

Orthodox Judaism and the Politics of Religion: From Prewar Europe to the State of Israel. By *Daniel Mahla*.

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A particular perspective of Israel, in the last decades, is stark: with their black attire, showy headgear, bewigged women pushing buggies with several children in tow, and teeming residential enclaves, the country's ultra-Orthodox Jews have not only swelled in numbers but also appear to be increasingly unified. Daniel Mahla's *Orthodox Judaism and the Politics of Religion: From Prewar Europe to the State of Israel* excavates the reality behind the impression of ultra-Orthodox “convergence” (196) that is reflected in much of the historiography.

In the late nineteenth century, a small faction of the marginal European-Jewish movement calling for Jews to “return” to their ancestral homeland of Palestine was assertively Orthodox and hoped to shape the fledgling enterprise. It adopted the name Mizrahi and a rudimentary organizational structure within Theodor Herzl's Zionism of the early 1900s. Mizrahi, unintentionally, ignited the rise of Agudat Yisrael, another movement among the passionately Orthodox. (*Yisrael*, here, refers to the people, “Israel,” or Jews.) Members of the Agudat were fearful that Mizrahi might be taken, somehow, as representative of (supposedly) authentic, traditional Jewry. They abhorred both Zionism and its Mizrahi faction as abominations for

propagating a false messianism. The Agudat also fought Mizrahi as a threat to its pre-eminence in religious questions and to its dominance of educational institutions. The Agudat party, still rigidly opposed to the secular mainstream of Zionism, was and remains dismissive of non-Orthodox Jews in general.

Despite the adversarial birth of Agudat, it attained a place at the table in the Zionist settlement in Palestine known as the *yishuv* and, after 1948, as the State of Israel. It seems obvious that despite ongoing quarrels there has been a reconciliation of sorts between Mizrahi and Agudat, as evidenced by the muscle of the ultra-Orthodox in Israel and even that of their counterparts in New York, London, Los Angeles, and Antwerp. Scholars have tended to see “ideology” as the bridge between them (160-61).

Mahla convincingly argues that most commentary about what seems apparent is largely off base. In fact, the Mizrahi and Agudat have continually defined themselves against each other, stoking their “rivalry” (78) through “religio-political entrepreneurs” in each camp (15). However much their fates are “enmeshed,” attempts to forge alliances have rarely come to fruition, even in the most harrowing circumstances such as the Holocaust (72-73).

Mahla reveals that the Mizrahi and Agudat are best understood through how they craft their internal “pragmatic” politics and through their respective relationships to Zionist bodies and, later, to Israeli governments. While Mizrahi and Agudat communities sometimes live in close proximity, they exist as sects largely apart, each with its own luminaries and core institutions. Agudat has, however, more or less made its peace with the reality of the State

of Israel (170), and Mizrahi continually negotiates its standing in the Zionist orbit—but there has been little fusion. They do not like each other, and probably never will. While their mutual antipathy might be less virulent than their disdain for secular Jews, and especially for non-Orthodox sects of Judaism (which are just as much historical products as they are), there is little feeling of brotherhood. They occasionally diverge over Zionist policies toward Arabs and over Israel's territorial appetites, but neither possesses an internally consistent approach. Mahla explains that each group bears remarkable resemblance to, and pays homage to, its pre-Holocaust European existence. Their separateness from each other is critical, yet ideology is credited as a governing force and common ground among the major ultra-Orthodox groups (172). Their respective strong men and charismatic leaders—who do not usually embody coherent ideologies—have been far more significant

This is one of the most quietly radical works in Jewish history to have appeared in decades. It may be one of the two or three most important scholarly books in Jewish Studies overall for fifty years. Zionism as a social, cultural, and political Jewish movement, which since the time of Herzl aspired to encompass all of Jewry (as today's Israel claims to do), has cheered and bolstered but also been bedeviled by the stridently Orthodox in its midst—regardless of whether the latter are for or against Zionism in principle. To varying degrees Israel's ultra-Orthodox share a missionary zeal not only to compel those Jews who do not share their faith to support them financially but also to coerce them to strictly observe Sabbath prohibitions and eat

exclusively Kosher food. From 1881 to 1948, Zionists in Palestine, later Israel, were obliged to confront the Jews who lived in (and immigrated to) “the land of Israel” but resisted becoming a Zionist constituency. The leading ultra-Orthodox sects, the “nationalized” and those distant from national agendas, pitted against each other, infuse a great deal of tension, distrust, drama, and rancor in the Israeli political landscape. The positions they adopt are not necessarily in accord with differing approaches toward Palestinian Arabs or embittered social-class divisions among secular Jews.

Mahla is acutely aware that he is writing about policies and practices dictated, with the rarest of exceptions, by men. Control of and treatment of women by their own communities and the state are supreme concerns of all the ultra-Orthodox, but “women's suffrage” became a contested issue (111-16). The vivid opening of the book offers a glimpse of “unity” between Zionist and non-Zionist religious authorities over their shared, fierce opposition to the proposed imposition of military service on Jewish Israeli women in 1953. There was a notable public attempted reconciliation in 1912 that was also scuttled. Despite some friction between feuding ultra-Orthodox groups being “smoothed over,” a “great chasm” existed from the beginning and still remains, even after the Holocaust and birth of the State of Israel, between “two distinct socio-cultural milieus” (2-3). At present, they remain divided most apparently due to the vehement “political messianism” of the national-religious Mizrahi stream, but this “ideological” difference is, at best, a partial explanation. The focus of each group is intensely inward. Mahla's

profoundly perceptive book is an unsurpassed history of the complex, pre-Second World War European and Israeli ultra-Orthodox religious landscapes, which are not nearly as black and white as they might seem.

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