When the Cost of Orthodoxy Is Too High

Four scholars ask: Are the high birth rates and high tuitions sustainable?

By Shaul Magid | November 26, 2018 12:00 AM

On July 31, Yale professor Eliyahu Stern published in *Haaretz*, the Israeli daily, "Donald Trump's Orthodox Grandchildren Aren't the Future of American Jewish Life ," a provocative piece challenging the common prediction that by the end of the century the majority of American Jews will be Orthodox. Stern argues that Orthodox communal leaders touting day schools, Jewish camps, and synagogue membership as an answer to the crisis of "Jewish continuity" have yet to fully grapple with the price tag and lifestyle options associated with both ultra-Orthodoxy (Haredi) and modern Orthodoxy. While the former, Stern claims, is largely comprised of lower income families prepared to continue to survive on government subsidies and a few very wealthy families who support its institutions through large charitable contributions, modern Orthodox communities largely operate along strict class lines and seem to function more like a "club" than a heterogeneous religious denomination. The criteria for membership is less devotion based and more the product of social class, style, and zip codes.

Neither group, Stern argues, can continue on its current path. Everything from high birth rates to high tuitions makes the model unviable. As in the century from 1870-1970, Orthodox Jews will, Stern argues, choose "bread" over strict piety. Stern argues in his recent book *Jewish Materialism* that the concern of having bread to eat was a driving force that led many Jews to embrace Jewish political movements ranging from Zionism to Bundism, that is, Jewish communal affiliations that promoted gender equality, democratic forms of representation, and the fair and equal distribution of resources in society. Stern speculates that there may be another mass exodus of Jewish youth from the ranks of Orthodoxy, given the high price tag of remaining affiliated with this upwardly mobile religious community. While he holds back on predicting where they will migrate to (he does not mention any of the other denominations or Zionism), he seems to assume that they will have reason to break with the moral and economic models put forward by their parents and establish new Jewish movements.

In this forum, four scholars of American Judaism critically assess Stern's claims about contemporary Orthodoxy and offer their own views on modern Orthodoxy in America.

—Shaul Magid

Lila Corwin Berman

Before Jewish funders and institutions plan for a future dominated by poor Orthodox Jews, Eliyahu Stern argues, they would do well to recall that one cannot live on Torah alone. Using history as his

guide, he suggests that market capitalism will again save Jews and Judaism from fundamentalism. Simply put, demographic trends—high fertility and affiliation rates among Orthodox Jews—will be no match for economic pressures and opportunities.

From his examination of late-19th-century sources, Stern contends that Orthodoxy will not stay the course if it means impoverishment. Instead, Orthodox Jews and, especially, their children will choose sustainable, money-making livelihoods over the separatism, study, and subsidy that has characterized their lives. Furthermore, as modern Orthodox Jews—a "clubbish" group who tend to "earn like Episcopalians and … vote like evangelicals" (in Milton Himmelfarb's classic rendering , in *Commentary* in 1973, Jews had the earning power of Episcopalians but voted like Puerto Ricans)—hit the limits of their resources, they will no longer be able to bankroll their ultra-Orthodox brethren, let alone afford their own costly lifestyles. Thus, Stern expects that they, too, will surrender their membership in the club of Orthodoxy for the sake of material sustainability.

Whether the historical patterns that Stern traces to the late 19th century will resurge and cause American Orthodox Jews to cede religious punctiliousness for economic stability, as Stern predicts, seems less clear to me than the significance that a more recent set of historical forces—the rise and fall of the American welfare state—is most certainly having on Orthodox life in the United States. Public assistance entitlements, from programs for children with special needs to health-care, nutritional, and educational subsidies, have supported the lives of countless Americans, including Orthodox Jews. Yet as the current occupant of the White House, who has received robust backing from Orthodox Jews, continues to gut social welfare programs so crucial to Orthodox communities, one must wonder how, indeed, these communities will survive.

