

Apocalyptic Orthodox Judaism

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Fundamentalist spokesmen in Orthodox Judaism of late have grown more vocal and militant. Recent protests, proclamations, and actions of Orthodox Jews have not just risen in intensity. Rather a substantive transformation has overtaken a segment of the Jewish community. It does not suffice to categorize Orthodox groups as “reversionary” “ultra” or “right-wing”. We must explain what generative conception distinguishes one group claiming to be Orthodox observers of Torah and mitzvos (commandments), true to the ideals of halakhah (Jewish law), and loyal to their rabbinic figures of authority, from another group claiming the same traits, but appearing to form its social life and defend its ultimate goals in recognizably different manners.

Some forms of fundamentalist Orthodoxy have become *apocalyptic* styles of Judaism. This form of Judaism has coherent world views and particular ways of life that thrive on conflict, that live on the margins of society and that employ predictable modes of discourse.

The term apocalyptic is used in two distinct ways. First, it is often used to describe a literary genre. Parts of the book of Isaiah, of Daniel, and some pseudepigraphic works are central to the formation of the literary category. Paul Hanson elaborated a second application of the term in his broad social theory of apocalyptic. He emphasized the social value and function of common accounts of visions and symbols for powerless religious groups on the margins of Israelite culture.¹

Apocalypticism itself in antiquity and thereafter takes numerous forms. The early apocalyptic proponents of the book of Daniel appear to be mainly a passive group of the second century BCE. They stood outside the corridors of power in Hellenistic Israel, awaiting the inevitable downfall of the evil empire they despised. In first century CE Israel Neusner describes three major groups representing competing trends in formative Judaism: priests, scribes, and zealots. The activist apocalyptic holy men of the zealot group, sometimes seen as messiahs by their followers, acted out their visions of leadership on the battlefield yielding the Israelite “prophetic and apocalyptic hope for meaning in history and the eschaton mediated by the messiahs and generals.”²

¹Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, Phila., 1975. Also see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, New York, 1984.

²Jacob Neusner, “Judaism and Christianity: Two Faiths Talking About Different Things,” in *The World and I*, November, 1987, p. 684. Also see his *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*, Boston, 1987, ch. 3.

But are these ancient phenomena informative for describing modern trends? Alan Segal emphasizes commonalities between ancient and modern apocalypticism:

Both movements characterize time as a linear process which leads to the future destruction of the evil world order... As opposed to holding an optimistic view of progress, which moves to the final goal by slow approximations, apocalypticists are totally impatient with the corrupt present, seeing it as a series of unprecedented calamities.³

Apocalypticism is also evident in marginalized social bodies and also in groups holding the reigns of power but watching the inevitable process of its dissolution. This combination may be one of the dominant triggers for the apocalyptic mode of expression and imagination in some segments of Orthodox Judaism today. They hold power as virtuosi of Torah. And yet they are forced to the margins of a fast moving new world order.

Perhaps a comparison to another group in a similar context will help facilitate our analysis. In reporting the apocalyptic characteristics of white South Africans, Vincent Crapanzano summarizes the features of their framework of understanding their crumbling world-structures. He suggests that the world views of the adherents of an apocalyptic system are based on the complex components. I term them: watching, waiting, and worrying. In apocalyptic conception the present is secondary to the future and the past. "The world of immediacy slips away; it is derealized. It is without elan, vitality, creative force. It is numb, muted, dead."⁴ Crapanzano explains that in this mode of understanding, meaning is always expressed in future terms. Something in the future is yet to come, but cannot be sought. This state of mind produces great anxiety, "feelings of powerlessness, helplessness and vulnerability." To escape the suspense, the apocalyptic tells stories and seeks a "swirl of everyday activity." This manifests itself in the form of prayer, pilgrimages, offerings, "personal taboos, and idiosyncratic rituals."⁵ Commonly, the apocalyptic sees omens in everyday events. The waiting takes on the function of expiation. The one who waits believes he can do little to change the courses of history. This can lead to the paralysis of dread, uncertainty, existential angst. We can translate this fear into longing, but the

³Alan Segal, *Rebecca's Children*, Cambridge, Mass., 1987, p. 70.

⁴Vincent Crapanzano, *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa*, New York, 1985, p. 44.

