

THE AMERICAN ORTHODOX JEWISH HOUSEWIFE: A GENERATIONAL STUDY IN ETHNIC SURVIVAL

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One American Jewish population subgroup has received relatively little sociological attention: American Orthodox Jews, particularly the "observant" among them. From personal observation, indicators of the American scene, and a pilot research project, it appears that several generations of observant American Orthodox have managed to sustain a traditional religious commitment without turning away from the cultural patterns of the larger American community.¹

This cultural resolution attracts sociological interest for several reasons. First, sociological theory has not foreseen ethnic cultural survival in the lives of immigrant group descendants, certainly not in conjunction with American cultural ways (Gordon, 1964: 71). Second, sociology has identified an acculturated pattern of living for most American Jews (Gordon, 1949; Sklare and Vosk, 1957; Kramer and Leventman, 1961; Goldstein and Goldscheider, 1968; Sklare and Greeblum, 1967). Finally, sociologists have predicted the eventual demise of Orthodox Judaism in America (Sklare, 1955; Polsky, 1958). What, then, has occurred among the observant American Orthodox?

HYPOTHESES

From a pilot research project inquiring into life histories of American Orthodox Jews across several generations, it appeared that the second generation—usually the offspring of East European Jewish immigrant parents—played a pivotal role in bringing about cultural resolution. Although this generation did acculturate and, in fact, discarded much of the ethnic cultural heritage of its parents, it made a concerted effort to instill traditional religiosity in its children while adhering to American cultural ways. This second-generation Jewish American had been parentally socialized into one culture and acculturated into another. Although these were the basic ingredients for *marginality*, in the case of second-generation American Orthodox

Jews it was theorized that these were also ingredients for creative cultural resolution. That point in the acculturative process facilitated a period of conscious or unconscious cultural shorting-out, a period during which a base for ethnic revitalization was established.

The ethnic culture of first-generation American Orthodox parents was a *religio-cultural* system—a traditional Judaic religious culture set mainly into the East European life of the small town, the *shtetl*. In this insular community, religious and secular cultures were inextricably combined. When East European Jews arrived in America, they suffered much confusion as to what cultural baggage to retain and what to discard (Liebman, 1967). First-generation American Orthodox Jews, unable to disengage from traditional Judaic East European culture, accepted it relatively intact. Second-generation American Orthodox Jews, experiencing the thrust of Americanization, and unable to disengage from the religio-cultural system, separated from both traditional religion and the East European culture. However, being in a pivotal position, and intent on instilling the ethnic culture in the third-generation, the second generation tended to emphasize traditional religiosity. This emphasis probably stems from the fact that traditional religion has moretic and universalistic characteristics enabling it to transcend physical and geographic situations more easily than nonreligious cultural patterns. Also, the American way of life, while not facilitating retention of much old world culture, maintained a secure place for religion (Halpern, 1956), defining it as a privileged realm of privacy, which did not require submission to the canons of majority tastes.

In view of these considerations, the research hypotheses became:

1. Cultural resolution of Eastern European first-generation American Orthodox Jews consisted of preserving traditional religiosity and East European cultural ways, with minimal adjustment to American culture.
2. Cultural resolution of second-generation American Orthodox Jews consisted of increased adaptation to American cultural ways, and a resultant decline in both traditional religiosity and adherence to East European culture.
3. Cultural resolution of third-generation American Orthodox Jews was marked by further acceptance of American cultural ways, a return to traditional religiosity, and further diminished adherence to East European cultural ways.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Respondents

The research model described by the hypotheses is a generational model; thus generation was explored through family lineage. It was felt that comparisons among the first three generations in American Jewish Orthodoxy

would profile the content and direction of cultural change. Although cultural resolutions within the generations have not remained constant, the relative differences among the generations still persist.

Respondents were drawn from families with three generations of maternally-related housewives: families with a first-generation, American Jewish Orthodox housewife born in Eastern Europe, a married, second-generation, American Orthodox daughter, and her married, third-generation, American Orthodox daughter. By holding role socialization and family lineage constant, observable differences possibly arising from role and family idiosyncracies would be obviated.

The sensitive and focal *housewife* role was selected for study because it occupies a significant religious position in the home, and religious practices in the home are sensitive indicators of religiosity. Also, the housewife is vitally concerned with the socialization of children. Finally, the current American Orthodox Jewish housewife role is being subjected to increased stress. Traditional Judaism protects and emphasizes the woman's place as being in the home. Yet American culture is experiencing a redefinition of female roles, advancing unique goals for women, and viewing aspirations outside the home with favor. How do American Jewish Orthodox housewives reconcile these seemingly mutually exclusive elements?