Perhaps Jewish philanthropic money will step into the gap. While modern Orthodox Jews may be reaching the limits of their largesse, as Stern maintains, many secular Jews also donate to support ultra-Orthodox institutions. These Jews appear eager to maintain a pecuniary connection to what they may perceive as "authentic" Jewish life, even as they are not interested in taking on such "authentic" practices themselves.

But should conservative economic policies continue to hold sway, I am doubtful that philanthropic capital—even from the pockets of well-heeled non-Orthodox Jews—can close the yawning gap between much depleted state provisions and social needs. In 2017, Americans gave over $400 billion to charity; the United States' federal budget that same year was $4.0 trillion , more than one half of it devoted to Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and other nondefense spending. It is inconceivable that American Jewish philanthropy, no matter how well executed by funders and Jewish organizations, could address substantial and longitudinal shortfalls in social welfare spending.

Bereft of social welfare entitlements, with insufficient philanthropy to sustain them, Orthodox Jews may realize that they cannot afford *not* to join the wage-earning economy. Still, the question will remain whether the wage economy can actually offer Orthodox Jews, or anyone else, for that matter, the material rewards that Stern assumes will tilt the future of American Judaism away from Orthodoxy. In the late 19th century, when Jewish leaders exhorted observant Jews to focus on having enough bread to eat, at least the industrial economy was expanding. Certainly, economic depression and political repression stood as obstacles to Jewish earning potential. But through industrial

opportunities and migration, millions of Jews accessed new resources to put bread on their tables, especially if they were willing to cede certain religious practices and constraints.

In our day and age, should the children of today's Orthodox Jews wish to chart a new way forward, one that veers from strict observance and from the economic conditions that demographers predict, the opportunities for doing so may be limited. Without living wages, and without workers' rights and benefits, what material rewards will these children see in leaving or reforming Orthodoxy?

In the final analysis, Stern convinces me that Jewish funders and institutions would do far better to consider the broader issues of social welfare and economic justice than to quibble over whether to allocate slightly more or slightly less to programs for Orthodox Jews. Doing so may get these funders and organizations blackballed from the modern Orthodox "club" that Stern describes. It also will demand they step outside of the fiction that American politics and its partisan nature is irrelevant to Jewish life. Instead, funders and organizations worried about the Jewish demographic future will need to face the fact that it's the economy, *and* it's political, stupid!

Edieal Pinker

As one of those analyzing the American Jewish demography and future, I find it particularly interesting to hear people's reactions to the inflection point that the data shows us—a point where the Reform and Conservative movements see large declines in key age groups, while the Orthodox experience very rapid growth, dramatically changing their shares of the communal population. Sometimes the reactions are more depressing than the numbers, making me run back to my spreadsheets and seek shelter.

From the Orthodox, I sometimes hear the smug refrain that there is no hope for the non-Orthodox and we knew this all along. There is only one way, the Orthodox way. This is depressing for two reasons: First, it may be true, and second, it shows a lack of care and concern for their fellow Jews.

From the left, we hear reactions like that of Eliyahu Stern, writing in *Haaretz*. His message is essentially the following: Don't worry about the Orthodox taking over! Their lifestyle is economically unsustainable, and they will eventually see massive defections. He also manages to throw in a few jabs describing the ultra-Orthodox as welfare leeches living on the dole, and the modern Orthodox (characterized by Jared and Ivanka Kushner) living an expensive, clubby, Republican, culturally vacuous lifestyle. If Stern's characterizations are correct, does it change the situation of the non-Orthodox, who have even worse retention and birthrates far below replacement rates?

A better response to the demographic projections comes from Tully Harcsztark, who asks the modern Orthodox to be less insular and more connected with other parts of the Jewish community. Or social justice activist Shmuly Yanklowitz, who draws on Orthodoxy as a guidepost to give people a way to pursue their interest in bettering society while connecting to Judaism in a deeper way. From the left, scholar Allan Arkush engages in some thoughtful introspection asking if it is possible to create a distinctive Jewish American culture that is at once self-sustaining and non-Orthodox?

