis." The crisis is, essentially, part of the larger clergy crisis in America and stems from the declining allegiance of Americans to community in general, including communities of faith. As a result of this and other American cultural patterns, the status of rabbis has diminished, and, at the same time, increasing demands are made of them by their lay leaderships, including the demand that they be spiritually "meaningful" and satisfying.

Even the non-Orthodox denominations that may not be experiencing declining rates of seminary enrollment have voiced considerable concern recently about sociocultural changes in the roles of both the synagogue and the rabbi, and many point to the contemporary cultural patterns even among American Jews who are institutionally affiliated (see, e.g., Hoffman 2002; Reconstructionist Commission on the Role of the Rabbi 2001). In their study of young "moderately affiliated" American Jewish baby boomers, Cohen and Eisen (1998, 29) found that they "did not identify God with the synagogue and that they were turning inward for meaning, not to institutions" (for a more extensive analysis of this study, see Cohen and Eisen 2000). For them, Judaism is increasingly personalistic, voluntaristic, and nonjudgmental. "Everyone interacts with Judaism in ways that suit them, none of us is capable of determining what is a good Jew (an elusive term, to say the least), and therefore none can judge another's Judaism" (Cohen and Eisen 1998, 76). It should thus be no surprise that "Many respondents reported negative encounters as young-adults or newly-married couples with rabbis and congregations." (ibid., 38) If each individual's choice is as legitimate

as the next persons, rabbis, who have a tradition of speaking with authority, are going to be viewed as obstacles.

Much of this part of the discussion does not apply, by and large, to Orthodox rabbis, and Wertheimer, for example, explicitly excludes them from his analysis. But that does not mean that Orthodox rabbis are immune to the consequences of the changes in American society and culture. Far from it! Leaving aside the whole issue of the decline of community in American culture, which affects the Orthodox much less than the non-Orthodox, contemporary American Orthodox rabbis experience numerous pressures and stresses that their predecessors did not. Yocheved Schacter (2003) avers that

Over the past number of decades it has become clear that today's rabbi must develop his talents in many areas. He must be successfully able to teach, to *pasken shalos*, to mediate, to counsel, to deliver sermons, to be politically aware, to be up on the latest novels, to administer a staff, to balance a budget, to raise money, and in some cases, to play golf and/or tennis, and more. All this plus forty years of experience before the age of thirty!

Although the tasks enumerated by Schacter may be characteristic of what some Modern Orthodox rabbis must do, a number of them are increasingly irrelevant to the much more typical role of the contemporary American Orthodox rabbi. He no longer has to cater to congregants who demand that he be politically aware, up on the latest novels, participate in sports, and the like. Rather, as a result of basic changes in American Orthodoxy (Waxman 1998), his challenges are much more likely to be the greatest halakhic scholar, to "be up on" the latest *humrot*, to be the most Israel-nationalistic, and perhaps even to be the most separatist in the Jewish community. There is considerable evidence of a frequent correlation between religious and political orientations, that is, people who are religiously traditional tend to be politically conservative, and vice versa; likewise, those who are religiously liberal tend to be politically liberal, and vice versa. (Johnstone 2001, 13–180; Hunter 1991; Owen,

Wald, and Hill 1991). It seems reasonable to expect, therefore, that the degree of obedience to the authority of the rabbi will vary along the liberal-traditional spectrum. Thus it is not all that surprising that there is much more blanket acceptance of the notions of *emunat hakhammim* and *dat Torah* among *haredim* of both hassidic and mitnagdic backgrounds than among other Orthodox Jews. The *haredi* approach to these notions is expressed well in the writing of the late Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler:

You must know, my revered friend, that Rabbi Elchanan [Wasserman] is certainly very great, and it would be wrong to set aside his words, much less to reject them, because of what we puny people think that we see with our eyes. Our Rabbis have told us to listen to the words of the Sages "even if they tell us that right is left," and not to say, God forbid, that they must be wrong because little I "can see the mistake with my own eyes." My seeing is null and void and utterly valueless compared with the clarity of their intellect and the divine aid they receive. No Beth Din can revoke the decrees of another Beth Din unless it is greater in number and wisdom; failing this, it is very likely that what they think they "can see the mistake with their own eyes" is merely imagination and illusion. This is the Torah view concerning faith in the Sages. (Dessler 1978, 218–219)