The National Council of Young Israel helped locate three-generation families. Committed to *Torah-true* Judaism, with a broad, geographically dispersed membership base, it served as a valuable resource for suitable sample families. With the help of 33 rabbis of Young Israel synagogues, contact was made with 63 families who were living in the New York City metropolitan area, the site of the study. Since interviews with each of the three-generations of housewives within a family were necessary, the unavailability of any one member excluded the entire family from the study. As a result of illness, out-of-town residence, and misinformation, 27 families were eventually selected.

The Interview Schedule

A focused interview was administered to each of 81 respondents in 27 families. Although many questions probed life history data, most questions were related to two comprehensive scales: one measuring traditional religiosity and one measuring East European and American influences.

The religiosity scale conceived of religious behavior in multiple components: ritual, knowledge, doctrine, emotion, and community involvement (Verbit, 1970: 24-39). The items tapped by each component were: *ritual*, including Kashrut, Sabbath observances, mikveh observance, religious

TABLE 3
Number of Respondents on Selected Items of East European-American Orientation Scale, by Generation

<u>Selected Items</u>	<u>First Generation</u>	<u>Second Generation</u>	<u>Third Generation</u>
Mostly East European Dishes in Friday night meal	27	23	18
Reading a Yiddish Newspaper	26	2	0
Agrees that "family" is more important than "friends"	27	18	13
Disapproves of single women living away from parents	27	21	7
Disapproves of men performing domestic tasks	25	14	0
Agrees that "family" is more important than "romantic love" in choosing a mate	12	4	0

portant differences among generations. With regard to ritual observance, the first-generation woman was the most ritually observant. But the second-generation respondent became more ritually observant over the years, to the point where no significant difference existed between the second-generation and the third generation. Most of the more observant 19 second-generation women became so because of the influence of their children to change, and/or an increased exposure to religious teaching.

With regard to *knowledge*, the third-generation woman was the most knowledgeable about her religious life, largely due to the extent of her formal religious training—25 of the 27 third-generation respondents received at least six years of yeshivah education.

With respect to *doctrine*, the first-generation woman was the most believing. As for *emotion*, the third-generation woman was somewhat more emotional in her religious life than were her mother or grandmother.

With regard to *community involvement*, the second generation was the most communally involved in Jewish Orthodoxy. The second-generation women were involved in synagogue affairs, yeshivah affairs, and religious Zionist affairs to a degree far exceeding that of the first- or third-generation women.

East European–American findings

Summing the East European–American scores for cultural content, and using the Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed-Ranks Test to determine statistical significance, it was found that the first-generation woman was significantly more East European or less American than the second-generation woman, who was significantly more East European or less American than the third-generation woman.

On certain items, many first-generation women seemed to indicate receptivity to American ways. They even rejected some East European ways and accepted American values and attitudes: girls should attend yeshivot; children should be encouraged to participate in sports; formal matrimonial introduction is not necessary; parents and adult children should not live together. The first-generation woman's ability to change may have given impetus to her daughter's ease in Americanization.

On the other hand, there was a definite trend among some of the more religious third-generation women to choose some East European items. For instances, these third-generation women endorsed the practice of supporting a son-in-law who is continuing his sacred learning, and preferred formal introductions when it came to serious dating. Since these East European ways have not survived over the generations, they were probably selected for their ability to enhance traditional religiosity.

Religiosity and East European–American Scores

Using the Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient as a nonparametric measure of association (Siegel, 1956), the way in which the religiosity scores and the East European–American scores vary together was examined.

An interesting finding concerns the association of *ritual* scores and East European–American scores. There was a higher correlation between scores among the second-generation women ($r_s = .71$) than among the first-generation women ($r_s = .49$). This may be evidence of the difficulty in disengaging the religio-cultural system discussed earlier. In the first generation, higher ritual scores were not necessarily linked with higher East European scores, nor were lower ritual scores necessarily linked with lower East European scores. This result was probably due to the confusion as to what cultural baggage to keep or to discard. Among the second generation, higher ritual scores were more strongly linked with higher East European scores, and lower ritual scores were linked with lower East European scores. This was probably the result of an inability to disengage from the religio-cultural system. The more ritually observant, despite their significant

Americanization, retained East European ways, the less ritually observant departed from the East European ways as well. It is in the third generation where the separation between the two becomes most observable.

HOW AMERICAN JEWISH ORTHODOXY MANAGED TO SURVIVE

From the findings already discussed, and from answers to other questions in the interview schedule, certain dynamic forces impelling cultural progression among the generations are suggested.

