Study Guide for:
Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History
Zev Eleff

Session 1: Engaging Reform

Learning Goals: By its very nature, an “orthodox” faith represents a response to some form of heterodox. Before the emergence of a “reform” element, Jews in this modern period by and large did not divide into neat “denominations” or “movements.” In the early 1820s, then, Orthodox Jews defended their traditional against Reform and did their best to articulate a vision for their community. Students and learners should explore the various and fluid meanings of “Orthodox Judaism” and how it rose up in reaction to Reform Judaism.

Reading: Chapter 1

Questions for Discussion
1. What were some of the different ways in which traditional Jews responded to the early incarnations of Jewish Reform in America?

2. Why might a “traditional” Jew accept the label “Orthodox” and why might they avoid that designation in their religious lives?

3. On what grounds did “Orthodox” Jews defend their inabilities to properly observe Jewish law? Are there echoes of those explanations today? If so, how might they differ?

Suggestions for Further Reading


Session 2: An Orthodox Approach to Texts

Learning Goals: Teachers and students should use this session to gain a better understanding of the role that texts play in the formation of Orthodox Judaism’s religious culture. In addition to the Bible, traditional Jews consider the prayer book and the Talmud very sacred. Therefore, attempts to change those texts or devalue them in some manner were viewed as hostile in the minds of Orthodox Jews.

Reading: Chapter 2

Suggestions for Further Reading


Questions for Discussion
1. Why do you believe it was so important for Orthodox defenders to raise the stature of the Talmud in response to the inroads paved by Reform leaders?

2. How did Orthodox defenses of the Talmud and the prayer book differ? In which ways were they similar?

3. Did you find any of the language used in this chapter’s texts overly “harsh?” If so, why do you think Orthodox leaders felt compelled at times to write in such extreme fashion?
Session 3: An Orthodox Rabbinate

Learning Goals: The role of authority is crucial to understanding the developments of religious community in the United States. In its first decades in America, Orthodox Judaism was led by the laity. In fact, the first ordained rabbis did not reach the United States until the 1840s. In the later decades of the century, rabbinic champions of Orthodox Judaism compete for control of the traditionalist community. This tension should be explored in this session.

Reading: Chapter 3

Suggestions for Further Reading


Questions for Discussion
1. How do these documents demonstrate the changing image of the traditional American rabbinate?

2. Did Alexander Kohut express “Orthodox” ideals in his debates with Kaufmann Kohler?

3. Was the Jewish Theological Seminary Association conceived as an “Orthodox institution?”
**Session 4: The Eastern Europeanization of American Orthodoxy**

**Learning Goals:** The character of the Orthodox community was irrevocably altered by the Jewish mass migration to the United States around the turn of the twentieth century. Too often it is perceived that immigrants were of one mind in relating to their new American environs. This session and its assigned sources are intended to challenge that narrow viewpoint.

**Reading:** Chapter 4

**Suggestions for Further Reading**


**Questions for Discussion**
1. What challenges to Rabbi Jacob Joseph face upon arrival in America?
2. What do these sources teach about the assumptions and decisions of Orthodox leaders who “resisted” the pull toward American acculturation?
3. What are different “accommodationist” perspectives explored in this chapter’s documents? How are these views similar and how are they different from one another?
Session 5: Trailblazers?

Learning Goals: History is the result of contingencies, or choices made by historical actors. This session challenges readers and learners to consider why Orthodox Jews chose to follow Bernard Revel rather than the vision of Solomon Schechter and the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Reading: Chapter 5

Suggestions for Further Reading

Zev Eleff, “Jewish Immigrants, Liberal Higher Education and the Quest for a Torah u-Madda Curriculum at Yeshiva College,” *Tradition* 44 (Summer 2011): 19-34


Questions for Discussion
1. What was the “Revel Revolution” and how did it compare with earlier visions of Orthodox Judaism in the United States?

2. Was Solomon Schechter “Orthodox?”

3. Why do you think Revel remained within the Orthodox fold whereas Solomon Schechter’s legacy moved him to Conservative Judaism?
Session 6: The Parting of the Ways of Orthodox and Conservative Judaism

Learning Goals: The purpose of this session is to explore the long separation between Conservative and Orthodox Judaism. For the first half of the century, it was not at all clear how to identify a rabbi, layperson or synagogue as part of one religious movement or the other. There were various causes for the eventual split, and learners should be encouraged to explore these texts and identify them.