⁵Ibid., p. 45.

ambivalence of oscillating between anxiety and optimism, leaves little hope for fulfillment, but much chance for terror. For the white commoner, waiting provides a framework of interpretation and a means of separation. The apocalyptic white in South Africa lives within a complex mass of potential enemies. He believes his world is disintegrating. It is. And he waits.

Return then to the apocalyptic Orthodox Jew. He also waits as his role Torah virtuoso, as sole scribe, circumciser, kashrut supervisor, and educator to the Jewish world slips away. Indeed Western society crumbles before his eyes. Through a survivalist sub-motif he proclaims in triumphalist theological prophecy that the moral disintegration in Western culture will be accompanied by the assimilation and disappearance of all modernized Jews from the face of the earth. The Orthodox will be the last Jews and the sole survivors of a totally decadent and corrupt world that is heading straight for damnation. Only immersion in the Torah-True life of mitzvos (commandments) and avoidance of the onrushing waves of secularity can stem the tide of assimilation. A version of this apocalyptic ideological component of the reversionary or right-wing world view is integral to its definition as a system.

Social action out of such an apocalyptic context expresses itself in engagement through conflict. The elite within this apocalyptic group assume a role akin to that of the warrior in a tribal society.⁶ In a confrontation of foreboding dimensions between the saving remnant and the crumbling world, the designated combatant is permitted to engage in many forms of attack in his sacred battle for the survival of his people, and hence of mankind. Combat with competing or neighboring clans is sanctioned and even desired. In some segments of right-wing Orthodoxy the attitude of triumphalism may be acted out in aggressive assaults on the nearest competition, the modern Orthodox or the Conservative Jews. One difference. The primary means of aggression and attack of apocalyptic Orthodoxy normally takes the form of character assassination rather than physical violence, and commonly is directed against weak and select targets. It rarely expresses itself as indiscriminate aggression against all Jews or all Gentiles outside the immediate world of the circle.⁷

⁶One New York Orthodox rabbi, head of a Yeshiva, and conversant with the writings of Freud, refers to an explosion in raw “tribalism” within right-wing Orthodoxy implying that rabbis take the place of totems and their minhagim [customs] function as their own forms of individualized taboos. Frequent internecine strife between separate social groups appears to be a common element in many forms of right-wing Orthodoxy.

⁷Bernard Lewis wrote a book called *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam*, Oxford, 1987, dealing with the “first group to make planned, systematic use of murder as a political weapon.” Someone might call a study of the apocalyptic Orthodox, *The Character Assassins*, whose leaders send their followers on methodical, organized defamatory expeditions

The modern Orthodox remain the favorite targets of apocalyptic Orthodoxy. Chaim Dov Keller provides an apt illustration of this posture, “Seventeen years ago, my sainted Rebbe, Reb Elya Meir Bloch z.t.l. (of blessed memory), Telshe Rosh Yeshiva, made a remark which I vividly remember since the occasion was my own wedding: ‘We no longer have to fear Conservatism — that is no longer the danger. Everyone knows that it is *avoda zara* [idolatry]. What we have to fear is Modern Orthodoxy.’”⁸ In another instance a writer in the Jewish Press labelled Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein: “evil”. Lichtenstein, son-in-law of HaRav Joseph Soloveitchik, scion of Orthodoxy, allegedly made overtures to conservative and reform Jews.⁹

Another illustration of conflict: In May, 1987, Orthodox rabbis in Israel inspired by Rabbi Eliezer Shach, head of the Agudat Yisrael Council of Sages and mentor of the Shas party, forbade under threat of excommunication, study in a Kollel program run by a former American rabbi, a graduate of Yeshiva University, in which a woman taught men. The venerated teacher was the Orthodox biblical scholar, Nechama Leibowitz. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, ruled that the woman could continue to teach from behind a screen. Nevertheless, many students left the program as a result of the encounter with Orthodox pressure.

The conflict-prone apocalyptic Orthodox, as noted, apparently make a point of targeting for attack some of the most vulnerable targets, such as women and minors. They may even attack the dead. In November, 1987, Orthodox extremists in Mea Shearim pasted posters to the walls of their quarter of the city to publicly express their joy over the death from cancer of Yigal Shiloah on November 14 at the age of 50. They had long before accused him of having violated Jewish law by digging near the old city of Jerusalem, thus disturbing ancient graves.¹⁰

Or consider this incident. Rabbi Steven Riskin reported that he overheard the following exchange on a bus in Jerusalem between a right-wing Orthodox man and a secular woman. “Please close

against rival rabbis.

