

Haym Soloveitchik teaches Jewish history and thought in the Bernard Revel Graduate School and Stern College for Woman at Yeshiva University.

RUPTURE AND RECONSTRUCTION: THE TRANSFORMATION OF CONTEMPORARY ORTHODOXY

This essay is an attempt to understand the developments that have occurred within my lifetime in the community in which I live. The orthodoxy in which I, and other people my age, were raised scarcely exists anymore. This change is often described as “the swing to the Right.” In one sense, this is an accurate description. Many practices, especially the new rigor in religious observance now current among the younger modern orthodox community, did indeed originate in what is called “the Right.” Yet, in another sense, the description seems a misnomer. A generation ago, two things primarily separated modern Orthodoxy from, what was then called, “ultra-Orthodoxy” or “the Right.” First, the attitude to Western culture, that is, secular education; second, the relation to political nationalism, i.e. Zionism and the state of Israel. Little, however, has changed in these areas. Modern Orthodoxy still attends college, albeit with somewhat less enthusiasm than before, and is more strongly Zionist than ever. The “ultra-orthodox,” or what is now called the “*haredi*,”¹ camp is still opposed to higher secular education, though the form that the opposition now takes has local nuance. In Israel, the opposition remains total; in America, the utility, even the necessity of a college degree is conceded by most, and various arrangements are made to enable many *haredi* youths to obtain it. However, the value of a secular education, of Western culture generally, is still denigrated. And the *haredi* camp remains strongly anti-Zionist, at the very least, emotionally distant and unidentified with the Zionist enterprise. The ideological differences over the posture towards modernity remain on the whole unabated, in theory certainly, in practice generally. Yet so much *has* changed, and irrecognizably so. Most of the fundamental changes, however, have been across the board. What had been a stringency peculiar to

the “Right” in 1960, a “Lakewood or Bnei Brak *humra*,” as—to take an example that we shall later discuss—*shiurim* (minimal requisite quantities), had become, in the 1990’s, a widespread practice in modern orthodox circles, and among its younger members, an axiomatic one. The phenomena were, indeed, most advanced among the *haredim* and were to be found there in a more intensive form. However, most of these developments swiftly manifested themselves among their co-religionists to their left. The time gap between developments in the *haredi* world and the emerging modern orthodox one was some fifteen years, at most.

It seemed to me to that what had changed radically was the very texture of religious life and the entire religious atmosphere. Put differently, the *nature* of contemporary spirituality has undergone a transformation; the ground of religiosity had altered far more than the ideological positions adopted thereon. It further appeared that this change could best be studied in the *haredi* camp, for there it takes its swiftest and most intense form. With this in mind, I read widely in the literature of the *haredim*, listened to their burgeoning cassette literature, and spent more time than was my wont in their neighborhoods. I tried my best to understand what they were doing in their terms and what it meant in mine. And the more I studied them, I became convinced that I was, indeed, studying myself and my own community. I uncovered no new facts about them or us, but thought that I did perceive some pattern to the well-known ones. As all these facts are familiar to my readers, the value of my interpretation depends entirely on the degree of persuasive correspondence that they find between my characterizations and their own experiences.

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If I were asked to characterize in a phrase the change that religious Jewry has undergone in the past generation, I would say that it was the new and controlling role that texts now play in contemporary religious life. And in saying that, I open myself to an obvious question: What is new in this role? Has not traditional Jewish society always been regulated by the normative written word, the Halakhah? Have not scholars, for well over a millennium, pored over the Talmud and its codes to provide Jews with guidance in their daily round of observances? Is not Jewish religiosity proudly legalistic and isn’t exegesis its classic mode of expression? Was not “their portable homeland,” their indwelling in their sacred texts, what sustained the

Jewish people throughout its long exile?

The answer is, of course, yes. However, as the Halakhah is a sweepingly comprehensive regula of daily life—covering not only prayer and divine service, but equally food, drink, dress, sexual relations between man and wife, the rhythms of work and patterns of rest—it constitutes a way of life. And a way of life is not learned but rather absorbed. Its transmission is mimetic, imbibed from parents and friends, and patterned on conduct regularly observed in home and street, synagogue and school.

