

Orthodox Jews, the City and the Suburb

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In contrast to the historical experience of Jews in Europe and the Islamic world, where areas of Jewish settlement were often legally restricted, Jews in America—at least according to the letter of the law—were always able to live wherever they chose. Attached to the goal of mobility and the breaching of new frontiers, a “don’t-fence-me-in” America was ambivalent about ordinances that ran counter to these ideals. Accordingly, such barriers as did exist to Jewish residency were rarely if ever explicitly stated in law, but were instead to be found in vaguely worded restrictive covenants attached to deeds that were enforceable in local and state courts or, more commonly, were the products of informal economic or social initiatives. Thus, certain regions or neighborhoods came to be known as too exclusive, too expensive or otherwise inhospitable to Jews. In time, however, Jews in America found ways to move wherever they chose, and the place they chose during most of the twentieth century was the city and its surrounding metropolitan region. This was particularly true of Orthodox Jews, who often lived at first in the least desirable sections of the inner city, which their less observant kin had abandoned in favor of more exclusive and expensive locales elsewhere in the city or on the suburban frontier.

In part, this continuing residence in the city can be summarily explained as the result of at least four factors. First is the fact that the Orthodox were (and remain to this day) the least economically endowed of Jews and as such could not afford to move up and out of the inner city. Second, there is the related fact that, being the most ideologically committed to their traditional religious practices, many Orthodox Jews were reluctant to leave the culturally rich Jewish world of Europe for what they perceived as the Jewish wasteland of America. When at last they did come—often as refugees and Holocaust survivors—they were forced by circumstance to live in places that had been vacated by others higher up the socioeconomic ladder.

Third, even when they entertained possibilities of moving out of the inner city, Orthodox Jews were more likely than others to experience the brunt of existing anti-Jewish restrictions, since their difference from the Christian majority was more obvious and explicit. Thus, the *haredim*, or ultra-Orthodox, whose traditions and appearance put them most at odds with surrounding America, were naturally inclined to remain in those inner-city areas where the resistance to them was least organized. Indeed, among these most visibly distinct Orthodox Jews, the Jewish urban ghetto be-

came in time a preferred location. “I would rather be surrounded by my own,” one resident of an Orthodox Jewish community explained to a *New York Times* reporter, who went on to note that “many in the community say they derive a clear, almost palpable comfort from living in the absence of malice—or stares. One resident spoke of shedding her self-consciousness as if it had been a cloak.”¹

Finally, Orthodox Jewish practices and religious commitments were more easily satisfied in a geographically contained urban environment. Because of their adherence to strict Sabbath observance, for example, Orthodox Jews need to have synagogues within walking distance of their homes. They insist on their own schools. They demand places where kosher food can be obtained, along with holy books and other ritual articles. Neighborhoods that concentrate large numbers of Orthodox Jews in a relatively small territory can more easily sustain such schools and establishments and, in so doing, create a powerful sense of attachment among their residents.² Put differently, Orthodox Jews cannot easily live as isolated individuals scattered throughout a region. To this day, when personal circumstances lead them to move either to the periphery of Jewish districts or out of them altogether, they often bring other Orthodox Jews in their wake, or at the very least promote greater religious and ethnic participation in their new areas of residence.³

The relationship between Orthodox American Jews, the city and the suburbs is a dynamic one, and where Orthodox Jews choose to live continues to be a reflection of who they are and how they express their religious identities. Moreover, Orthodox Jews—unlike other of their co-religionists—have been able to make areas of Jewish scarcity, even in the most unlikely areas, flourish: increasingly, they have changed the communities in which they have settled rather than being themselves changed.

Migration to the City and Suburbs

While Jews who could be characterized as Orthodox came to America during the great waves of immigration of the late nineteenth century and up to the First World War, many if not most of those who today call themselves Orthodox actually trace their American origins to the years immediately preceding and following the Second World War. In part this was because many of those who embraced Orthodoxy in Europe were convinced that America was, as some called it, a *treyfe medine*, a contaminated state, where Jews as individuals might survive but where Judaism as a way of life would not. They therefore preferred, and their religious leaders encouraged them, to stay in what, as already noted, they considered to be the secure heartland of a thousand years’ worth of traditional Judaism—Europe. Only when the ominous shadow of Nazism began to sweep across that continent did many of the Orthodox realize that at last they had to leave.

Treyfe medine or not, America offered a haven (albeit one that was difficult to enter during the interwar years). Especially in New York City, a number of important Orthodox institutions had already been established by those who had come earlier. These institutions were invigorated by the refugees who fled Nazism, and later, by Orthodox survivors of the Holocaust. New institutions were also founded during this time—indeed, most of the major yeshivas and other religious institutions of

Orthodoxy, practically all hasidic courts of any significant size and a plethora of today's active Orthodox synagogues trace their origins to the 1940s and thereafter.

Prior to the Second World War, American Orthodox Jewry had been hobbled by the large-scale abandonment of Jewish tradition that had occurred during the first half of the twentieth century. The enormous destruction of the Holocaust further diminished its ranks. Traumatized by these two blows, Orthodoxy socially reconstructed itself in the process of its survival in America. The Orthodox Jews of the postwar U.S. were animated both by survivor guilt and the consequent determination to deny a posthumous victory to the enemy. As such, they became far more resolutely determined than their predecessors in America to affirm and maintain a traditional Jewish life in the United States that would be loyal to the strictures of Orthodoxy and not eroded by American contemporary culture.