Reading: Chapter 6

Suggestions for Further Reading


Questions for Discussion
1. Why did rabbis like Leo Jung and Joseph Lookstein hesitate to embrace “Orthodox Judaism?” What do you think was gained and lost with their decisions?

2. Why was mixed seating a major point of contention in conversations about Orthodox and Conservative Judaism?

3. Why did rightwing Orthodox leaders oppose the Synagogue Council of America? How did the interdenominational organization threaten their culture and community?
Session 7: Becoming Modern Orthodox Jews

Learning Goals: This session asks students to analyze how a Modern Orthodox Movement emerged in American Jewish life. Learners should be asked to consider how youth played a role in this process, as well as the balance between lay and rabbinic influences. In addition, the session should call attention to the fact that this movement emerged after a decades-long struggle for Orthodox Jewish leaders to define the contours of their religious community, particularly in an American milieu.

Reading: Chapter 7

Suggestions for Further Reading

Zev Eleff, “‘Viva Yeshiva!’: The Tale of the Mighty Mites and the College Bowl,” American Jewish History 96 (December 2010): 287-305.


Questions for Discussion
1. Why did the members of the so-called “New Orthodox Left” reject the designation “Modern Orthodoxy?”

2. What might Modern Orthodox Judaism have looked like if more liberal Orthodox rabbis claimed leadership of the movement?

3. What in Rabbi Norman Lamm’s 1969 article is reflective of a “Modern Orthodox” point of view?
Session 8: Orthodox Inc.

Learning Goals: Once better consolidated, the Modern Orthodox community managed to identify several important and “standard” features of its allied institutions and ideals. This session should ask students to consider why these areas were set into focus, perhaps over others.

Reading: Chapter 8

Suggestions for Further Reading


Questions for Discussion
1. Why did the Jewish day school emerged as one of the more celebrated institutions within America’s Orthodox community?

2. In the interview with Rabbi Alexander Rosenberg on kashrut, why do you think the interview felt compelled to raise issues of Orthodox observance?

3. Why did Rabbi Soloveitchik’s position on interfaith dialogue achieve a consensus among Orthodox leaders?
Session 9: The New Orthodox Synagogue

Learning Goals: Like Session 3, this area of study returns the focus to the role of rabbis and the synagogue in dictating the developments of Orthodox Judaism in the United States. For many Orthodox Jews, the synagogue was the major site (along with the day schools, particularly later in the century) where congregants looked to obtain their religious culture and points of social contact. Students should be urged to address how the synagogue conveyed Orthodox culture and whether its various messages were truly on the same Modern Orthodox page.

Reading: Chapter 9

Suggestions for Further Reading


Questions for Discussion
1. How did economic mobility influence the Orthodox synagogue in the post-World War II period?

2. How did proximity to Conservative communities impact Orthodox Jewish life in American suburbs?

3. How do the documents in this chapter describe the “evolution” of the Orthodox rabbinate in the post-World War II period?
Session 10: What do Orthodox Jews Believe?

**Learning Goals:** Interestingly, most Modern Orthodox Jews were united by social and cultural factors, rather than a shared theological outlook. This session urges students to engage the variety of Orthodox theological positions in the postwar period.

**Reading:** Chapter 10

**Suggestions for Further Reading**


**Questions for Discussion**
1. The Orthodox presentations of “theology” in this chapter differ markedly from one another. What are the advantages and disadvantages of their literary forms and viewpoints?

2. Consider the two excerpts from the *Commentary* symposium. How did the answers provided by Marvin Fox and Immanuel Jakobovits differ?

3. What was “radical” about Rabbi Emanuel Rackman’s view of Jewish law? Why did it elicit criticism?
Session 11: Responding to Tragedies and Triumphs

Learning Goals: America’s Orthodox Jews were deeply impacted by changes in the global Jewish community. Recurrently, their leaders were challenged to offer responses to major and cataclysmic events such as the Holocaust and the rise of the State of Israel. Students should be encouraged to ask how Orthodox Jews reacted to the global situation of Jews and the broader situation of the American social and political landscape.