Stern says that being modern Orthodox requires observance "but not belief in God, social or economic justice or the ambitions of a larger Jewish civilizational project"; he writes as if they are uniquely morally flawed. But one must ask: Do the non-Orthodox have fewer moral flaws? Is that because they vote Democratic in higher numbers? Do the non-Orthodox have fewer children, intermarry, and fail to invest in their children's Jewishness only because they are so busy working for Doctors Without Borders or creating the next great Jewish civilization?

Many non-Orthodox Jews at some point in their lives want Jewish content. It could be just having matzo available on Passover, a Jewish camp or schooling for their children, a mohel for their son's brit milah, or a minyan to say Kaddish for a departed parent. Those tend to be services that are provided by people who have heavily committed their lives to Jewish life and community. Where do these service providers come from? Someone had to raise them, teach them, fund the institutions within which they learned and grew. Not only that, but these Jewish service providers, who provide the backbone of the Jewish community and its sparks, themselves need communities to live in that provide a higher level of Jewish intensity than most American Jews seek. The Orthodox communities are a major reservoir for these sparks and provides many of their needs. The non-Orthodox are free riding on these services.

Stern is correct that a modern Orthodox lifestyle is expensive, but he is disrespectful of the majority, who are not Kushners, who pour all of their disposable income into Jewish institutions, have homes in relative disrepair, drive old cars, and definitely don't take private tennis lessons. All those after-tax dollars they put into day schools and camps provide employment for legions of Jewish educators and staff who come from a variety of backgrounds. Should we begrudge them a little sushi from time to time? It is simplistic to think they are on the verge of economic collapse and will suddenly jump ship. The retention rates I have used for the Orthodox in my projections are actually not very dissimilar than those for the Reform and Conservative Jews raised by two Jewish parents. The big difference is in intermarriage and fertility rates, which are so much lower for more religiously liberal Jews because of their failure to create strong communal bonds.

If fear of the Orthodox is what it takes to motivate the more liberal streams of Judaism to take action, so be it. But denigrating the Orthodox does not advance the interests of any part of the Jewish community, unless one includes *Haaretz*'s click-through rate.

Matt Williams

It is such a shame and, worst, such a waste. Eliyahu Stern's article makes one incredibly strong point, amidst a series of both socio-historical and tonal missteps.

His key point is simple and powerful: "While many have begun to reexamine the social and ideological profile of American Orthodoxy … none of them contain a rigorous examination of its economic profile and how the actual price … might affect a long-term prognosis." The costs associated with living an Orthodox lifestyle, in other words, must be factored into any longer-term sociological analyses, given the assumed wealth and supposed poverty contained within the two larger communities that make up American Orthodoxy—the modern Orthodox and the American Haredi, including Hassidic,

movements. To put it a different way, it ought to be impossible to render accounts of such communities' demographic sustainability without attending closely to the potential precariousness of their respective socio-economic realities—after all, how long can one retain such wealth and how long can one subsist below poverty? If we're to truly understand the Jewish community as it is, as opposed to how it "ought" to be, we commit a grievous sin by ignoring such socioeconomic avenues of inquiry.

All of that said, while I admire Stern's project, in this essay he loses the necessary focus to achieve this useful intervention; the essay fails in at least three significant ways.

First, one cannot simply take for granted that Haredi communities in America are impoverished. Every impoverished community in America hosts an underground economy (drug dealing, babysitting, etc.) and a communally subsidized economy (as when philanthropists subsidize religious education). To say that there's solely a "pork barrel funding" ("pork"? really?) welfare model for the American Haredi communities sidesteps a much more robust economic analysis in favor of caricature.

My second concern relates to Stern's description of modern Orthodoxy as "clubbish." While attending to questions of the socio-economic sustainability of a community whose wealth is unprecedented, Stern's depiction once again falls into stereotype. Gone are those who genuinely worry about providing a Jewish education for their children and, in their stead, are those who are preoccupied by the maintenance of their socio-economic status. While some in that community may be invested in their clubbishness, many others may not be. Without evidence to support these assumed motivations, such labels introduce a decidedly judgmental tone to what, in fact, might be a more complex reality.