Although some believed that this goal would be best attained by creating isolated Orthodox enclaves far from the city and its profane attractions—such was the strategy of those who in 1943 established the Beth Midrash Govoha Yeshiva in Lakewood, in what was then rural southern New Jersey—most newly arrived Orthodox Jews gravitated to the cities, and most prominently to New York, where the largest number of Jews was already residing. Here, within a multicultural metropolitan region, they would succeed over time in creating an Orthodox Jewish enclave culture that would surround them with a web of invisible but effective boundaries.⁴

Precisely at the moment in history that these Orthodox Jews came to the American cities, American residential patterns were about to change significantly. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States had been transformed from a predominantly rural society to an overwhelmingly urban one by the dual forces of rapid industrialization and migration. Now, by the middle of the twentieth century, it was about to make its dominant residential form a kind of neoruralism that came to be known as suburbanization. As sociologist Morton Keller has argued, "If the Old American culture was rooted in small towns and the countryside, and the New in the cities of the East, the third culture has its prototypical home in the suburbs."⁵ On the periphery of the cities, people were building a new way of living. New roads (including the efficient and high-speed interstate highway system) and affordable automobiles, along with plentiful and still cheap gasoline—no longer subject to wartime rationing—helped make life in these suburban peripheries conceivable. People began to speak of living within a suburban "commuting distance" from the city, and a new style of American life blossomed. In the decade between 1948 and 1958, some twelve million Americans relocated to the suburbs, and between 1950 and 1955, suburbs grew seven times as fast as America's central cities.⁶

Orthodox Jews did not immediately embrace the suburban way of life. For one thing, many of them did not have the financial wherewithal to buy even the relatively inexpensive tract houses that were going up in places such as Levittown, NY. (Levittown's first residents were mostly U.S. Army veterans benefiting from inexpensive mortgages sponsored by the G.I. bill, and not too many of the Orthodox immigrants qualified.) Additionally, there was the problem of how to create the necessary Jewish institutions, primarily synagogues and religious schools, in what was for them a suburban wilderness. At this point, the Orthodox were not yet sufficiently organized as a movement to initiate large-scale projects of this sort, and as individuals,

they did not seek to be pioneers leading the way to the Jewish periphery. Their continued habitation in the city was also influenced by the conviction that like-minded Jews would not be quick to follow them to suburbia. Thus, they continued, at least at first, the pattern begun in Europe of remaining in what was considered to be a more traditional Jewish heartland.

The Orthodox Move to Suburbia

To be sure, Orthodox Jews were not all alike, and neither were their residential choices. In the course of its emergence in America, Orthodoxy evolved into roughly three broad groups. One may be called the “nominally Orthodox”: those who choose to call themselves Orthodox but whose practices bond them in only the most minimal way to Orthodoxy.⁷ In many ways, the nominally Orthodox constituted the majority of those Jews who established the earliest Orthodoxy in America. Fundamentally acculturative in orientation, they remained sentimentally attached to Orthodoxy but sought whenever possible to accommodate themselves to the cultural demands of America and its open—and increasingly appealing—society. In the now classic expression of their Jewish orientation, these Jews maintained membership in an Orthodox synagogue they did *not* regularly attend.

Nominally Orthodox Jews were the first to join their less observant brethren in the suburbs. Some of them chose to touch base from time to time with “the city” and its traditional Orthodox institutions; others joined new suburban Conservative Jewish congregations and gradually made the transition to a more permissive movement that, among other things, tolerated a drive to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Yet there were also those who established Jewish institutions that mirrored their own tenuous Orthodox attachments: primarily synagogues and Hebrew schools that, while nominally Orthodox, were relatively lax in their Jewish demands. A not uncommon situation was that the synagogues would be packed during the High Holidays but would have a meagerly attended Sabbath service and no regular quorum of ten men for weekday prayers, whereas the schools drew their students mainly from non-Orthodox families. In an effort to maintain their religious orientation, some of these first suburban Orthodox establishments formally affiliated themselves with national Orthodox institutions such as the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, which saw in them an important foothold on the emergent suburban frontier. Others, however, broke away from formal Orthodox affiliation once their membership had become increasingly non-Orthodox.

A second group of Orthodox Jews likewise embraced the acculturative ideal while attempting to avoid compromises in Jewish observance. In the words of the preamble to the constitution of the National Council of Young Israel, a synagogue network that came in large measure to represent them, the aim was to “foster and maintain a program of spiritual, cultural, social and communal activity towards the advancement and perpetuation of traditional Torah-true Judaism . . . and demonstrate the compatibility of the ancient faith of Israel with good Americanism.” Calling themselves “modern Orthodox” (and more recently, “centrist”), these Jews, like the less observant Jews who preceded them, were also attracted to the emerging American ideal of

a private house surrounded by a patch of greenery, within commuting distance of the city. Like everyone else in suburbia, they reinvented themselves.