Did these mimetic norms—the culturally prescriptive—conform with the legal ones? The answer is, at times, yes; at times, no. And the significance of the no may best be brought home by an example with which all are familiar—the kosher kitchen, with its rigid separation of milk and meat—separate dishes, sinks, dish racks, towels, tablecloths, even separate cupboards. Actually little of this has a basis in Halakhah. Strictly speaking, there is no need for separate sinks, for separate dish towels or cupboards. In fact, if the food is served cold, there is no need for separate dishware altogether. The simple fact is that the traditional Jewish kitchen, transmitted from mother to daughter over generations, has been immeasurably and unrecognizably amplified beyond all halakhic requirements. Its classic contours are the product not of legal exegesis, but of the housewife's religious intuition imparted in kitchen apprenticeship.

An augmented tradition is one thing, a diminished one another. So the question arises: did this mimetic tradition have an acknowledged position even when it went against the written law? I say "acknowledged", because the question is not simply whether it continued in practice (though this too is of significance), but whether it was accepted as legitimate? Was it even formally legitimized? Often yes; and, once again, a concrete example best brings the matter home. There is an injunction against "*bover*"—sorting or separating on Sabbath. And we, indeed, do refrain from sorting clothes, not to speak of separating actual wheat from chaff. However, we do eat fish, and in eating fish we must, if we are not to choke, separate the bones from the meat. Yet in so doing we are separating the chaff (bones) from the wheat (meat). The upshot is that all Jews who ate fish on Sabbath (and Jews have been eating fish on Sabbath for, at least, some two thousand years²) have violated the Sabbath. This seems absurd, but the truth of the matter is that it is very difficult to provide a cogent justification for separating bones from fish. In the late nineteenth century, a scholar took up this problem and gave some very unpersuasive answers.³ It is difficult to imagine he was unaware

of their inadequacies. Rather his underlying assumption was that it *was* permissible. There must be *some* valid explanation for the practice, if not necessarily his. Otherwise hundreds of thousands, perhaps, millions of well-intending, observant Jews had inconceivably been desecrating the Sabbath for some twenty centuries. His attitude was neither unique nor novel. A similar disposition informs the multi-volumed *Arukh ha-Shulhan*, the late nineteenth century reformulation of the *Shulhan Arukh*.⁴ Indeed, this was the classic Ashkenazic position for centuries, one which saw the practice of the people as an expression of halakhic truth. It is no exaggeration to say that the Ashkenazic community saw the law as manifesting itself in two forms: in the canonized written corpus (the Talmud and codes), and in the regnant practices of the people. Custom was a correlative datum of the halakhic system. And, on frequent occasions, the written word was reread in light of traditional behavior.⁵

This dual tradition of the intellectual and the mimetic, law as taught and law as practiced, which stretched back for centuries, begins to break down in the twilight years of the author of the *Arukh ha-Shulhan*, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The change is strikingly attested to in the famous code of the next generation, the *Mishnah Berurah*.⁶ This influential work reflects no such reflexive justification of established religious practice, which is not to say that it condemns received practice. Its author, the Hafetz Hayyim, was hardly a revolutionary. His instincts were conservative and strongly inclined him toward some *post facto* justification. The difference between his posture and that of his predecessor, the author of the *Arukh ha-Shulhan*, is that he surveys the entire literature and then shows that the practice is plausibly justifiable in terms of that literature. His interpretations, while not necessarily persuasive, always stay within the bounds of the reasonable. And the legal coordinates upon which the *Mishnah Berurah* plots the issue are the written literature and the written literature alone.⁷ With sufficient erudition and inclination, received practice can almost invariably be charted on these axes, but it is no longer inherently valid. It can stand on its own no more.

Common practice in the *Mishnah Berurah* has lost its independent status and needs to be squared with the written word. Nevertheless, the practices there evaluated are what someone writing a commentary upon *Shulhan Arukh* would normally remark on. General practice as such is not under scrutiny or investigation in the *Mishnah Berurah*. It is very much so in the religious community of today.