⁸“Modern Orthodoxy: An Analysis and a Response,” in Bulka, p. 253 reprinted from the *Jewish Observer* 6, no. 8, June, 1970, pp. 3-14.

⁹Lichtenstein, who has a Ph.D. in English from Harvard, has now become a favored target of the apocalyptic Orthodox, for he represents the liminal Orthodox scholar and talmudist who has obtained a higher education.

¹⁰Consider also that thousands of Jewish children are sent a newsletter from the Lubavitch movement called Tzivos Hashem, the army of the Lord. Vulnerable Jewish youth are often heavily targeted for propaganda by the right-wing in the name of the furtherance of Torah-True Judaism.

the window, the draft is bothering me,” said a modern looking Israeli woman. “Please lengthen your sleeves, your arms are bothering me,” replied the Haredi man sitting next to her.¹¹ Note also another more serious incident. On Simhat Torah in Jerusalem, 1986, a passing band of Orthodox men attacked a reform synagogue where they saw women dancing with the Torah. They acted with justification, as they conceived of it, to restore the Torah and Jewish women to their destined places and roles.

In the apocalyptic mode, menacing aggressive practices may dominate. Through apocalyptic Orthodox ideology and its customs, a foreboding, ominous and somber world view overshadows the community as the organizing force of the system. Such a climate could appear to a psychotic member to condone even his plans for a violent attack against imagined enemies in a public place of worship.

Let me make clear that I am not describing Modern Orthodoxy. That system more approximates the mainstream of religious observance and ritual in American-Western religion. Its adherents accept a relationship with the Western world. They are not overtly belligerent. They may study Torah or Jewish Theology. They exemplify the faith of the synagogue and accept as role models a variety of leaders including the Western educated intellectual rabbi (like Soloveitchik). They might partake of leisure activities of the general culture.

Rather I am defining Apocalyptic Orthodoxy. This system resembles a survivalist cult or sect. Its adherents think that assimilation is evil. They maintain that they must fight their opponents. They believe that the ends of Torah-True life justify the means of occasionally violating law and ethical behavior. Against the enemy intellectual terrorism is justified. And for some, even physical violence is sanctioned. They engage in limited communication with unclean world. Their children are enlisted in the army of the Lord, or in the reversionary system of a Yeshiva — one of the primary closed and controlled environments for fostering apocalyptic Orthodox ideology and practice.

The apocalyptic mode, which has permeated some segments of the social world of Orthodoxy, has also entered the realm of the legal discourse of halakhic decision-making. An example of a recent halakhic responsum (rabbinic legal opinion) with apocalyptic tones comes from an unlikely source, Yeshiva University, the hybrid institution, part Yeshiva, and part University, usually considered to be a bastion of modern Orthodox life, the symbolic center of what I just have called Modern Orthodoxy. Rabbi Hershel Schachter in a responsum, backed up by four other rabbis of Yeshiva University

¹¹S. Riskin, “Religious and Secular Conflict in Israel,” in *Hamevaser*, the student newspaper of Yeshiva University, October, 1987, p. 2.

demonstrates through a formal halakhic decision how unfocused the lines of distinction may be in the real world beyond the realms of a theoretical phenomenology of Orthodoxy.¹² In this decision he attacked all Orthodox women who participated in women's prayer groups. We observed above that women may be the targets of apocalyptic Orthodoxy. They are considered to be virtually defenseless in the community and easily dominated and controlled. Modern Orthodoxy had tended to downplay such attitudes and recently began to show some ambiguity towards the role of women in the public life of the group.

This responsum came under the scrutiny of an Orthodox critic Rivka Haut:¹³

In the past few years, Orthodox rabbis have expended much energy attacking women's prayer groups. Nearly every major rabbinic journal has printed articles prohibiting the establishment of such groups. In 1985, five Yeshiva University rabbis issued a teshuvah, a rabbinic responsum, which categorically denounced what they termed "women's minyanim." One of these rabbis, Rabbi Hershel Schachter, has since published more on the subject. He has not merely denounced the groups as being against halakhah, but has also cast personal aspersions on the characters of some of the women involved. Various prayer groups have been publicly attacked, from the pulpit, by the rabbis of their communities. In Flatbush, for example, the Flatbush Women's Davening Group was recently attacked from the pulpit of a major synagogue in the area. The conflict has become bitter and often ugly.