During the late 1960s, about a decade after their less observant predecessors, they too began to move to the suburbs. In a sense the nominally Orthodox had blazed the suburban trail for the “centrists”—yet it was sometimes the case that the nominally Orthodox founders of synagogues and schools were eventually replaced in the very institutions they had established by these newer, more observant members of the community. While the move of centrist Orthodox Jews to suburbia enabled some of the nominally Orthodox to become more committed to Orthodox life patterns, more often than not it led them to a realization that, compared to these suburban newcomers, they could no longer really call themselves Orthodox.⁸

Orthodox Jews who relocated to suburbia had to deal with the fundamental reality of lower housing density and greater geographic dispersion. This meant that in any given suburban neighborhood there were fewer like-minded individuals available to build and support Jewish institutions. Consequently, those few Orthodox institutions that were established rested on a relatively narrow economic base, while the paucity of such institutions led to a weaker sense of local Jewish community. Unlike urban ghettos, moreover, where cultural life spilled out onto the streets, suburbia hid its cultural life within the home and nuclear family. As a result, there were fewer informal or spontaneous occasions during which Jews could experience being part of a Jewish community. Instead, the public schools and their affiliated parent organizations often became the single most important suburban neighborhood institutions—and these, of course, were not at all Jewish in their ambience, even if a majority of the student body was Jewish. This, too, was a factor in diminishing and in some cases undermining the initial centrist Orthodox hopes of controlling the acculturative remaking of Jewish life in suburbia. Thus, at the outset, Orthodox Jewish suburban “pioneers” felt ambivalent at best, and anxious at worst, about their move away from the urban centers of Jewish life.

Not surprisingly, therefore, when the more religiously committed centrist Orthodox did choose to move away from the inner city, they were drawn to those areas, at the city’s borders or just beyond them, that were in the process of becoming heavily Jewish. Such areas often had a relatively dense residential pattern of multi-family or row houses, or contained private houses built on relatively small lots; they were less expensive as a result, and the local population also included working-class whites and members of minority groups. In metropolitan New York (where most of America’s Orthodox still live), the neighborhoods preferred initially were in the “outer boroughs” of Queens, Staten Island and parts of the Bronx and later, just over the border in neighboring Nassau County, northern Bronx (including, ultimately, Riverdale), neighboring towns in southern Westchester County, and nearby New Jersey communities along the west bank of the Hudson. In Philadelphia, neighborhoods along the city line such as Overbrook Park and Wynnefield were first selected, followed by Bala Cynwyd and Lower Merion just over the border. In Boston, similar patterns led to Orthodox communities being founded in Brookline and Newton.

The second, centrist wave of Orthodox Jews to suburbia embraced the goal of building and sending their children to Jewish day schools and yeshivas, even when the local public schools were of a high educational caliber. Suburban living, as noted,

provided little in the way of a Jewish “street” where traditional Jewish life could be acquired by osmosis and mimesis. Thus, the Jewish day school, where children were immersed in a totally Orthodox environment for most of their waking hours, became a vitally important component of modern Orthodox life. There was a pragmatic advantage as well to the long school day, given the fact that the second generation of modern Orthodox mothers and fathers began, like their non-Orthodox peers, to pursue dual professional careers (many of the new schools developed thriving preschool programs). The very act of organizing and founding schools and synagogues—also an essential element of the centrist Orthodox suburban agenda—helped foster a sense of community among the new arrivals, and as the community grew, the financial base of Orthodox institutions became more solid.⁹

By the 1990s, both the nominally and centrist modern Orthodox had made suburban America their residence of choice, concentrating themselves in a number of suburbs that became magnet communities. Their move from the city to the suburbs, albeit occurring later than the suburban migration of the non-Orthodox, had taken barely a generation.

Haredim and the City

Suburbanization has largely bypassed American haredim, those most traditionalist of Orthodox Jews who considered the American culture they were *in* but not *of* as a contaminating civilization. Numbering some two hundred thousand people in 1990—about 42 percent of the total American Jewish Orthodox population¹⁰—the haredim have resolutely maintained their presence in the city. In part, their reason for avoiding the suburbs is ideological. Although living within American society, the haredim reject most values of American culture. Priding themselves on living a life apart, they disparage those aspects of the acculturating “American dream” that have motivated many of their nominal and centrist Orthodox counterparts to seek a life in suburbia.¹¹

Over the course of the last fifty years, American haredim have predominantly concentrated themselves in several neighborhoods in Brooklyn—notably Borough Park, Williamsburg, Crown Heights and parts of Flatbush.¹² Even before the Second World War, Brooklyn had begun to replace Manhattan as the stronghold of haredi Jewry. Thus, it was natural that a number of hasidic rebbes who had survived the Holocaust chose to settle in these neighborhoods, thereby establishing a cultural enclave in which traditional East European Jewish life could be socially reconstructed and where a culture and recipe for negotiating the realities of American life could be articulated by the entire group.

Economics as well as ideology keeps the haredim within the city. By and large, the ultra-Orthodox constitute the poorest segment of American Jewry. The reasons for this are multifold. Haredim tend to have larger families than most other Jews, with all the attendant expenses. They are unlikely to make use of free public schools for their numerous children and are therefore forced to pay significant tuition for their private education. Furthermore, they increasingly cling to an ethic that encourages long years of Torah study for males and discourages their pursuit of higher education in the university (and the improved earning power that comes with it).¹³ While women are not

expected to spend long years in a yeshiva, the early onset of their marriage and child-bearing, as mandated by haredi norms, effectively makes it difficult if not impossible for them to engage in paid labor outside the home—to say nothing of their staying in school long enough to acquire marketable skills. Additionally, while they live in those parts of cities where many of the housing costs are relatively lower, the geographic regions in which haredim reside tend to be those where the cost of living is among the highest in the United States. Their scrupulous attachment to restrictive standards of *kashruth* often leads to their paying more for their food than most others pay. All of these factors combine to create a situation in which haredi families often find themselves driven to subsist on external aid and subsidies, sometimes from the community and even more often from a variety of government programs, including welfare, food stamps and an assortment of other kinds of aid to families with dependent children.