Finally, Stern's biggest error isn't in his economic or sociological analyses, but rather in his historical analysis, which neglects the role violence played in Eastern Europe as a function of a materialist enterprise designed to disenfranchise Jews, Jewish property, and Jewish bodies. "Redemptive anti-Semitism," a termed coined by Holocaust historian Saul Friedländer, is intrinsically bound to the notion that violence against Jews is, in large part, an expression of economic or class anxiety. Prewar Orthodoxy, in other words, is a poor analogy for contemporary Orthodox lifestyles, which carry significantly less risk for personal harm. To make the case that the Jews of yore left because their God didn't put bread on the table misses both the vast numbers of European Jews who didn't leave (and were murdered) and the important underpinning that there was always a tenor of fear that violence might just as soon take their bread quicker than God. Shedding one's "Orthodoxy" can't be understood as solely abandoning poverty, but also potentially escaping death—with the two, bound together, in the psyches of those who lived during that period.

It's a shame. On the surface, Stern's larger point ought to resonate so importantly for sociologists committed to understanding American Jewry, for the communities he calls to notice, and for Jewish professionals who try to use the data generated from the first to help serve the second. Stern's piece is a wasted opportunity, because a focused argument might have called attention to a singularly important issue—the absolute need for richer socio-economic analyses of the Orthodox community—whereas his polemical rhetoric distracts and offends, closing windows before they're even opened.

Rivka Press Schwartz

Eliyahu Stern's article fits with a genre that appears periodically in both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Call it "Choking to Death on $500,000 A Year": The article is a profile of a two-income professional couple, barely scraping by in their life in New York City or its suburbs on an income that easily places them in the top 1 percent of American households. What follows is a detailed rundown of their necessary expenses—two cars, two vacations a year, private school tuitions for both children. Two six-figure incomes, and these families are barely hanging in.

These articles could easily be written about the modern Orthodox world, and within their own community's publications, often are. That they are just as easily written, however, about families without the particular religious and communal commitments of modern Orthodoxy suggests that what we see in these cases is not a phenomenon of modern Orthodox life, but of a particular sort of lower-upper-class existence.

Analyses of contemporary American Judaism that insist on reading Jewish life as apart from the broader American context in which it takes place often violate Occam's razor, missing the simplest explanations. Attempting to understand modern Orthodoxy shorn of its American context leads to significant misunderstandings as to what are the manifestations of a particular religious way of life, and what are the manifestations of a class and race position that we happen to inhabit, but share with many who are not our co-religionists. To understand modern Orthodoxy we must view "Orthodoxy" within its larger social, economic, and cultural contexts.

For example, if you read modern Orthodox Jews' disinvestment from American citizenship as being, at best, a manifestation of a centuries-old relationship of Jewish ambivalence toward the society around it, and, at worst, hostility toward that society, we miss that mid-to-late-20th-century patterns of suburbanization and sorting—patterns that we share with other upper-class white Americans—do a better job explaining our reactions to the world around us than our great-great-grandparents' feelings about the czar. Material affluence, and the anxiety (and feelings of precarity) that surround that affluence, in the modern Orthodox world are not specific phenomena of a particular religious subgroup. Except for larger family size, we are precisely mirroring the socio-economic concerns and anxieties of the societal stratum into which we fit.

Take, in particular, the tuition crisis. Observers of the community, both from within and without, cast this as the greatest challenge and threat facing our community. Fully cognizant of how dangerous it is for someone whose salary is paid by parents' tuition dollars to wade into this, I nevertheless challenge this way of looking at the problem. Yeshiva tuition doesn't have to cost over $30,000 a year. We know, because in the Haredi world, it doesn't. The further one goes to the right, the lower tuition tends to be. And while one can point to ultra-Orthodox schools with tuitions of $4,000 and no general studies education, one can also find schools whose tuitions are a third or a half that of modern Orthodox schools, but which provide a sound basic education that adequately prepares students for college. This is not advocating for the Haredi system as much as suggesting that the economics of day schools' education is not a necessary or inevitable product of a modern Orthodoxy lifestyle.