One of the most striking phenomena of the contemporary community is the explosion of halakhic works on practical observance. I do not refer to the stream of works on Sabbath laws, as these can be explained simply as attempts to determine the status, that is to say, the permissibility of use, of many new artifacts of modern technology, similar to the spate of recent works on definition of death and the status of organ transplants. Nor do I have in mind the halakhic questions raised by the endless proffer of new goods in an affluent society. I refer rather to the publications on *tallit* and *tefillin*, works on the daily round of prayers and blessings in synagogue and home, tomes on High Holiday and and Passover observance, books and pamphlets on every imaginable topic. The vast halakhic corpus is being scoured, new doctrines discovered and elicited, old ones given new prominence, and the results collated and published. Abruptly and within a generation, a rich literature of religious observance has been created and, this should be underscored, it focuses on performances Jews have engaged in and articles they have used for thousands of years.⁸ These books, moreover, are avidly purchased and on a mass scale; sales are in the thousands, occasionally in the tens of thousands. It would be surprising if such popularity did not indicate some degree of adoption. Intellectual curiosity *per se* is rarely that widespread. Much of the traditional religious practice has been undergoing massive reevaluation, and by popular demand or, at the very least, by unsolicited popular consent. In Bnei Brak and in Borough Park, and to a lesser, but still very real extent, in Kiryat Shmuel and Teaneck, religious observance is being both amplified and raised to new, rigorous heights.

Significantly, this massive, critical audit did not emerge from the ranks of the left or centrist Orthodoxy, some of whose predecessors might have justly been suspect of religious laxity,⁹ but from the inner sanctum of the *haredi* world, from the ranks of the Kolel Hazon Ish and the Lakewood Yeshivah. It issued forth from men whose teachers and parents were beyond any suspicion of ritual negligence or casualness. Moreover, it scarcely focused on areas where remissness had been common, even on the left. Indeed, its earliest manifestations were in spheres of religious performance where there had been universal compliance. The audit, rather, has encompassed all aspects of religious life, and its conclusions have left little untouched. And the best example and, also, one of the earliest ones, is *shiurim* (minimal requisite quantities). On Pesach evening one is obliged to a minimal amount of *matzah*—a quantity equal to the size of an olive. Jews have been practicing the Seder for thousands of

years, and no one paid very much attention to what that *shiur* was. One knew it automatically, for one had seen it eaten at one's parents table on innumerable Passover eves; one simply did as one's parents had done. Around the year 1940, R. Yeshayahu Karelitz, the *Hazon Ish*, published an essay in which he vigorously questioned whether scholars had not, in effect, seriously underestimated the size of an olive in Talmudic times. He then insisted on a minimal standard about twice the size of the commonly accepted one.¹⁰ Within a decade his doctrine began to seep down into popular practice, and by now has become almost *de rigueur* in religious, certainly younger religious circles.¹¹

This development takes on significance when placed in historical perspective. The problem of "minimal requisite quantities" (*shiurim*) has been known since the mid-eighteenth century, when scholars in both Central and Eastern Europe discovered that the *shiurim* commonly employed with regard to solid food did not square with the liquid-volume *shiurim* that we know in other aspects of Jewish law. The ineluctable conclusion was that the standard requisite quantity of solid food consumption should be roughly doubled. Though the men who raised this issue, the GRA and the Noda Beyehuda,¹² were some of the most famous Talmudists of the modern era, whose works are, to this day, staples of rabbinic study, nevertheless, their words fell on deaf ears and were without any impact, even in the most scholarly and religiously meticulous circles¹³. It was perfectly clear to all concerned that Jews had been eating *matzot* for thousands of years, and that no textual analysis could affect in any way a millennia-old tradition. The problem was theoretically interesting, but practically irrelevant.

And then a dramatic shift occurs. A theoretical position that had been around for close to two centuries suddenly begins in the 1950's to assume practical significance and within a decade becomes authoritative. From then on, traditional conduct, no matter how venerable, how elementary, or how closely remembered, yields to the demands of theoretical knowledge. Established practice can no longer hold its own against the demands of the written word.

Significantly, this loss by the home of its standing as religious authenticator has taken place not simply among the modern orthodox, but first, indeed foremost, among the *haredim*, and in their innermost recess—the home. The zealously sheltered hearth of the *haredi* world can no longer validate religious practice. The authenticity of tradition is now in question in the ultra-orthodox world itself.