According to figures based on the 1990 census, the annual household income of 27 percent of the residents of the predominantly haredi precincts of Borough Park falls below the poverty level. Comparable figures for haredi precincts in Crown Heights and in Williamsburg are 25 and 56 percent, respectively.¹⁴ By way of comparison, the figures for selected centrist Orthodox strongholds in Nassau County (Long Island), Bergen County (New Jersey) or the neighborhood of Kew Gardens Hills (Queens) range between three and six percent.¹⁵ At the same time, the costs of living in haredi areas of the city are lower than the median, making them more attractive and reducing the incentive to move away.

According to the 1990 U.S. census, the median value of owner-occupied housing in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where Satmar hasidim concentrate, is \$161,730. In Crown Heights, where Lubavitcher hasidim live, it rises to \$195,700, while in Borough Park, the Brooklyn neighborhood with the largest number of haredi residents, the median value rises to \$234,000. These numbers, moreover, reflect a large number of multifamily units in these city neighborhoods. In contrast, the median value in West Hempstead, Long Island—containing a large centrist Orthodox community with mostly single-family homes—is \$197,100; while in New Rochelle, in northern Westchester county, where modern Orthodox Jews are part of a new and growing community, the figure rises to \$377,000. And in Lawrence, Long Island, an even more upscale and heavily populated modern Orthodox suburb of single-family houses, it is a whopping \$419,800. Even in Kew Gardens, a modern Orthodox enclave in the city, where the property plots are relatively small, the median owner-occupied house is valued at \$217,000.

There are also cultural reasons for staying in the urban milieu. Because haredim, even more than other Orthodox Jews, are part of tightly knit communities of like-minded people and a network of extended families, even those economically able to leave the city are reluctant to detach themselves from the community to which they are culturally, religiously and socially bound. The appeal of living in a suburb, where the living arrangement emphasizes individuals in nuclear families rather than community attachments, is lost upon them. Haredim continue to prefer living within easy walking distance of a yeshiva or a variety of synagogues to looking out from their windows on a bucolic suburban vista of lush lawns (in fact, when they do live in suburbia, their lawns are often quite neglected). This is true for those connected to yeshiva commu-

nities. And it is also the case with hasidim, who in America make up the large majority of haredim. The latter are not only bonded to other hasidim but also to the charismatic rebbe who leads them. Since few rebbes have so far chosen to make the move to suburbia, their hasidic followers have been reluctant to do so on their own, realizing that such a move would be taken as a symbolic indication of their choosing to distance themselves not only from the rebbe but from the hasidic way of life. The idea of a hasid and his family making such a move for personal reasons is unthinkable, except in those cases in which the rebbe has sent followers out as emissaries—as with Lubavitcher hasidim, who are often found engaging in Jewish outreach efforts in far-flung suburban locales—or else where the rebbe has established a branch of his court elsewhere, the notable examples being Kiryas Joel, the Satmar enclave in suburban Orange County, and the Wizniz (Vizhnitz) outpost in nearby Monsey, north of New York City.¹⁶ As for the famous Beth Midrash Govoha, when this premier Lithuanian-style yeshiva in America did establish itself in rural southern New Jersey in the city of Lakewood, it did so in part to insure that its students would be insulated from the contaminating effects of American cultural life, which at the time were most prominent in the city. Most other haredi yeshivas, however, eschewed this sort of location and established themselves in urban haredi districts.

In some neighborhoods, most prominently the Brownsville, Williamsburg and Crown Heights sections of Brooklyn, the local population, while heavily Jewish, began to change its composition during the 1960s. During that period, many Jews from these neighborhoods moved elsewhere while other ethnic minorities—blacks, Hispanics and Caribbean immigrants—moved in. Many of the Jews took the suburban route, while others relocated in other parts of the borough, primarily Flatbush and Borough Park, or else settled in neighboring Queens. It was at this point that two haredi groups—mostly Satmar hasidim in Williamsburg and Lubavitchers in Crown Heights—actively resisted the migration and stayed where they were. The Satmars stayed primarily for social and economic reasons, although they would ultimately relocate a significant number of their community (by 1990, about 30 percent) to Kiryas Joel, where housing was cheaper. The approximately 8,800 Lubavitchers who stayed in Crown Heights articulated their decision to remain in ideological terms. Their leader, Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson, saw his refusal to “flee” Crown Heights as a symbolic expression of an unwillingness to repeat the historical pattern of a “hasidism on the run”—a pattern established in his group’s European experience. Moreover, the refusal to move was a symbolic demonstration of an ideological unwillingness either to make changes or to embrace the cultural mode of what constituted the American dream. Surviving in Crown Heights “against all odds” would bespeak the renewed vigor of a transplanted hasidism.¹⁷ (In time, however, they too would shift the focus of their concern to the emissaries they sent out to spread the word of Chabad throughout the world.)

Schneerson and his supporters also reasoned that the integrity of their haredi enclave culture would be enhanced by its being surrounded by a non-Jewish population that had little or nothing about it that would be attractive to young hasidim. Precisely because the surrounding neighborhood was perceived as hostile and dangerous, the Lubavitchers (and the Satmars no less), like other haredim who remained in the inner city, could feel confident that there would be few cultural and social forces to pull

their followers away. The dangers of their neighborhoods might be physical, but as they saw it, the assimilative dangers of the suburban milieu were religious and cultural. The former risks seemed to them small in comparison with the latter. Those inside the haredi enclave in largely African American and Hispanic areas could often feel as if they were protected by a wall of Jewish virtues, as if they were clearly a people set apart and chosen for higher moral rewards. More and more, therefore, the city neighborhoods where the surrounding population was most unwelcoming seemed the preferred locale for haredi life.