But modern Orthodoxy doesn't only want a sound basic education. It wants the full range of academic

and co-curricular opportunities that will enrich their children's lives and get them accepted to the most competitive colleges. It wants the full range of support from school psychologists and learning specialists, so that students with a variety of needs can be supported in our institutions. It wants its students to be engaged meaningfully in their lives as Jews—not only in stimulating classes but with personal connections to teachers, in *chagigot* and *Shabbatonim*, in programming outside and around and on top of the school day. We want Horace Mann plus a *geshmak* (love) for Yiddishkeit.

Compared with the private schools whose educational and college-admissions outcomes modern Orthodox day schools are supposed to match, their tuition is a relative bargain—and that's before factoring in a dual curriculum and Friday night *tisches*.

To a meaningful extent, what is going on in our community is that we are taking the demands of a certain class lifestyle and recasting them as religious obligations, which both ennobles our consumption and allows us to take pride in the sacrifices we make for it. Stern's argument buys into that "Torah-washing," casting the demands of this lifestyle as manifestations of, and judgments on, a particular kind of Orthodoxy. But if what Stern is describing is the lifestyle of the 1 percent (always anxious about slipping back into the 2 percent, always modelling itself on the .01 percent), and if his argument is that that lifestyle is not sustainable in a society that does not provide for the basic needs of all of its members, that is an argument about many things: about equity and redistribution, about housing and schooling, about taxes and spending, about rising income inequality and decreased class mobility. The one thing it is not is a particular argument about the current state of, or future prospects of, American modern Orthodoxy. If, as Stern predicts, our children leave our community, they will find themselves facing many of the same strains and concerns of their fellow 1-percenters, shorn of the religious overlay that ennobles their families' economics.

Stern's central conclusion is that Orthodoxy is "not a viable option for humanity" because "it's the economy, stupid," too-narrowly defines the phenomenon he is describing as the product of a particular religious lifestyle, when it is better understood as the product of a particular class stratum of American society at this point in time. Just ask the gentile parents paying for two cars, a vacation, a three-bedroom Manhattan apartment, and tuitions at Collegiate or Dalton.

Eliyahu Stern responds:

I am glad that the editors of Tablet have decided to host a much-needed conversation about the economic and class aspects of contemporary Judaism. It is a sensitive issue, and the passionate tone of my article in *Haaretz* reflects my deep ties to the many families who struggle to take part in a vibrant Jewish community. If my concerns were perceived as "disrespectful" by readers such as Matt Williams, a rising star in the Orthodox Union, and Edie Pinker, my distinguished colleague, that was not my intent. Rather my aim was to voice the often-ignored frustrations and anxieties of the many Jews in America for whom the ideas articulated in my article struck a chord. We are in desperate need of a new blueprint for Jewish life, one focused not simply on increasing demographic strength and preserving Jewish continuity, but one directed at building a Jewish identity that takes democratic principles and economic accessibility as core values.

I would like to respond to the important critiques and issues raised by Rivka Press Schwartz and Lila Corwin Berman. Schwartz argues that any analysis of modern Orthodox Jews must view the group as part of a broader class of upwardly mobile Americans. Meanwhile, Berman points out that the long-term growth of the largely impoverished ultra-Orthodox may be jeopardized by the continuing dismantling of the welfare state. Whereas Schwartz's analysis casts the political tendencies of modern Orthodox Jews as being determined primarily by their status as, and identification with, 1-percenters, questioning the need for public institutions and entitlement programs, Berman reveals ultra-Orthodoxy to be dependent on those very institutions and programs. Taken together they suggest some potentially deep political tensions between the economically ascendant modern Orthodox and the less prosperous but more demographically significant ultra-Orthodox.

Both point to a gap in my briefly sketched argument in *Haaretz*: the importance of the larger American political and economic context in the development of Jewish communal—and specifically Orthodox—institutions. They suggest that we should be focusing our critique more on the many forms of income inequalities endemic to early 21st-century America. My focus on American Jewry, they correctly note, misses the big picture of American culture and politics that ultimately determines the fate of all its minority groups.

