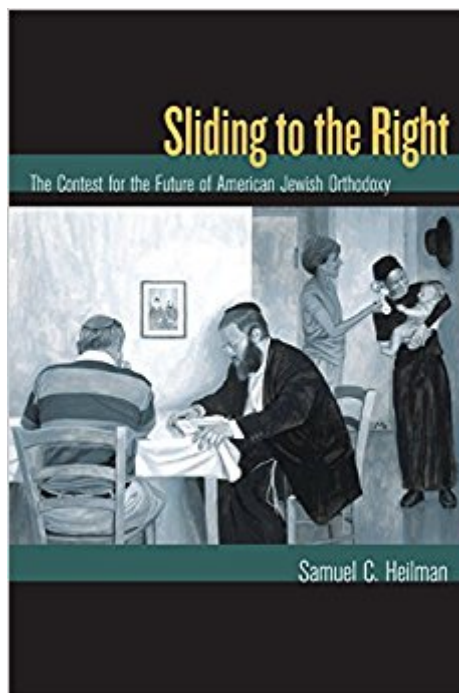




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Sliding To The Right: The Contest For The Future Of American Jewish Orthodoxy



Synopsis

Written by one of this country's leading experts on American Judaism, this book offers a snapshot of Orthodoxy Jewry in the United States, asking how the community has evolved in the years since World War II and where it is headed in the future. Incorporating rich details of everyday life, fine-grained observations of cultural practices, descriptions of educational institutions, and more, Samuel Heilman delineates the varieties of Jewish Orthodox groups, focusing in particular on the contest between the proudly parochial, contra-acculturative haredi Orthodoxy and the accommodationist modern Orthodoxy over the future of this religious community. What emerges overall is a picture of an Orthodox Jewry that has gained both in numbers and intensity and that has moved farther to the religious right as it struggles to define itself and to maintain age-old traditions in the midst of modernity, secularization, technological advances, and the pervasiveness of contemporary American culture.

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Customer Reviews

"Heilman is one of the most productive, interesting, and important sociologists writing about Jewish communities in the world today. This book is a significant snapshot, filled with Heilman's fine-grained observations of particular cultural practices such as humor, posters, and Rabbi portraits. Heilman is a first-rate thinker, an excellent researcher whose work is richly empirical, and an unusually clear and lively writer." - Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, author of *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*

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The basic purpose of this book is to explain the growth of hareidi Orthodoxy (that is, Orthodox Judaism that tends to be not particularly interested in Americanization, and more interested in religious stringency) as opposed to modern Orthodoxy (which tends to combine strict adherence to traditional religious practices with Americanization). The two forms of Orthodoxy are not separate denominations, but merely divergent tendencies within the Orthodox movement- more analogous to vague categories such as "conservative" and "moderate" than to membership organizations such as "Democrats" and "Republicans." Both tendencies flow out of the same tradition, and a person or synagogue can be "hareidi" in certain respects and "modern" in others. Heilman suggests that hareidi forms of Orthodoxy have grown and that modern Orthodoxy has become more strict. (This conclusion is based on more conjecture than data; however, it is not clear to me that there is any easy way of proving the point). Why? Heilman lists the following possible causes: 1. As American culture has become more permissive on sexual matters, the American mainstream has become less attractive to Orthodox Jews (who oppose premarital sex and homosexuality). 2. As modern Orthodox Jews have become more educated and materially successful, fewer modern Orthodox Jews have become interested in less remunerative fields such as Jewish education and the rabbinate. As a result, modern Orthodox children are often educated by teachers and rabbis from hareidi backgrounds. 3. Hareidim tend to have more children than modern Orthodox Jews; as in other religions, demography favors traditionalism. As other reviewers pointed out, this book focuses heavily on metropolitan New York where hareidi Jews tend to live. I would love to read a book showing how these tendencies play out in communities too small to support hareidi-oriented synagogues and neighborhoods - but to be fair, that's not really the book Heilman set out to write.

This was a well written book that provided many reasons for the apparent shift to the right amongst Orthodox Jews in America. Especially interesting were the analysis of the day school movement, and the lack of modern orthodox educators in this field. I thought that the book should have focused more on American Orthodoxy as a whole rather than just looking at a few neighborhoods in New

York. Also, Heilman didn't really address the fact that much of this right wing shift may be on the superficial level only having to do with outward appearances. I thought the section devoted to analyzing posters was too long and didn't really add to the thesis of the book. Even with these weaknesses, I am glad that Heilman wrote this book, and I hope more books on the social aspects of Orthodox culture will be published in the future.

Overall, I found this book disappointing. In its defense, its basic thesis of the movement of Jewish American Orthodoxy towards the 'right' (more closed and intensely religious) is interesting, and I am sure accurate, and Heilman's analysis of its evolution is insightful and well-researched. However, I was extremely bothered by the lack of any attempt to portray Hareidi society through the prism of its own value system, or in fact any attempt to understand their values at all. Heilman accepts his own world view as absolute and obvious to the reader, and in this context denigrates a society with an entirely different set of goals and aspirations. Examples of this include his assumption of the primacy of feminism and the worth of secular culture. Hareidi society has its own worldview which, although too complex to elaborate on here, has valid and very real reasons for its hierarchy of values, reasons which Heilman completely disparages or ignores. (For an example of a book that is not written by a religious author, yet is able to appreciate Hareidim from their own perspective try "Real Jews" by Noah Efron). In general, I found his view of religion as a mere sociological construct (i.e. a defensive reaction to the Holocaust) to be grossly insensitive to the Hareidi intense religious belief founded on thousands of years of tradition. The latter half of the book I found a pathetic attempt to draw conclusions from insignificant pieces of information. For example the juxtaposition of poster A condemning something to a poster advertising B implies that poster A is condemning B as well. Or two posters (put out by the same company) advertising two different types of music indicates that the community is embattled over the appropriateness of one type of music. In conclusion, although I eagerly awaited this book and found a fraction of it interesting and intelligent, my overall impression is negative due to the authors biased approach and manipulative use of insignificant information.

this was a most interesting review of the sociological movement of orthodox judaism from centrist/traditional to right wing, ultra orthodox. Prof. Heileman validated all the things I've been saying for years. Book is highly recommended.

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