In contrast, for those who lived in a more pluralistic neighborhood in suburbia, with many options regarding how to behave as a Jew, who felt increasingly at home and hard-pressed to remember they were in a Jewish exile, such barriers to change and assimilation were not as powerful. With its leveling of all differences and its fresh start mentality, where assimilation and cultural contamination would be far more likely even for those who tried to remain modern Orthodox, suburbia was not a place haredim saw as an acceptable residential option.

The aversion to suburban living was particularly strong in the case of haredi women, for whom the family, home and community was the dominant arena of existence and personal expression. Unlike adult men and children, who were “protected” inside schools and yeshivas or in a job that often connected them to a Jewish domain beyond the home, haredi women, in a traditional division of labor, were expected to build their lives around home and shopping. The suburban milieu was far from ideal for women who were saddled with babies and toddlers, and with husbands otherwise engaged. They needed a large support system and peers they could meet on the street while pushing their strollers about: this was *their* protective environment. The station wagon (and later the van), which became the tool of suburban women—including the non-haredi Orthodox—represented an independence and mobility that haredi women were not expected to embrace. To this day, relatively few haredi women are drivers. The city, therefore, was both practically and ideologically a more appropriate place for haredi women. Accordingly, as was not the case with many of their non-haredi peers, these women did not encourage a move to suburbia. Instead, they cultivated an ideal of providing their inner-city homes with all the luxuries their suburban counterparts might have, within a similarly spacious area. For those who could afford it, this led to huge houses in Borough Park or Williamsburg—homes whose size, to be sure, was determined to a great extent by the large size of haredi families and the emphasis on intracommunal sociability.

In haredi neighborhoods, households of seven or more persons are far more common than elsewhere. The proportion in Borough Park, for example, is almost four times greater than in New York City or Nassau County, while in Williamsburg it is almost eight times greater. According to the *New York Times*, since 1990, the New York City Building Department has issued more than eight hundred permits for private construction projects (both new homes and additions to existing homes) in Borough Park—more than in any other residential neighborhood in Brooklyn. The area’s birthrate in 1990 was slightly more than twice that of New York City as a whole.¹⁸

By the late 1990s, as haredi Orthodoxy managed to establish secure roots in America and acquire more self-assurance, the efforts to stake out an increasingly autonomous urban enclave became ever more pronounced. Haredim became adept at

local politics, both at the city and state level. Since they invariably voted as a bloc, their political clout was considerable. They also became literally more visible, as politicians increasingly sought photo opportunities with these symbolic icons of Jewry. Gradually, haredim—and other Orthodox Jews—also actively sought office. In New York, a number of Orthodox Jews were elected to the state senate and assembly; others became political appointees in the mayor and governor's offices. In 1994, Sheldon Silver, an Orthodox Jew, became speaker of the New York Assembly and arguably the most powerful Democrat in the state. Such enhanced political power aided the haredim and other Orthodox in maintaining the cultural integrity of their neighborhoods. This, in turn, made it easier for them to resist leaving the city.

Among the particular accomplishments of the haredim was their attaining separate ethnic minority status for hasidim, which enabled them to qualify for a variety of government programs on both the individual and community level. No less important, the demands and expectations of Orthodoxy became a dominant social and economic reality within the haredi enclaves. A wave of Sabbath store closings swept the commercial district. Small synagogues, yeshivas and Jewish study halls became ubiquitous, whereas public schools closed their doors for lack of students. When a branch of the Jewish-sponsored Touro College opened in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Midwood, it followed, in the words of its dean, “an undergraduate model of separating into a women's and men's college to accommodate religious sensibilities.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, saloons, video stores and non-kosher eating facilities disappeared. Indeed, one observer described “a commercial area that has become like a giant kosher superstore (complete with fancy wig salons, black hat shops and twenty-four-hour nosherias).”²⁰

Simultaneously, efforts were made to keep any “invasion” of the outside world to a minimum. A striking example of such efforts occurred in 1997, when the city made plans to route a citywide bicycle path through the haredi neighborhoods of Brooklyn. Local Orthodox leaders argued that such a path would bring scantily clad cyclists into their enclave, thus threatening community standards of modesty. The path was rerouted. It is hard to conceive of modern Orthodox Jews voicing such complaints; in their neighborhoods, integration is far more normative, and bikers, runners and all manner of people are constantly making their way across the invisible boundaries behind which the modern Orthodox live.

Shifting Realities: Haredi Suburban Communities

Whereas the discussion so far has centered on the reasons underlying the continued—even growing—haredi presence in inner-city neighborhoods, that very growth has led to severe demographic and accompanying economic pressures. According to the 1990 census, for instance, there were approximately twenty-five thousand haredim, mostly Satmar hasidim, living in Williamsburg. Census projections raise this figure to about thirty thousand by 1997,²¹ of whom a towering 42 percent are under the age of thirteen (the comparable figure for the Borough Park haredi population is 28 percent under the age of thirteen—itsself more than twice the proportion among whites in New York City). As a consequence, the overall standard of living among haredi families is lower than average. In the haredi precincts of Borough Park, the median family in-

come in 1989 was \$26,422; in comparable areas in Williamsburg, it was \$20,401—as noted, 25 and 56 percent of the haredi population in these two neighborhoods were living below the poverty line as of 1990.²²

Economic pressures cause many haredi families to seek external aid and subsidies, sometimes provided from within the community but more often from a variety of government programs, including welfare and food stamps. Others, however, have chosen to move out of the city to one of several haredi enclaves in suburbia. A closer look at two of these enclaves, Kiryas Joel and New Square, shows that the move has not led to a significant easing of economic hardship.