Though I agree in theory with their more general orientation, I think it might elide certain social developments that are distinctive to the modern Orthodox community, ones that should be carefully examined in conversations about Jewish continuity. For example, Schwartz's analysis does not adequately attend to the way "traditional" Jewish values are mobilized to reaffirm modern Orthodoxy's unique class structure. modern Orthodoxy's dualistic worldview, practically speaking, means its members must have the capacity to pay for two different value systems. What Schwartz describes as "Horace Mann plus a *geshmak* for Yiddishkeit," or what I call "kosher sushi," richly expresses this point. There is nothing neutral about the history of the senses, and for that matter the cultivation of a whole sector of society that has a hankering for kosher Alaska rolls. Just ask those Haredi leaders who institute strict sumptuary laws on their communities, or Zionists who built a society on the very principle of overcoming such burdens. On the other hand, having Talmud teachers in Jewish day schools with M.A. degrees from American universities means paying for that kind of faculty. Cosmopolitanism combined with the tastes of a very specific kind of Judaism (one that is anything but traditional) is the philosophy that reflects, justifies, and defines the contours of modern Orthodoxy's unique club-like structure.

The politics that go along with a Horace Mann/Yiddishkeit pose a very serious threat to the American welfare state and the unique horizontal alliances fostered by American Jews with their gentile neighbors. The folksy elitism and exceptionalism implicit in a political doctrine of Horace Mann/Yiddishkeit is concerning because of just how similar it is to the worldview of white Protestants who would insert Christ for Yiddishkeit. The prosperity and protection enjoyed by American Jews has historically been the result of steadfast allegiance to the upkeep of strong public socio-economic institutions: hospitals, public schools, and social welfare. Some, like Beth Israel Hospital and Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, carry Jewish names on their masthead. The reduction in anti-Semitism over the 20th century in the United States—the capacity of Orthodox Jews to walk the street or go to the workplace without the fear of being discriminated against—cannot be divorced from the strong social

and economic ties developed by Jews with other Americans through shared institutions.

Moving forward, non-Orthodox American Jewry will have to ask itself some difficult questions. For starters, are its commitments to equality and alliances with progressive groups simply a relic of its immigrant past, or are they reflective of deeper principles unique to Jews' religious teachings and historical experiences? I fully understand why the modern Orthodox model of Horace Man/Yiddishkeit is tempting to those who want the very best for their own children. I do not fault a parent for being enticed by the material benefits that might come with their children growing up to be Jareds and Ivankas. But the question Jewish leaders need to ask is whether such a desire reflects the political and economic interests of a larger Jewish civilizational project. Can it produce and make room for Jewish social workers, civil servants, musicians, artists, and plumbers? Can it guarantee social safety and continued economic opportunity for all Americans and for *all* Jews? If not, we would do well to invest in new religious movements, educational institutions, and cultural activities that reflect and support an economic and spiritually heterogeneous American Jewry.

***

Lila Corwin Berman holds the Murray Friedman Chair of American Jewish History at Temple University, where she directs the Feinstein Center for American Jewish History. Her latest book is *Metropolitan Jews: Politics Race, and Religion in Postwar Detroit*.

Edieal Pinker is deputy dean at the Yale School of Management. His current research includes predictive modeling in health care using machine-learning methods and demographic analysis of the U.S. Jewish community.

Rivka Press Schwartz teaches American history at SAR High School, where she is associate principal. She is also on the faculty of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America.

Eliyahu Stern is associate professor of religion at Yale University. His latest book is *Jewish Materialism*.

Matt Williams is the director of the Orthodox Union Center for Communal Research.

Shaul Magid, a Tablet contributing editor, is the Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein Professor of Jewish Studies at Indiana University/Bloomington, the Brownstone Visiting Professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College, and Kogod Senior Research Fellow at The Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. His latest book is Hasidism Incarnate: Hasidism, Christianity, and the Making of Modern Judaism.

Find this story online: https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/274954/cost-of-orthodoxy-is-too-high