

A Ortodoxia Judía e seus descontentes: dissidência religiosa no Israël contemporâneo by Marta Topel, São Paulo, Annablume (paper) 2011, 222 pp. ISBN 978-85-391-0266-2

Jewish Orthodoxy and Its Discontents: Religious Dissidence in Contemporary Israel by Marta Topel, University Press of America: Lanham MD, 2012, 170 pp. ISBN 978-0-7618-5917-8 (paper) eISBN 978-0-7618—5918-5 (electronic edition). (translation from the Portuguese)

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The world of evangelical sects, religious revival and fundamentalist enclaves exercises an understandable fascination on the secular mindset of social scientists and the opinion-forming intelligentsia. These continue, as does this reviewer, to puzzle over what drives people to join a world which to them seems joyless and full of sacrifices, not to speak of its irrational trust in and fear of the forces of the supernatural and in human beings' ability to enlist them in the cause of their own happiness. Yet – from at least one point of view – all is not lost: vast numbers exit these sects and movements all the time and for all sorts of reasons. Yet even though the 'leavers' would offer some comfort to the sceptical outlook of most social scientists, we pay insufficient attention to the outflow from those places, which from the rationalist's point of view is presumably less puzzling than the inflow – though there are, notoriously, rationalists who might disagree.

It is therefore with some anticipation that we open Marta Topel's book about people who leave the Jewish ultra-Orthodox world in Israel. Topel is a Brazilian anthropologist who has already written an excellent book about women from São Paulo's prosperous Jewish middle class who gravitate towards an ultra-Orthodox lifestyle. (Topel 2008). Now she has turned her attention to the opposed movement, offering an unusual insight into the relationship between what to most outsiders appears as a suffocatingly repressive and incomprehensibly dreary social world and its surrounding society. She does this by studying the experience of people who have left that world and also the activities of people who are trying to 'rescue' these fugitives, and perhaps to encourage more of them. The leavers incur substantial risks and a high price in their venture to join 'mainstream' society in which people have jobs, go shopping, flirt, watch television, use the internet, and so on. The case is of specific interest because the ultra-Orthodox Jewish world which she describes is so influential in Israel and in Judaism worldwide, regarded as the yardstick of a properly Jewish life.

Haredi, or ultra-Orthodox, Judaism is a triumph of social engineering. Stated very schematically, it developed as a reaction to the outward-looking theological and practical version of Judaism which grew out of the Enlightenment. Starting in the late 18th century, vast numbers of Jews moved out of the *shtetl* into participation in secular life in Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, while others retreated into fortresses of resistance across a vast swathe from Vilna to Odessa. From this

confrontation grew nationalism, Zionism, revolutionary socialism and much besides on the one hand, and the construction of institutions of Torah learning and Rabbinical courts on the other, not to speak of the great divide within the traditionalist camp, arising from the explosive revival of mystical religiosity (associated with the charismatic figure of Ba'al Shem Tov or Besht) in the late 18th century.

All of this suffered catastrophically during the Holocaust, but the population and culture of their *haredim* (those who live in fear of God) have undergone an extraordinary rebirth since then, as residents of Brooklyn, North London or Belleville (Paris), not to speak of Jerusalem, will testify. In all these places they have large families, averaging more than 6 children each in Israel and well above average size elsewhere. In Israel the result is life in enclaves where young men are destined for a life of full-time Torah study plus burdensome child care subsidized by the state, while elsewhere they try to earn their living in ways which free up the most time possible for study. Of course all those young men are suited to such a life, yet their education and upbringing make them psychologically as well as socially and economically unsuited to life outside the enclave. Women for their part are also unlikely to be uniformly suited to early marriage followed by ten years of almost uninterrupted pregnancies. So there is a leakage, but it is hard to estimate because of the *omertà* which prevails in such enclave societies. In Israel, if all the children born to haredi families were to remain within the community, their proportion in the population, currently between 15 and 20 per cent and rising fast, would be even greater.

