Nostalgia, inspiration, ambivalence: Eastern Europe, immigration, and the construction of collective memory in contemporary American Haredi historiography

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Abstract  Viewing itself as the spiritual heir of Eastern European Orthodoxy, contemporary Haredi Orthodoxy in the United States is much invested in its representation of the transition of Jews and Judaism from Eastern Europe to the United States. The story of this transition is contemporary American Haredi Jewry’s “founding myth,” shaped into a narrative that aids the Haredi community to define itself with respect to the American culture in which it is perforce embedded. Contemporary English language Haredi historical writing offers a nostalgic image of Eastern European Jewry, as well as a vision of the destructive effects of immigration to America. It paints an inspirational portrait of a handful of immigrant rabbis who managed to recreate on American shores a (purportedly) ideal Judaism of Eastern Europe, despite American culture’s imputed destructive nature. At the same time, this narrative also conveys a sense that Americanization is not all bad, that it is even a necessary aspect of contemporary Haredi Judaism.

The past, as Edward Shils reminds us, is a plastic thing, something to be shaped and reshaped.¹ What happened may be less important than what stories we tell one another about what happened. Telling these stories is inevitably an act of construction. Individuals and communities pick and choose what to report, interpret and contextualize. They invent occurrences that never happened or suffer from “collective amnesia”² about ones that did. They weave that information into a story, a narrative. All groups and communities tell such stories about their pasts and their origins. These stories are critical for developing group identity, for teaching members about what it means to be part of the group. They help the group define itself, organize its stance toward the world, and imagine its future, since a shared image of the past inevitably implies a shared vision of the present and the future.³

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Haredim [ultra-Orthodox Jews] are particularly concerned with defining and distinguishing themselves in the context of contemporary culture. These Jews reject a great deal of what they see around them as spiritually damaging and dangerous. They isolate themselves from others, and work to maintain allegiance to the religious traditions of the past. As a demographic and cognitive minority, they must do a great deal of work to explain to themselves who they are, where they came from, and why they insist on being so distinctive. Orthodox and Haredi historiographies have been, throughout the modern era, an important element in these devout Jews’ attempts to negotiate their self-definition. With their conservative, tradition-bound culture, Haredi Jews find the past to be a matter of particular importance. By telling stories of their historical origins, these Jews can help explain their distinctiveness to themselves and to others, and can help transmit to listeners and readers the community’s most deeply held values. In this paper, I would like to examine the way in which contemporary American Haredi Jewry describes its roots in the Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe to the United States that began in the end of the nineteenth century and continued in various waves through after the Second World War. This Haredi Jewry perceives itself as a spiritual descendant of a certain segment of Eastern European Jewry, and its identity is bound up with the story of the transition of those Jews and their Judaism to the United States.

This Haredi community is characterized by its strict adherence to Jewish law and custom, separate enclave neighborhoods, distinctive patterns of dress, isolationist social practices, and opposition to what it perceives as the dangers of contemporary culture. I will focus in particular on the more moderately isolationist wing of American Haredi Jewry, a community that William Helmreich refers to as “strictly Orthodox” and is referred to colloquially as “yeshivish” or “black hat.” More countercultural and enclavist than their Modern Orthodox peers to the left, this Haredi Jewry is also more acculturated and less rejectionist than some of the more isolationist Hassidic groups to its right. Loosely associated with the Agudath Israel political and religious movement, this American Haredi Jewry has grown by leaps and bounds in the past half century. Strengthened by its network of enclaves, private primary and secondary schools, and advanced yeshivas and seminar-ies, Haredi Judaism has emerged as one of the most dynamic and energetic sub-group of American Jewry. Over these same decades, a vast English-language Haredi popular literature has developed, centered on publishers such as Artscroll-Mesorah, Feldheim, and Targum Press, which is written by and for Haredi Jews. This literature includes voluminous historical writings, some of the most important of which center on Eastern Europe, immigration, and the history of American Orthodoxy. As noted by several scholars, Orthodox historiography serves an important ideological and apologetic function.