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A Contextual Piece about Orthodox Life in America

Orthodox Jews express their love and awe for G-d by following the Torah—the Hebrew Bible and the teachings of the rabbinic tradition—which, they believe, were given to the Jewish people by G-d. They observe the Jewish Sabbath, keep the kosher dietary laws, are serious about prayer and Torah study, and strive to build strong families and communities. In this paper, I will provide a sketch of the American Orthodox Jewish community and how it came to be the way it is today.

The vast majority of America's Jews descend from the estimated 2.4 million Jews who migrated from Eastern Europe between 1881 and 1914. While Orthodox Jews in the United States also came from many other places (including German-speaking lands, Turkey, Syria, North Africa and elsewhere), American Orthodoxy resulted mainly from the encounter between Eastern European immigrants and their new country.

Until the social and political upheavals of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Jews of Eastern Europe, for the most part, lived lives we would describe as "Orthodox." They prayed in Hebrew, spoke Yiddish with each other, and communicated with their gentile neighbors in Russian, Polish, German, etc. They did not call themselves Orthodox Jews but rather "Yidden," that is, Jews. Early Jewish Reformers in Central Europe first used the non-Jewish term "Orthodox" as an expression of reproach aimed at traditionalists. Only later was it adopted as a sign of pride by traditionalists themselves.

Modernity brought the Jews of Eastern Europe secular Yiddish and Hebrew culture, Zionism and socialism. At the same time, traditional religious life enjoyed a renaissance: The popular spiritual movement called Chasidism enjoyed a meteoric rise; new, elite Talmudic academies or *yeshivos* were established in Lithuania; and an ethical movement called Mussar made a powerful impact. Often, a single Jew was influenced by an unusual combination of these elements. The 19th century also brought forced military conscription of Jewish boys as young as 8, with an eye to their conversion to the Russian Orthodox Church, and the terrifying Pogroms that began in 1881. Jews began leaving their homes of centuries in the hundreds of thousands.

In "the Golden Land," Jews became American. We adopted English and lost Yiddish. We tended to sacrifice Jewish practices that did not neatly fit the American environment. Many immigrants forewent synagogue affiliation. With time, many Jews from Eastern Europe chose to affiliate with the burgeoning Reform and Conservative Movements. These Movements openly embraced modernity and called for numerous changes in traditional Jewish practice and belief. Fewer and fewer American Jews were aligned with synagogues that retained traditional forms and called themselves "Orthodox."

Yet Orthodoxy survived. In the first decades of the 20th century, some Orthodox communities struck firm roots. Many fervently pious survivors of the Holocaust of the 1930s and 40s took refuge in the United States and rebuilt their religious culture on new shores. Jewish pride rose with the successes of the State of Israel. Some previously non-Orthodox Jews, known as *Ba'alei Teshuvah*, decided to begin leading an Orthodox life. Orthodox Jewish life encompasses Sephardic or Mizrachi (Eastern) communities and many Jews whose families came to the U.S. from the former Soviet Union. An Orthodox Jew, considering these things, might say "*Baruch Hashem*," expressing gratitude to G-d.

Since the 1960s, American Orthodox Jews have become more self-confident about their Jewishness. Many have become increasingly alienated from the culture of individualism they see around them: If their grandparents fell in love with America, they often romanticize Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Others embrace Modernity and Orthodoxy at the same time. Orthodox Jews may variously call themselves Torah-true, Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, *frum* (meaning "pious"), Ultra-Orthodox, Chassidish (Chasidic), Yeshivish, Hareidi, Sephardi, Mizrachi, etc. In general, Orthodox Jews are increasingly punctilious in their religious observance. They tend to look within their tight-knit communities for friendship, entertainment, and culture. Orthodox children learn the values of *frumkeit* or piety, respect for rabbinic authority, self-sacrifice, and commitment to the group. Talmudic literacy rises. Less value is set on secular education for its own sake. Families grow larger. Naturally, the financial and emotional needs of large families pose a significant challenge to Orthodox individuals and to the social service agencies that help them.

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