Marta Topel has studied this phenomenon of exit in Israel, mostly by interviewing contacts made through a few charitable organizations which exist to help people who exit the haredi world. Although neither she nor the organizations say so explicitly, it would be fair to say that they have an anti-haredi agenda of varying intensity and their leaders would in Israel be regarded as 'ultra-left' (which means pro-peace and opposed to the excessive influence of the ultra-Orthodox and the settlers in the country's life and politics).

Taking a historical view, we see that the fate of these dropouts is a reflection of the enormous changes which have occurred in Israel since before the watershed of the 1967 War. Before then it was a relatively low-income country with an inward-looking managed economy where television had barely been introduced, and it was having difficulty attracting immigrants. But it was a country driven (broadly speaking) by the ideal of building a society which was not just Jewish (that was taken for granted) but above all more solidary and more egalitarian than others – and operating under the benevolent management of an Ashkenazi secular elite. After 1967 the economy was gradually opened up, foreign aid and investment piled in, there was a new and final wave of immigration from Arab countries and later a mass influx of Russians. Shopping malls sprung up, immigration from Europe and the Americas came to be dominated by religious people and fervent nationalists, and the country's fiercely competitive culture was harnessed to a muscular brand of ill-regulated capitalism in which technological knowhow and international connections were

the keys to success. Yet at the same time increasing emphasis was placed in numerous spheres on the Jewishness of Israeli daily life and politics.

So in the early period, when the haredi leaders, who had extracted crucial concessions from Ben-Gurion with respect to military service, Sabbath observance and subsidized Torah study, were relatively few in number and politically docile, thousands abandoned the ultra-Orthodoxy drawn by Zionism's heroic vision and the attractions of taking part in the building of a new society. But now, in this new Israel, where Palm Beach-style suburbs and malls coexist with ramshackle markets and overcrowded reinforced concrete or pink stone apartment blocks, where religious and secular enclaves are separated and distanced by symbolic walls, to leave haredi society is to leave as a failure. Leavers find themselves plunged into a social environment which offers them no role, because they do not have the necessary technical, even social, skills. They have never worn jeans, they experience nausea when travelling on the Sabbath, the men among them (the majority) do not know how to strike up a conversation with a woman. They have little experience of privacy: in the yeshiva, one informant tells, the lavatory cubicles have no doors. (I am a little sceptical about this, having visited many yeshivas, but it may occasionally be true.)

The 'leavers' are even denied the status of apostates: in classical Rabbinic eyes, an apostate is a person who has reached a conscious and rational decision to change religions. But in this modern enclave society these people are labelled mere dropouts, victims of decadent urges for sex and drugs.

Of course, it is tempting to paint these situations in stark contrasts, for close and patient observation reveals intermediate and grey areas. There are indeed people who live on the margins or in between, like one of Topel's interviewees whom she meets in a pub, bearded and wearing the standard haredi 'uniform' of black suit and white shirt. There are also people who manage something of a double life, keeping up appearances and hiding their complete disaffection with the haredi lifestyle, and others who stretch the limits. Income can count quite a lot – enabling a woman to get a doctor's certificate which will persuade a rabbi to say they need not continue having children; or enabling parents to put their children into private schools where they will be equipped for a secular profession as well as for Rabbinic virtuosity. And, as was stated at the start of this review, the numbers seem to indicate that there is a steady leakage, even though it is almost impossible to gain access to the detail necessary to verify that claim.

In some ways one wishes the author had been more audacious: this subject is more important quantitatively and qualitatively than she is prepared to say, because of the light it throws on Israeli society and also because of the fruitful comparisons it invites. Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy seems to exceed other comparable religious enclaves in the stringency of the demands it places on its people and in its success in imposing those demands. Its growth is leading to increasing variation within, but even so the thickness of the walls of the enclaves remains astonishing.

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