Whether that is, in fact, "the Torah view concerning faith in the Sages" is irrelevant within the context of this paper. As the sociologist W.I. Thomas pointed out in his famous theorem, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928, 572). As for the validity of R. Dessler's assertion, his assertion clearly obfuscates the significant distinction between a halakhic ruling of a *beit-din* and a nonhalakhic opinion. In contrast to his assertion, Rav Sherita Gaon explicitly stated that *hakhammim* have authority in Halakha but not necessarily in other fields he specifically mentions medicine and they are not to be heeded on nonhalakhic matters (*Otzar ha-Geonim*, Gittin 68b, 376). A similar approach is found in the writing of R. Avraham the

son of Maimonides (printed in the introductions to a number of editions of the *Ein Yaakov*), where he says that rabbis have authority in halakhic matters but not necessarily elsewhere. It is not solely in medicine or in the physical sciences that rabbis have no special authority. As Haym Soloveitchik (1994/1999, 345) points out, "The lay communal leadership had always reserved political and social areas for itself. Even in the periods of maximum rabbinic influence, as in sixteenth-century Poland, political leadership was firmly in the hands of laymen." In large measure, as a response to modernization, pluralization, and secularization (Berger 1967), Haredism developed and, along with it, the notion of the rabbis' all-encompassing charismatic authority in the original sense of the term charisma. Given their strong sense of community and strong communal bonds, the authority and power wielded by rabbis in *haredi* communities far surpasses what is found in any other Orthodox community, including those that are not *haredi*. No other community has the kind of social control commonplace in *haredi* communities, and thus, for example, no other community has been witness to the variety of religious bans public, widely circulated pronouncements of *herem* that are prevalent in the *haredi* communities. In the year 2002 alone, such pronouncements have succeeded in forcing an Orthodox writer from participating in speaking tours with his Reform co-author (Hirsch and Reisman 2002), in having the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth revise a book that was already in production (Sacks 2002), and in banning a book on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rabbinic scholars (Kamenetsky 2002), all because they did not conform to the perspectives and not solely halakhic of some militant *haredi* rabbis. Such power is found only in *haredi* and other, non-Jewish, fundamentalist groups, which are composed of individuals who are much more amenable to submission to authority (Owen, Wald, and Hill 1991). It should, however, be emphasized that the close-knit character of *haredi* communities and the concomitant strong social controls do not necessarily mean that the rabbis have complete control. On the contrary, there is more than good reason to suggest that *haredi*

communities are not impervious and are not immune to many of the same forces at work in the larger society. They, too, have experienced the consequences of modernity, and even among them, the authority of rabbis has declined. If nothing else, there is now much greater heterogeneity even among *haredi* rabbis. Consequently, it is frequently "independent" zealots with little or no formal authority who are able to instigate "witch hunts" and incite significant sectors of the *haredi* masses to enforce their desired ends. Accordingly, the authority of rabbis in these communities is significantly weaker than is typically perceived, even as the zealots legitimate their actions under the banners of *dait Torah*.⁴

As for the future of rabbinic authority in the United States, more than thirty years ago Charles Liebman (1968) analyzed the training of American rabbis, and since then there has been little systematic analysis of the relationship between the objectives set forth by the seminary, the expectations in the field, and its rabbinic program. Writing in the mid-1950s, Carlin and Mendlovitz interviewed a series of American rabbis in order to see how they coped with the loss of rabbinic authority in modern American society. On the basis of their interviews, they suggested that there are now seven rabbinic models in American society, ranging from the Traditional rabbi, on the right, to the Intellectual Reform, on the left. Between them are the Modern Orthodox, the Conservative, the Social Reform, the Traditionalistic Reform, and one other type, who "earns his livelihood from rabbinic functions but refuses to accept any responsible rabbinic role" (Carlin and Mendlovitz 1958, 412), the Free-Lancer. In their conclusion, they predicted "that the scholar-saint role which from the time of the early rabbi was the most characteristic rabbinic role in the Jewish community, but which was submerged under the impact of Emancipation, is once again destined to re-emerge as the most characteristic rabbinic role" (*ibid.* 414). A cursory look at the programs at the three major rabbinic seminaries, RIETS, JTS, and HUC, seems to confirm this prediction by the two sociologists almost a half-century ago. At the close of the twentieth century, the programs were much more rigorous and demanding in terms of the breadth and depth of traditional

Jewish knowledge than they were at mid-century. All three place much greater stress on producing rabbinic scholars in addition to communal workers, and all three have become much more tradition-oriented. Much of this is, undoubtedly, related to the greater traditionalism of the communally affiliated segment of American Jewry since the 1980s as well as the significant growth in the field of Jewish Studies on college and university campuses around the country. The "consumer market" (Berger 1967) now expects and demands greater cognitive knowledge as well as "spirituality" from rabbis, and the seminaries have apparently responded. On the other hand, it must be recalled that the organized Jewish community is shrinking, one of the major reasons being that fewer and fewer American Jews affiliate with the institutions of the community. It does not seem very likely that the unaffiliated will relate to rabbis in general, much less to scholar-saints. If the process of disaffiliation continues, the role of the rabbi may undergo change once again.