This development is related to the salient events of Ashkenazic Jewish history of the past century.¹⁴ In the multi-ethnic, corporate states of central and Eastern Europe, nationalities lived for hundreds of years side by side, each with its own language, its own religion, its way of dress and diet. Living together, these groups had much in common, yet at the same time they remained distinctly apart. Each had its own way of life, its own code of conduct, which was transmitted formally in the school, informally in the home and street — these are the acculturating agencies—, each complementing and reinforcing one another. Equally significant, each way of life seemed inevitable to its members. Crossing over, while theoretically possible, was inconceivable, especially when it entailed a change of religion.

These societies were traditional, taking their values and code of conduct as a given, acting unselfconsciously, unaware that life could be lived differently. This is best epitomized in the title of one of the four units of the *Shulhan Arukh*. The one treating religious law is called *Orah Hayyim—The Way of Life*. And aptly so. In the enclaves of Eastern Europe, going to *shul* (synagogue) in the morning, putting on a *tallit katan* (fringed garment) and wearing *pe'ot* (sidelocks) were for centuries the way of life of the Jew. These acts were done with the same naturalness and sense of inevitability as we experience in putting on those two strange Western garments, socks and ties. Clothes are a second skin.

The old ways came, in the closing years of the nineteenth century and the early ones of the twentieth, under the successive ideological assaults of the Socialist and Communist movements and that of Zionism. In the cities there was the added struggle with secularism, all the more acute as the ground there had been eroded over the previous half century by a growing movement of Enlightenment. The defections, especially in urban areas, were massive; traditional life was severely shaken, though not shattered. How much of this life would have emerged unaltered from the emergent movements of modernity in Eastern Europe, we shall never know, as the Holocaust, among other things, wrote *finis* to a culture. There was, however, little chance that the old ways would be preserved by the “surviving remnant,” the relatives and neighbors of those who perished, who earlier had embarked for America and Israel. These massive waves of migration had wrenched these people suddenly from a familiar life and an accustomed environment, and thrust them into a strange country where even stranger manners prevailed. Simple con-

formity to a habitual pattern could not be adequate, for the problems of life were now new and different.¹⁵ What was left of traditional Jewry regrouped in two camps: those who partially acculturated to the society that enveloped them, and those who decisively turned their back on it, whom we, for lack of a better term, have called *haredim*. They, of course, would define themselves simply as Jews—Jews resolutely upholding the ways of their fathers.

They are that indeed. Resolve, however, is possible only in a choice, and ways of life that are upheld are no longer a given. Borough Park and Bnei Brak, not to speak of Riverdale and Teaneck, while demographically far larger than any *shtetl*, are, as we shall see, enclaves rather than cultures. Alternatives now exist, and adherence is voluntary. A traditional society has been transformed into an orthodox one,¹⁶ and religious conduct is less the product of social custom than of conscious, reflective behavior. If the *tallit katan* is worn not as a matter of course but as a matter of belief, it has then become a ritual object. A ritual can no more be approximated than an incantation can be summarized. Its essence lies in its accuracy. It is that accuracy that religious Jews are now seeking. The flood of works on halakhic prerequisites and correct religious performance accurately reflects the ritualization of what had previously been routine acts and everyday objects. It mirrors the ritualization of what had been once simply components of the given world and parts of the repertoire of daily living. A way of life has become a *regula*, and behavior, once governed by habit, is now governed by rule.

If accuracy is now sought, indeed deemed critical, it can be found only in texts. For in the realm of religious practice (*issur vebeter*), custom, no matter how longstanding and vividly remembered, has little standing over and against the normative written word. To be sure, custom may impose an added stringency, but when otherwise at variance with the generally agreed interpretation of the written law, almost invariably it must yield.¹⁷ Custom *is* potent, but its true power is informal. It derives from the ability of habit to neutralize the implications of book knowledge. Anything learned from study that conflicts with accustomed practice cannot really be right, as things simply can't be different than they are.¹⁸ Once that inconceivability is lost, usage loses much of its force. Even undiminished, usage would be hard pressed to answer the new questions being asked. For habit is unthinking and takes little notice of detail. (How many people could, for example, answer accurately: "How many inches wide is your tie or belt?") When interrogated, habit replies in approximations, a matter of discredit in the new religious atmosphere.