As of 1990, there were approximately 7,100 people (almost entirely Satmar hasidim) residing in Kiryas Joel. The parents among them have indeed been fruitful and have multiplied: approximately 50 percent of the population is aged thirteen or under, and the projected population for 1997 was 10,000—a growth rate of 40 percent. Forty-seven percent of Kiryas Joel's residents live in households numbering seven or more individuals, and 95 percent of the school-age population attend private schools. Although the median house value in Kiryas Joel in 1990 was approximately the same as in Williamsburg (\$165,400, compared with \$161,730), the average household income in Kiryas Joel was lower (\$14,702, compared with \$20,401 in Williamsburg or \$39,198 for all of Orange County, where Kiryas Joel is located). In 1990, fully 63 percent of the population was living below the poverty line.

The story in New Square is much the same. This suburban haredi village numbers approximately 2,700, about 49 percent of whom are aged thirteen or younger. Some 41 percent live in households numbering seven or more individuals. With a median income of \$13,488 (even lower than that of Kiryas Joel, though the median house value is somewhat higher), about 56 percent of the population is living below the poverty level. In nearby Monsey, which has a large Orthodox population, the median house value is about 30 percent higher, and the median household income is \$49,833—just a bit lower than the countywide median household income of \$52,731.

In short, as this look at Kiryas Joel and New Square demonstrates, those haredim who have tried to reconstitute their lives in suburbia—even a suburbia that is a shtetl-like Jewish village—are finding it to be no solution to economic pressures. Thus, when urban haredim look at their suburban haredi cousins, they may well wonder whether such a move is feasible. It therefore appears that the harsh economic realities of haredi life do not evaporate with a change in location.

Developments Among the Centrist Orthodox

While the ideological differences that accounted for the divisions between those Orthodox Jews who chose the city and those who went to the suburbs were real, a blurring that began to occur displayed itself in the ways these areas developed by century's end. Not only were places like Kiryas Joel and New Square, located in the suburban periphery of New York, becoming more like their Orthodox urban enclaves and less like the rest of suburbia. Much the same thing was happening in those localities in which the centrist Orthodox had concentrated themselves. They too were becoming Orthodox Jewish cultural enclaves.

Many have argued that this transformation is a reflection of a move to the religious right by centrist Orthodoxy. As more Orthodox young were educated in schools whose religious teaching staff came from among those who embraced *haredi* norms, or at least respected them, they too absorbed many of these norms and ideals. Sent to *yeshivas* from their preprimary years until well after high school, they often articulated their adolescent separation from their parents and expressed their emergent personal Jewish identities in terms that were closer to their teachers' world. Indeed, in a study of Orthodox Jewry conducted by Steven M. Cohen and me in the late 1980s, we discovered that those aged thirty-four or younger were about 34 percent more ritually observant than those between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-four, and about 69 percent more so than those aged fifty-five and older. Religious beliefs showed a similar intensification as one moved downwards from the older to the younger people.²³

For the young who grew up in suburbia, religious change often expressed itself in a rejection of the acculturative norms of suburban Jewish life. For some, this meant choosing to live in the *haredi* urban enclaves rather than in the Jewish suburbs of their childhood. For others who did make their way back to suburbia (or to quasi-suburban neighborhoods such as Kew Gardens Hills in Queens), an effort was expended to make these places more like the existing Orthodox (*haredi*) enclaves. This meant creating a variety of institutions that to some extent transformed the suburb into a modern-day *shtetl*.

Critical to these developments was the emphasis on building an *'eruv*, a Jewish legal device that allows for carrying various objects within the public domain on the Sabbath. Beginning in the 1970s, Orthodox suburban communities began to construct these symbolic fences around their neighborhoods—a procedure that required the symbolic purchase and “fencing in” (commonly, by means of a combination of wires and poles) of the entire neighborhood and all the private properties within it. Suburban neighborhoods with an *'eruv* became magnet communities for a growing number of young Orthodox.

This tendency was threatening to many of the non-Orthodox. They saw the *'eruv* not as a ritual device meant to make it possible for the Orthodox to carry or to wheel baby carriages to the synagogue or to each other's homes on the Sabbath—which is what the Orthodox claimed it was. Rather, they saw the *'eruv* as a symbolic expression of an Orthodox desire to create a separatist enclave that would attract yet more Orthodox and would relentlessly exclude all those who did not share their way of life. For many of those who opposed the *'eruv*, the political activity that was necessary for convincing the local authorities to permit it was perceived as a stalking horse for the Orthodox acquisition of even greater political power.

To some extent, these anxieties had a basis in fact. The construction of an *'eruv* often did presage the more rapid growth of local Orthodox suburban communities, and also reflected enhanced political power and confidence. Local politicians increasingly recognized the fact that, in suburbia, the Orthodox—as was true of the city neighborhoods in which they were dominant—had all the characteristics of a political bloc that voted (as indeed all Jews did) in large proportions. Any candidate who ignored their interests did so at great political peril.

