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NORMAN LAMM



INTRODUCTION TO ZVI KURZWIEL'S

"THE MODERN IMPULSE IN TRADITIONAL JUDAISM"

Orthodox Judaism is an "in" topic nowadays. Respectable journalists devote major reports to it, sociologists analyze it, learned societies invite scholarly papers on it. A movement that, fifteen years after the start of this century, was widely expected to fade away and become a relic of interest only to historians and antiquarians, is, fifteen years before the end of this century, full of life, vigor, dynamism -- and problems.

The problems largely center on the nature of the Orthodoxy or Orthodoxies that are emerging and their relations to each other. None of them has yet received adequate scholarly attention. The proliferation of "right wing" yeshivot and communities has not been sufficiently documented and, certainly, we do not possess enough competent analysis of this phenomenon. The few articles and works that have appeared are only a beginning, especially if one excludes polemics and apologetics.

The story is no different with Modern or Centrist Orthodoxy (the labels are notoriously short-lived and singularly

insignificant). Those of us engaged in the enterprise of leading it, fashioning it, teaching it, and elaborating it are too preoccupied, and lack the proper perspective, to see it in its historical setting and to appreciate the continuities and discontinuities in its development.

It has remained, therefore, to an Israeli scholar familiar with the European antecedents of the modernist wing of Orthodoxy to lay bare the background and thus illuminate the foreground of contemporary centrist Orthodoxy. Zvi Kurzweil makes no pretenses to comprehensiveness. He could hardly do so for a movement which is very much in flux and which requires not only theological but social historians as well to do it justice.

Our author's goals are limited to the ideological roots of the modern impulse in traditional Judaism. This he has done in both a competent and interesting manner, one that will engage the attention of both scholar and layman. Unquestionably, there will be those who will challenge him on this or that point, or wish to add or subtract one item or another from his description. No matter; he has made a beginning, an excellent beginning, in systematically bringing together much of the relevant material. His scholarship is evident throughout this book.

All those who are interested in the contemporary Jewish religious scene, and especially that of Orthodox Judaism, will remain very much in his debt.

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