The first-generation woman, with her strong commitment to ritual, presented a *holy* model to her family, but had less stringent standards for her children. As a result of community pressures for change, of pressures from her children, and of her own valuation that change was desirable, the first-generation woman accepted greater latitude in the behavior of her children than she would for herself.

The second-generation woman, occupying this double-edged position, found both negative and positive elements with respect to traditional religion. Among the negative elements were peer groups formed in neighborhood and public school: unlike the other generations, 23 of the 27 second-generation women had non-Sabbath-observing childhood friends. Second-generation respondents reported experiencing temptations and transgressions as a result of these associations. The public school also presented conflict-laden situations for the second-generation woman.

On the other hand, among the positive elements for the second-generation woman were brothers who attended yeshivot, dedicated teachers in the Talmud Torah, the few friends with whom Sabbath was spent, and Sabbath groups formed in Young Israel synagogues. More than two-thirds of the second-generation women met their husbands through these contacts.

The larger Jewish group experience rapidly moved in the direction of 100 percent Americanization. Those trying to sustain religiosity were few and far between. One major difficulty was the sorting problem—how to locate each other. At first, their social structures were fragile and tenuous. But, as groups formed, and as they found others who shared similar concerns, their confidence grew. A significant finding was the degree of second-generation communal involvement, contributing to fundamental structures ultimately perpetuating American orthodoxy. Peter Berger terms such structures “plausibility structures,” structures by which views of reality receive social support (Berger, 1969: 3). With the strengthening of these structures came the survival of American Jewish Orthodoxy.

The key component in structural survival has been the yeshivah, its important role being socialization of the third generation and resocialization of the second. Children returned home, sharing yeshivah learning experi-

ences with their parents; their parents, in turn, were responsive. The children thus reintroduced religiously related behavior into the home. In addition, the parents directly supported this institution through fund raising and active membership in auxiliary parent groups. The yeshivah thus became a source of primary group associations for both parents and children.

Perhaps the most difficult question to answer is why the second-generation woman, despite her departure from traditional religion, tried so hard to transmit it to her children. Perhaps elements of cognitive dissonance contributed to the second-generation woman's concerns and decisions (Festinger, 1957). Also, the lessons of Americanization may have yielded unexpected results. The experience of Americanization may have demonstrated to the second generation pitfalls and hazards in sustaining traditional religiosity that first-generation parents could have neither understood nor appreciated. American values taught that one need not fear expressing cultural uniqueness and individuality. Although second-generation respondents remembered their own childhood hesitancy in admitting to kashrut or Sabbath observance, they urged their third-generation children to be candid and forthright about their special needs. Perhaps increased knowledge of modern American life reinforced the values of traditional religion by placing them in a more favorable light: the Sabbath, as a day of rest, has great value in an otherwise hectic work-week; primary group relationships fostered in religious circles offer a sense of community difficult to find in contemporary American life; the yeshivah experience gives parents a measure of control over their children's ideas and companions, a control unknown to parents of public school children. These factors, as well as others, probably contributed to the second generation's resolute actions.

While third-generation women, their husbands, and their friends were largely a product of yeshivah socialization, they now display interesting variations in the emphasis placed on components of their cultural resolution. Although second-generation cultural resolution patterns include significantly more American and traditional religious ways, one third-generation segment tends to emphasize American cultural ways, while the other segment emphasizes traditional Judaic ways. What this finding may portend for the future of American Orthodoxy is difficult to say.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the cultural dynamism within American Jewish Orthodoxy via the experiences of three generations of Orthodox housewives. Examining the force of Americanization on its early period and the revitalization of traditional Judaic commitment in its more recent period, the study concluded that the second generation, in both organizational acumen

and effectiveness of third-generation socialization, was pivotal to this unfolding. The Americanization of the second generation did not operate as a deterrent, but as a comfortable context into which the third-generation has maintained a vital, traditional Judaic commitment.

Although this study has traced experiences in ethnic survival of an American Jewish population subgroup, its findings may be suggestive of other American ethnic experiences. Ethnic concern persists, several generations removed from the immigrant generation. Second-generation Americans, who seemed so fully "Americanized," may have been more of an ethnic presence than their American veneer would admit. And there may be some middle ground of experience among the ethnic groups on which both American cultural and ethnic ways accommodate. Perhaps further research will explain America's unexpected phenomenon of ethnic survival.

NOTES

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1. The Hasidim are not included in this discussion of the American Orthodox, since they are "recent" arrivals to America.

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