As Orthodox Jewish residence concentrated itself increasingly in a limited number of suburban magnet communities, these indeed took on many of the characteristics

of an enclave culture. Most prominent was the impressive growth of formal and informal Orthodox institutions. Communities that might once have had only one Orthodox synagogue to serve as the locus of most—even all—religious, social and educational activity now established a variety of synagogues, day schools and other religious institutions (most prominently mikvehs, or ritual baths), alongside various centers of communal or social activity. Similarly, where a suburban community initially may not have had many businesses dependent upon the Orthodox economy, it now catered to a wide variety of Orthodox needs, especially those that were food-related. One could now find everything from kosher butchers, supermarkets and restaurants (particularly of the fast-food variety), to bakeries and kosher caterers. Along the suburban commercial strips, kosher pizza, Chinese and even sushi outlets might coexist with Dunkin' Donuts, Domino's Pizza and Carvel ice cream. Increasingly, these suburbs also supported Jewish bookstores (where ritual items as well as religious books could be acquired) and women's clothing shops that carried garments conforming to the dress code of Jewish law. Even some non-Jewish businesses became transformed. Local franchises such as the above-mentioned Carvel and Dunkin' Donuts acquired kosher certification—sometimes a matter, when the ingredients were essentially kosher to begin with, of closing their doors on the Sabbath. Other businesses sometimes followed suit. Thus, for example, a taxi company or a gas station might advertise the fact that it was closed for business on the Sabbath. Normally, such a claim would be fatal for business, but in an Orthodox enclave, it signaled a special relationship with the local population.

Perhaps the most striking example of a transformed suburban Orthodox community is Monsey (in Rockland County, New York), whose population of 52,300 is virtually all Orthodox. Monsey is so Jewishly developed that it has become a desirable community for haredim as well.

But Monsey was not alone. Even in the Long Island suburb of Woodmere, one of a collection of adjacent hamlets known collectively as the "Five Towns," a high-status suburban area that some have called "the fastest growing Orthodox community in the metropolitan area," this kind of shtetlization was happening. With a bit more than fifteen thousand residents, Woodmere (the most populous of the five), where the median home value is \$325,700 and median annual income is more than \$85,000, and where Orthodox Jews have been moving in for more than a decade, has, as a reporter for the *New York Times* put it in her community profile, "the feel of a small country town, with its four-block shopping area and its neighborhoods of winding lanes, some without sidewalks."²⁴ With an 'eruv and three synagogues serving more than eight hundred families, Woodmere and other places like it have become upscale Orthodox shtetls.

At present, though the differences between haredi urban enclaves and Orthodox suburban neighborhoods continue to be real, these distinctions are becoming a matter less of character than of scale. Centrist Orthodox suburban communities are becoming more like haredi enclaves, in part because their residents are themselves becoming more like their haredi counterparts. Unlike their parents and predecessors who fled the city for the "better" life of the suburbs, many young Orthodox look back at the urban haredi enclaves with a kind of longing, seeing in them a Jewish vitality and institutional richness lacking in the suburbs of their youth. Accordingly, in many

ways they are transforming the suburban Orthodox communities into something more and more like these enclaves.

Like those in the haredi enclaves, the centrists in the suburban Orthodox communities increasingly try to provide for as many of their residents' daily needs as possible, in part by cultivating political power. Unlike political efforts in the haredi sector, there is no attempt to prevent "contamination" from the outside world. Rather, the focus is on measures that will ensure the community's continued growth, such as zoning abatements to allow for an *'eruv*, or for synagogues to be built or expanded in predominantly residential areas; or the right to open private religious schools, which will in some measure compete with the local public schools. The "thickening" of Orthodox Jewish communities in suburbia, with all the concomitant changes, has naturally encountered resistance on the part of both non-Jews and non-Orthodox Jews. To some extent, such resistance can be attributed to anti-Orthodox prejudice. Beyond this, however, there are real concerns, ranging from the fear of a decline in public school standards (since, with lowered local enrollment, the schools must draw proportionately larger numbers of students from among disadvantaged minority groups living in nearby communities) to the more general fear that a given community will gradually be transformed into an exclusivist zone or ghetto.

Ultimately, what probably distinguishes centrist Orthodox suburban communities from haredi enclaves is their higher socioeconomic profile and smaller family size. Woodmere, as noted, has an annual median income exceeding \$85,000, while in the less affluent Kew Gardens Hills, the Orthodox population of some twenty thousand has a median annual income of \$40,000—twice as high as the figure for the haredi sections of Williamsburg and significantly above the figures of \$14,702 for Kiryas Joel and \$13,488 for New Square. Whether these economic differences will remain constant as the entire Orthodox population moves closer in orientation to the haredim—by having more children; by having males spend more time in the yeshiva world, eschewing a college education; by embracing cultural separatism as an ideal—remains to be seen. An equally open question is whether the haredi way of life can be sustained, given the serious economic pressures borne by its population.

In any event, there is increasing interaction between these two major modes of Orthodox American Jewry. While it is unlikely that centrist Orthodox suburbia will become quite the same sort of residential milieu as is found in the urban haredi enclaves, more and more haredim are finding ways into the suburban landscape—whether as providers of various religious stores and services, emissaries seeking financial contributions (Orthodox congregations in suburbia are visited continually by such emissaries) or even, on occasion, as the founders of religiocultural haredi outposts in the form of a yeshiva or other institutional offshoots. Centrist Orthodox Jews, for their part, have growing links to the haredim, whether through family ties, connections to a haredi educational institution—or even electronic interaction, via the internet, or through special telephone services featuring such items as daily Talmud classes. Haredi neighborhoods, moreover, remain the cultural and consumer heartland for traditional Jews seeking everything from a Torah scroll to a new black fedora. Yet more and more, Orthodox Jews in suburbia seek the convenience of having their needs satisfied locally. Hence, they are testing the limits of what the suburb can provide for those still wedded to traditional Judaism.