What are the implications of all this for rabbis of this and future generations of American Jewry, and especially Orthodox Jewry? In addressing the non-Orthodox, Wertheimer (2003, 39) sees positive change only if rabbis reassert their authoritative role.

Rejecting defeatist advice from among their own colleagues, they would need to gird themselves to combat the present solipsistic moment in American Judaism, reeducating their congregants to think beyond their immediate personal needs, their inchoate yearnings for "spirituality," and their consumerist notion of religious life. They would need to insist on synagogue rituals focused on communal rather than privatized concerns, and they would need to reorient the synagogue itself as an institution focused on the transcendent needs of the Jewish people. Above all, they would need to take their own role seriously, accepting the burden and the challenge of their calling as individuals who speak with authority not only for themselves but for the Jewish tradition, the Jewish people, and God.

Implementing all this is much less of a challenge for the Orthodox

rabbi. To a much larger extent than among others, his position commands authority even when he, as an individual, does little to reinforce that authority. Given the open, pluralistic nature of American Judaism, it may be assumed that those who affiliate with Orthodoxy do so out of some allegiance to it. Although this certainly does not secure the position of any specific rabbi, it does provide extremely strong support for the position of rabbi per se. The specific individual then needs to legitimate himself by demonstrating that he is deserving of that position. Within the context of American Orthodox Judaism, this can probably be best accomplished by demonstrating commitment to principles, manifesting sacred Jewish knowledge, teaching congregants, and being empathetic even when not agreeing with them or acting in accordance with their wishes. The evidence suggests that contemporary Orthodox congregants increasingly want a rabbi who is a role model and an authority figure, not a "best friend," entertainer, or political analyst. Perhaps we might paraphrase Rabban Gamliel and R. Yehoshua ben Perahyah and apply their Talmudic dictum, "*aseh lekha rav*" to candidates for the pulpit: "make yourself a rabbi," that is, act like one. Internalize the role, and your congregants will respect and appreciate you for it.

Notes

NOTES

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance and comments of the participants in the 2003 Orthodox Forum, and especially those of Rabbi Dr. Moses D. Tendler, Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, Dr. Steven Bayme, and Rabbi Robert Hirt.

1. These figures may not be as dramatic as they initially appear. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Waxman 2001, 78), we are actually not sure what the NPS respondents meant when they stated that they had been raised Orthodox. They may have meant that they had been raised as observant in the Orthodox definition of the term, but on the other hand, they may have simply meant that they had attended an Orthodox synagogue. The two are very different. Many of the latter may have been part of what Marshall Sklare termed the "non-observant Orthodox" (Sklare 1972, 46), that is, individuals who were not Orthodox in observance, but when they went to synagogue, went to an Orthodox one.
2. Unpublished data supplied by Rabbi Robert Hirt, based on a survey of ordainees in the 2002 *Hag ha-Semikhah*.

3. It should be noted that there is now another Conservative rabbinic seminary, the University of Judaism, in Los Angeles, so the sum total of rabbinic candidates has actually grown. The same may be said of the Orthodox. I took one major seminary as representative of the denomination as a whole, but, in fact, there are other seminaries and more rabbinic candidates than these figures indicate, though we don't know how many. The figures may be more indicative of specific institutional trends than of denominational patterns.
4. On the politics of the concept, see Bacon 1996; Kaplan 1992; Brown 2002. Evidence that even in the *haredi* community the rabbi may not have as much authority as is generally believed may be inferred from the fact that, despite the *herem* signed by numerous *haredi* authorities against the book *Making of a Godol*, there was a humorous *pashkevil* (poster) in the *haredi* neighborhood of Geula, Jerusalem, before Purim of 2003, which indicates that some members of the *haredi* community with a sense of humor feel free to poke fun at the so-called *herem*.

New Conditions and Models of Authority: Changing Patterns within Contemporary Orthodoxy

Steven Bayme

7

The scene was a leading Modern Orthodox high school. The instructor, trying to explain Cain's motivation in killing his brother Abel, cited a *midrash* that Cain feared that the Temple would ultimately be built in Abel's domain. A student quickly challenged the instructor, saying that worrying about something that might happen a thousand years hence hardly constituted a realistic motive for murder. Taken aback by the student's unwillingness to bow to rabbinic authority, the teacher trivialized both the comment and the *midrash* by saying, "It's just a *midrash* anyway!"

In truth, this seemingly small incident (and small-minded instructor) illustrates the dilemma of Modern Orthodoxy: how does one preserve rabbinic authority and simultaneously construct that authority so as to make room for intellectual freedom and