There is currently a very strong tendency in both lay and rabbinic circles towards stringency (*humra*).¹⁹ No doubt this inclination is partly due to any group's need for self-differentiation, nor would I gainsay the existence of religious one-upsmanship. It would be unwise, however, to view this development simply as a posture towards outsiders. The development is also immanent. Habit is static; theoretical knowledge is dynamic and consequential, as ideas naturally tend to press forward to their full logical conclusions. "Only the extremes are logical" remarked Samuel Butler, "but they are absurd." No doubt. What is logical, however, is more readily agreed upon than what is absurd. When the mean is perceived as unconscionable compromise, the extreme may appear eminently reasonable.

It is one thing to fine-tune an existing practice on the basis of "newly" read books; it is wholly another to construct practice anew on the exclusive basis of books. One confronts in Jewish law, as in any other legal system, a wide variety of differing positions on any given issue. If one seeks to do things properly (and these "things" are, after all, God's will), the only course is to attempt to comply simultaneously with as many opinions as possible. Otherwise one risks invalidation. Hence the policy of "maximum position compliance," so characteristic of contemporary jurisprudence, which in turn leads to yet further stringency.

This reconstruction of practice is further complicated by the ingrained limitations of language. Words are good for description, even better for analysis, but pathetically inadequate for teaching how to do something. (Try learning, for example, how to tie shoe laces from written instructions.) One learns best by being shown, that is to say, mimetically. When conduct *is* learned from texts, conflicting views about its performance proliferate, and the simplest gesture becomes acutely complicated.²⁰

Fundamentally, all the above—stringency, "maximum position compliance," and the proliferation of complications and demands—simply reflect the essential change in the nature of religious performance that occurs in a text culture. Books cannot demonstrate conduct; they can only state its requirements. One then seeks to act in a way that meets those demands.²¹ Performance is no longer, as in a traditional society, replication of what one has seen, but implementation of what one knows. Seeking to mirror the norm, religious observance is subordinated to it. In a text culture, behavior becomes, inevitably, a function of the ideas it consciously seeks to realize.

No longer independent, religious performance loses then its inherited, fixed character. Indeed, during the transitional period

(and for some time after), there is a destabilization of practice, as the traditional inventory of religious objects and repertoire of religious acts are weighed and progressively found wanting. For many of those raised in the old order, the result is baffling, at times infuriating, as they discover that habits of a lifetime no longer suffice. Increasingly, they sense that their religious past, not to speak of that of their parents and teachers, is being implicitly challenged, and, on occasion, not just implicitly.²² But for most, both for the natives of the emergent text culture and its naturalized citizens alike, the vision of perfect accord between precept and practice beckons to a brave new world. And, as ideas are dynamic and consequential, that vision beckons also to an expanding world and of unprecedented consistency. The eager agenda of the religious community has, understandably, now become the translation of the ever increasing knowledge of the Divine norm into the practice of the Divine service.

So large an endeavor and so ambitious an aspiration are never without implications.²³ Translation entails, first, grasping an idea in its manifold fullness, and then, executing it in practice. This gives rise to a performative spirituality, not unlike that of the arts, with all its unabating tension. What is at stake here, however, is not fidelity to some personal vision, but to what is perceived as the Divine Will. Though the intensity of the strain may differ between religion and art, the nature of the tension is the same, for it springs from the same limitations in human comprehension and implementation. Knowledge rarely yields finality. Initially, thought does indeed narrow the range of interpretation by detecting weaknesses in apparent options, but almost invariably, it ends with presenting the inquirer with a number of equally possible understandings, each making a comparable claim to fidelity. Performance, however, demands choice, insistent and continuous. Whatever the decisions, their implementation is then beset by the haunting disparity between vision and realization, reach and grasp.

A tireless quest for absolute accuracy, for “perfect fit”—faultless congruence between conception and performance—is the hallmark of contemporary religiosity. The search is dedicated and unremitting; yet it invariably falls short of success. For spiritual life is an attempt, as a great pianist once put it, to play music that is better than it can be played. Such an endeavor may finally become so heavy with strain that it can no longer take wing, or people may simply weary of repeated failure, no matter how inspired. The eager toil of one age usually appears futile to the next, and the performative aspiration, so widespread now, may soon give way to one of a wholly different kind,

even accompanied by the derision that so often attends the discarding of an ideal. Yet this Sisyphean spirituality will never wholly disappear, for there will always be those who hear the written notes and who find in absolute fidelity the most sublime freedom.