Conclusion

As one contemplates the situation of contemporary urban and suburban American Orthodox Jews, one must conclude that they have demonstrated a capacity to do something that few of their co-religionists have been able to do in an open and culturally beckoning America. Rather than being completely assimilated into the urban and suburban cultural milieus in which they find themselves (as so many of their non-Orthodox predecessors were), they have instead gradually and single-mindedly transformed these environments so that they are in tune with their own cultural needs. As such, they have refashioned their city neighborhoods and increasingly even their suburban communities into recognizably Orthodox Jewish enclaves. While this ghettoization of metropolitan neighborhoods was part of general patterns of American urban ethnic adaptation, the success that the Orthodox have had more recently in remaking suburbia in their own image is particularly striking. Their success in creating Orthodox enclaves in suburbia, where the dominant design is the creation of a bland sameness, where even formerly unmeltable ethnics have culturally melted and pasteurized, reflects a growing Orthodox self-assurance in America and a willful—some would argue, stubborn—refusal to disappear. Moreover, it also displays the staying power of what was once considered a form of Judaism most culturally endangered and dissonant with American culture: traditionalist, insular Orthodoxy.

At the beginning of this century, when most of them were living far from America's shores, traditionally Orthodox Jews were warned by their religious leaders not to come to an unholy America, the *treyfe medine*, where they were advised that Jews might survive but Judaism would not. Most accepted that advice until it was too late to leave. But those who survived the firestorm of antisemitism in Europe, and later the expulsions from the Muslim world, and by century's end have settled in America, discovered that those religious leaders were wrong. At least within the urban and suburban precincts of Orthodoxy, Jews, Judaism and Jewish life—even in its most traditional forms—thrives.

Notes

1. Deborah Sontag, "Orthodox Neighborhood Reshapes Itself," *New York Times*, 7 Jan. 1998.

2. Cf. Leanne G. Rivlin, "Group Membership and Place Meanings in an Urban Neighborhood," *Journal of Social Issues* 38, no. 3 (1982), 75–93, esp. 89.

3. See C. Jaret, "The Impact of Geographical Mobility on Jewish Community Participation: Disruptive or Supportive," *Contemporary Jewry* 4 (Spring/Summer 1978), 9–20.

4. Cf. Emmanuel Sivan, "The Enclave Culture," in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, ed. Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: 1995), 11–68.

5. See Morton Keller, "Jews and the Character of American Life Since 1930," in *Jews in the Mind of America*, ed. Charles Stember, et al (New York: 1966), 270.

6. See Albert I. Gordon, *Jews in Suburbia* (Boston: 1959), 1; *U.S. News and World Report*, 10 Aug. 1956.

7. See Samuel C. Heilman and Steven M. Cohen, *Cosmopolitans and Parochials: Modern Orthodox Jews in America* (Chicago: 1989).

8. This phenomenon may partially account for the drop in the Orthodox population in the

1990 National Jewish Population Survey, as compared with figures from the previous survey of 1970.

9. *New York Times*, 19 and 20 Jan. 1950; see also Egon Mayer, *From Suburb to Shtetl* (Philadelphia: 1979), 3–19.

10. The source for this number is an estimate based on the 1990 U.S. Census—which lists 213,064 speakers of Yiddish at home—combined with other data that will be more fully discussed later. A majority of these Yiddish-speakers live in New York; it is likely that almost all of them are haredim, for whom Yiddish is the common language. This would make them about 43 percent of all American Orthodox Jewry in 1997. I would like to thank my research assistant, Susan G. Weber, for help in assembling this data.

11. For an interesting exposition of this theme, see the recent film documentary, *A Life Apart* (1997), produced and directed by Menachem Daum and Oren Rudavsky.

12. See, for example, Mayer, *From Suburb to Shtetl*.

13. For a discussion of this ideal and the implications arising from it, see Hayim Soloveitchik, “The Migration of Texts,” in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, ed. Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: 1994).

14. The U.S. Census classifies people by race but not by religion—and certainly does not identify them by their levels of orthodoxy. Nonetheless, it is possible to analyze the figures for certain neighborhood blocks in order to make some informed guesses about the Jewish population. Since in many cases (for example, Williamsburg and Crown Heights), haredim live in neighborhoods where their non-haredi neighbors are almost exclusively black or Hispanic, the census figures for the “white, non-Hispanic” population provide a fairly good estimate of the number of haredim. In areas such as Borough Park, various blocks are inhabited virtually exclusively by haredim; hence the figures for that neighborhood are drawn from data pertaining to those blocks.

15. The poverty rate for whites in Monsey is a bit higher—9.5 percent. What probably accounts for this higher rate is the presence of a poorer haredi population in some of the districts alongside the centrist Orthodox areas.

16. There are those as well who go to Israel, mostly to Jerusalem and Bnei Brak.

17. See Menachem Friedman, “Habad as Messianic Fundamentalism,” in Marty and Appleby (eds.), *Accounting for Fundamentalisms*, esp. 341–345.

18. *New York Times*, 7 Jan. 1998.

19. Janice Fioravante, “Midwood: A Rich Ethnic Mix in Mid-Brooklyn,” *New York Times*, 21 July 1996.

20. *Ibid.*, 7 Jan. 1998.

21. Based on 1997 Wessix, Inc. and U.S. census data and estimates.

22. U.S. Census figures for zip code 11219 (Borough Park).

23. See Heilman and Cohen, *Cosmopolitans and Parochials*, 198.

24. Vivien Kellerman, “A Rural Ambiance Close to Queens,” *New York Times*, 11 Aug. 1996; for a profile of a similar kind of community, see Jerry Cheslow, “Fair Lawn: A Jersey Suburb with Some Surprises,” *ibid.*, 8 Jan. 1995.