Reading: Chapter 11

Suggestions for Further Reading


Questions for Discussion
1. How did Orthodox leaders connect the Holocaust to the State of Israel?

2. What are the differences that Bessie Gotsfeld distinguish between religious life in “Eretz Israel” and the “Galut?”

3. Why did some leaders within the Movement to Free Soviet Jewry speak of their cause in religious terms and why did other choose not to do so?
Session 12: The Orthodox Family

Learning Goals: This session places an emphasis on the domestic condition of the Modern Orthodox community. How did the personal decisions of Orthodox women and men cohere with the more public pronouncements and ideologies of Orthodox Judaism? What role did public policy—particularly in the area of family purity—play in how Orthodox families augured their lives? These are the sorts of broad questions that this session should provoke.

Reading: Chapter 12

Suggestions for Further Reading


Questions for Discussion
1. In what ways did Rabbi Norman Lamm’s fresh treatment of “family purity” differ from the earlier statement issued by the Orthodox Union?

2. What were Rabbi Herbert Goldstein’s reasons for his anti-birth control stance? How did Judaism and Jewish law figure into his argument?

3. Evaluate the Rabbinical Council of America’s 1993 resolution on Agunah. In which ways was this text representative of a sea change in Modern Orthodox Judaism? In which ways was it not?
**Session 13: From Rebbetzin to Rabbah**

**Learning Goals:** Other sessions offer insight into the role of gender in the development of American Orthodox Jewish life. However, this session takes a more focused look at the role of female Orthodox leadership. Without question, women have obtained an ever-increasing role in this sector of American Judaism. This session should explore how that role has been defined at different stages and the rhetoric used by Orthodox women to describe their positions within Orthodox leadership.

**Reading:** Chapter 13

**Suggestions for Further Reading**

Schwartz.


**Questions for Discussion**
1. How has the role of the Orthodox rebbetzin changed over the course of twentieth century?

2. How did the two tracks of female congregational leadership compare and contrast in the 1980s and 1990s?

3. What can be gleaned from the sources in this chapter about the relationship between Orthodox Judaism and feminism?
Session 14: Sliding to the Right and to the Left

Learning Goals: Harmony within Modern Orthodox Judaism was a rare commodity. This session asks learners and students to explore the various avenues of the fissures. Modern Orthodox Judaism had considered itself the occupier of the “center.” Yet, an assortment of elements tried to move it to both the right and left. On some occasions, observers accused “centrists” of sliding out of that difficult position. This session is ripe for consideration of how a religious balance was so difficult to maintain.

Reading: Chapter 14

Suggestions for Further Reading


Questions for Discussion
1. How did feminism and “women’s issues” shape the discussions of Modern Orthodox Jews in the final decades of the twentieth century?

2. Consider the variety of ways that Modern Orthodox Jews used Rabbi Soloveitchik to argue for their perspectives? Why do you think each side was able to use Soloveitchik to justify their respective viewpoints?

3. Consider the lexical transformation of the Modern Orthodox community in this period? What is the different between a “Modern Orthodox” Jew and a “Centrist” Jew?
Session 15: Reconsidering Modern Orthodox in a New Century

Learning Goals: The fallout of the fissures within Modern Orthodox Judaism caused great confusion and religious depression. In the wake of this turmoil, a group of Orthodox Jews whose views did not altogether mirror the positions of Modern Orthodox leaders of previous generations attempted to claim the mantle of Modern Orthodox Judaism. Students should read the sources included in this session with sensitivity and consider how this epoch resembled and different from previous incarnations of Modern Orthodoxy.

Reading: Chapter 15

Suggestions for Further Reading


Questions for Discussion
1. How does the criticism levied against Modern Orthodox Judaism in this chapter differ from the kind expressed in the previous chapter?

2. How do you view Rabbi Saul Berman’s optimism in his announcement on the close of Edah in light of the pessimism and disinterest shared by the earlier texts in this chapter?

3. How did Rabbi Asher Lopatin attempt to “reclaim” and “rejuvenate” Modern Orthodox Judaism? Was this an isolated moment or should it be viewed in a wider historical context?