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In all probability, so arduous an enterprise would not have taken so wide a hold had it not also answered some profound need. "The spirit blows where it listeth" is often true of individuals, rarely of groups. The process we have described began roughly in the mid-nineteen-fifties,²⁴ gathered force noticeably in the next decade, and by the mid-Seventies was well on its way to being, if it had not already become, the dominant mode of religiosity. The shift of authority to text, though born of migration, did not then occur among the immigrants themselves but among their children or their children's children.²⁵ This is true even of the post-Holocaust immigration. *Haredi* communities had received a small, but significant, infusion after World War II, which had strengthened their numbers and steeled their resolution. Unlike their predecessors, these newcomers came not as immigrants but as refugees, not seeking a new world but fleeing from a suddenly beleaguered old one. And they came in groups rather than individually.²⁶ However, equally unlike their predecessors, they did not hail from the self-contained *shtetl* or the culturally isolated ghettos of Poland and the Pale. Few from those territories escaped the Holocaust. These refugees came from the more urbanized areas of Central Europe, especially Hungary, and their arrival in America was not their first encounter with the contemporary world.²⁷ The rise of the text culture occurred only after a sustained exposure to modernity, in homes some twice removed from the *shtetl*.

This exposure finally made itself felt, as the century passed its halfway mark, not in willful accommodation, God forbid, but in unconscious acculturation, as large (though, not all²⁸) segments of the *haredi* enclave, not to speak of modern Orthodoxy, increasingly adopted the consumer culture and its implicit values, above all the legitimacy of pursuing material gratification.²⁹ Much of the *haredi* community took on an increasingly middle class life style. The frumpy dress of women generally disappeared, as did their patently artificial wigs. Married women continued, of course, to cover their hair, as tradition demanded, but the wigs were now fashionably elegant as were also their dresses, which were, to be sure, appropriately modest, but

now attractively so. Elegant boutiques flourished in Borough Park. Ethnic food gave way to culinary pluralism, and French, Italian, Oriental and Far Eastern restaurants blossomed under the strictest rabbinic supervision. Dining out, once reserved for special occasions, became common. Rock music sung with “kosher” lyrics was heard at the weddings of the most religious.³⁰ There had been no “kosher” jazz or “kosher” swing, for music is evocative, and what was elicited by the contemporary beat was felt by the previous generation to be alien to a “Jewish rejoicing” (*yidische simche*). This was no longer the case. The body syncopated to the beat of rock, and the emotional receptivities that the contemporary rhythm engendered were now felt to be consonant with the spirit of “Jewish rejoicing.” Indeed, “hasidic” rock concerts, though decried, were not unheard of. The extended family of the old country (*mishpokhe*) gave way considerably to the nuclear one. Personal gratification, here and now, and individual attainment became increasingly accepted values. Family lineage (*yikhes*) still played an important role in marriage and communal affairs, but personal career achievement increasingly played an equal, if not a greater one. Divorce, once rare in religious circles, became all too familiar. The divorce rate, of course, was far lower than that of the surrounding society, but the numbers were believed to be sufficiently large and the phenomenon sufficiently new to cause consternation.³¹

Even the accomplishments of Orthodoxy had their untoward consequences. The smooth incorporation of religious practice into a middle class lifestyle, meant that observance now differentiated less. Apart from their formal requirements, religious observances also engender ways of living, Eating only kosher food, for example, precludes going out to lunch, vacationing where one wishes and dining out regularly as a form of entertainment. The proliferation of kosher eateries and the availability of literally thousands of kosher products in the consumer market,³² opened the way to such pursuits, so the religious way of life became, in one more regard, less distinguishable from that of others. The facilitation of religious practice that occurred in every aspect of daily life was a tribute to the adaptability of the religious and to their new mastery of their environment; it also diminished some of the millennia-old impact of observance.