The key datum in this account is the presence of apocalyptic tones or attitudes in the writings of representatives of the center of modern Orthodoxy. Our informant suggests great dismay at the character of a responsum from an unlikely source of opposition. The concept of "conflict" stands out in her brief remarks as a term that we generally associate with apocalyptic Orthodoxy.

Schachter's responsum on women's prayer groups does frequently assume the tone of apocalyptic character assassination, rather than the rhetoric of a legal argument. It combines research and polemic, looking for ways to discredit and to disprove the actions of sincere and pious Orthodox women interested in observing and upholding the halakhah. Some ten illustrations from Schachter's

¹²Hershel Schachter, "Go Follow the Tracks of the Sheep," *Beit Yitzchak*, no. 17, New York, 1985, pp. 118-134.

¹³"Women and the Synagogue," *Bat Kol, Hadassah Jewish Education Guide*, Fall, 1987, New York, p. 28.

responsum represent what must be classified as an apocalyptic attitude from a spokesman of modern orthodoxy.

1. Schachter attacks women's prayer groups and women's Torah processions (on the Simhat Torah festival) on the grounds that such actions falsify (or denounce) the Torah. He equates this endeavor with the act of denying the validity of the Torah, "Which may not be permitted even in an instance of danger." There are severe prohibitions against this, he says. [p. 119]
2. He says, "Women want specifically to act as leaders of the prayer, specifically to go up to the Torah, and on account of this they go and make for themselves minyanim (prayer groups). And this is really like the dispute of Korach and his congregation." [120]
3. He cites R. Naftali Zvi Berlin, "One who innovates with respect to the Torah, with regard to this if it is not for the sake [of the Torah]... lo, this is poison, for he perverts the balanced judgement of instruction in accord with his own will... Regarding every new practice that is performed not for the sake [of Torah] we say -- it is better that [a person who performs such an action] should not have been created," Schachter concludes.
4. Furthermore, even, "A good custom, instituted by an evil person" may not be followed. And a custom which has no substantive foundation is called a silly custom about which the authorities say such a minhag (*minhag* = custom) leads to Gehenom (*ghnm* = hell, a play on the Hebrew words). [124]
5. "Those who refuse to accept the sense and feelings (intuitions) ... [of those rabbinic authorities] who know how to conduct new practices, lo this comes under the definition of one who kicks out against his masters, who is singled out in the Talmud for severe punishment." [126]
6. Schachter says it appears to him that the primary motivations for women's prayer groups are the "desires to innovate for the sake of innovation, for the sake of publicity in the newspapers, for the sake of honor -- to be known as leaders... [for some] the main motivation is to `uproot everything.'" [127]

7. Schachter cites Maimonides, “One who deviates from the ways of the community even if she did not commit any transgression, but just separated from the congregation of Israel... has no portion in the world to come.” [129]

8. “It is a known fact that such conduct did not come about in our time out of the thin air, but as a result of the general women's liberation movement, whose substance and purpose in this area is for the sake of licentiousness, to equate women and men in every way possible,” says Schachter. [131]

9. Schachter implies in his most apocalyptic tone that we live in a time of persecution and that accordingly even minor modifications of religious custom must be resisted at all costs. “In several places in our land, this matter [of women's minyanim for prayer and for Torah reading, and women's Torah processions] has become a symbol of rebellion against the traditions of the Torah which is presently in our hands, and accordingly, in those places it will be forbidden to participate in such minyanim and Torah processions, even for those women who have no intention of rebellion or of destroying the religion.” [133]

10. In summarizing he says, “We have already seen... how these minyanim have brought about much corruption (disgrace) and how this movement has brought about many matters of licentiousness...” [134]

This strident decision has been effective in slowing the growth of Orthodox women's prayer groups. Its rhetoric and belligerence, as well as its reactionary substantive content, shows that one of the main rabbinic authorities at that school stands more squarely in the world of apocalyptic Orthodoxy than we might have suspected, thereby rejecting some of the values of modern Orthodoxy, and assaulting its proponents with a primary tool of apocalyptic intellectual belligerence.

In this instance we see some overlap in the social reality of Orthodoxy. Nevertheless it is urgent that we develop more refined categories of analysis for the study of fundamentalism. This attempt at defining an apocalyptic form of Orthodox Judaism represents one step along that path.

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