Not only did the same amount of practice now yield a smaller sum of difference, but the amount of practice itself was also far less than before. A mimetic tradition mirrors rather than discriminates. Without criteria by which to evaluate practice, it cannot generally distinguish between central and peripheral, or even between religious demands and folkways. And the last two tended to be deeply

intertwined in Eastern Europe, as ritual, which was seen to have a physical efficacy, was mobilized to ward off the threatening forces that stalked man's every step in a world precariously balanced between the powers of good and evil (*sitra ahara*). The rituals of defense, drawn from the most diverse sources, were religiously inflected, for the Jew knew that what lay in wait for him was not goblins, as the peasant thought, but *shedim*, and that these agents of the *sitra ahara* could be defeated only by the proven weapons of traditional lore. Prophylactic ritual flourished as it served the roles of both religion and science. Its rites were thoroughly intertwined with the normative ones and, to most, indistinguishable from one another. Joined in the struggle for health, for example, were amulets, blessings, incantations, and prayers.³³ In the world now inhabited by religious Jewry, however, the material environment has been controlled by a neutral technology, and an animistic, value-driven cosmos replaced by a mechanistic and indifferent one. Modernity has thus defoliated most of these practices and stripped the remaining ones of their significance. People still gather on the eve of circumcision, but as an occasion of rejoicing, not as a nightwatch (*wachnacht*) to forestall the forces of evil from spiriting away the infant.³⁴ A Jewish hospital differs from a Catholic one in the symbols on its walls and in the personal religion of its staff, but not in any way in the procedures of health care. As religion ceased to be called upon to control directly the natural world, many vital areas of activity lost their religious coloration, and, with it, their differentiating force.

It would be strange, indeed, if this diminution of otherness did not evoke some response in the religious world. They were "a nation apart," and had lived and died for that apartness. Their deepest instincts called for difference, and those instincts were not to be denied. Problems of meaningful survival were not new to religious Jews, and they were not long in evolving the following response:

If customary observances differentiated less, more observances were obviously called for. Indeed, they always had been called for, as the normative texts clearly show, but those calls had gone unheeded because of the power of habit and the heavy hand of custom. The inner differences of pulse and palate may well have been leveled, and the distinctive Jewish ideals of appearance and attractiveness may equally have been lost. This was deplorable, and indeed our religious leaders had long railed against the growing pursuit of happiness.³⁵ But small wonder, for people had failed to take stock in the New World. They had turned to habit and folklore for guidance rather than to

study, and despite the best of intentions, their observances had been fractional. Even that fraction had been less than it seemed, for superstition had been confused with law, and, on occasion, had even supplanted it. Religious life must be constructed anew and according to the groundplan embedded in the canonized literature, and in that literature alone. While this reconstruction was going on, the struggle for the inner recesses of the believer would continue as before, only now it would be bolstered by the intensification of religious practice. And there was hope for the outcome, for our moralists (*hakhmei hamussar*) had always insisted that “the outer affects the inner,” that constantly repeated deeds finally affect the personality. As for the so-called stringency, some of it was simply a misperception based on the casual attitude of the past, much only legal prudence. As for the remainder—if there was one—that too was for the good, for there could not be too much observance when dwelling amid the fleshpots of Egypt.

An outside spectator, on the other hand, might have said that as large spheres of human activity were emptied of religious meaning and difference, an intensification of that difference in the remaining ones was only natural. Moreover, the more pervasive the influence of the milieu, the more natural the need of a chosen people to reassert its distinctiveness and to mark ever more sharply its identity borders. As the inner differences erode, the outer ones must be increased and intensified, for, progressively, they provide more and more of the crucial otherness. In addition, the more stable and comprehensive the code of conduct, the less psychologically threatening are the subtler inroads of the environment. The narrowing of the cultural divide has thrust a double burden on religious observance, as ritual must now do on its own what ritual joined with ethnicity had done before. Religious practice, that spectator might have added, had always served to separate Jews from their neighbors; however, it had not borne alone that burden. It was now being called on to do so, for little else distinguished Jew from Gentile, or the religious Jew from the non-religious, for that matter.

But then, there always is a dissimilarity between what is obvious to the participant and what is clear to the observer.

Both participant and observer, however, would have agreed that it was the mooring of religion in sacred texts that enabled this reassertion of Orthodoxy's difference. And for those who sought to be different and had something about which to be genuinely different,³⁶ the Sixties in America were good years, as were the decades that followed. The establishment lost much of its social and cultural