Chapter 7

Rebels, Heretics, and Exiles: Blogging among Estranged and Questioning American Hasidim

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ABSTRACT

The advent of blogging has created a medium in which estranged and disaffected members of religious groups, such as American Hasidim, have written about experiences of alienation from and critical perceptions of their spiritual communities. These blogs have an emancipating function, allowing writers unprecedented freedom of speech and expression. Moreover, such online journals often enjoy a diverse readership beyond the geographical and cultural borders of their respective communities. The present study draws on narrative analysis to explore the ways in which blogging by former and questioning members of Hasidic communities reflects the pursuit of new meaning and direction in their lives. The author contends that blogging among disaffected Hasidim challenges Hasidic communities and offers opportunities for communal self-scrutiny, revitalization, and progress toward engaging difficult and important issues that have been introduced into Orthodox Jewish life by the information and communication revolution.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Blogging can be viewed as a natural extension of conversations that are being conducted via other media, or through conversations that were formerly conducted in more contained and limited venues. Blogging also functions as a public form of journaling, since numerous blogs are spaces in which writers convey observations that were once material for diaries and personal records. One of the medium’s most prominent innovations is its provision for exchange between writers and readers. Blogging, therefore, comprises both reflection and conversation taken to electronic lengths. The enormous range of blogs reflects the diversity of human interests and culture, as
blogging has emerged as an ubiquitous vehicle of self-expression and communication. Blogging has also opened avenues of communication for individuals who were formerly isolated, allowing unprecedented opportunities for exchanging ideas and sharing thoughts and experiences. One of the most interesting examples of this trend involves bloggers belonging to American Hasidic Jewish communities, whose members are adherents of a strictly fundamentalist interpretation of Judaism.¹

Residents of urban regions of the United States, such as New York and Miami Beach, frequently encounter bearded and black-suited men and boys, as well as women and girls dressed in patently modest attire. Such individuals may be affiliated with any number of Orthodox Jewish communities, all of which adhere to varying standards of dress and demeanor, and significantly, strict codes of behavior and lifestyle that mandate limited contact with the dominant, secular culture. This chapter focuses specifically on Orthodox Jewish communities whose members identify themselves as Hasidim, a term derived from the Hebrew word hesed that means literally “loving-kindness,” and that also has to signify “pious.” As Judith Baumel-Schwartz, professor of Jewish history at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel, writes,

There is no precise number of Orthodox Jews in the world today, although various studies speak of approximately 12 million Jews worldwide, about 1.5 million of whom are Orthodox. Orthodox Judaism today ranges from Modern Orthodox (MO) to the more right-wing Haredim who are in turn composed of three subgroups: Hassidim, Mitnagdim (also called “Lithuanian” or “Yeshivish”) and Sefaradi (Oriental) Haredim. MO and Haredi Jews follow the same basic tradition, but differ in terms of strictness of religious observance of non-halachic issues. These include dress codes, attitude towards language and music, the degree to which they engage or disengage with secular society, the weight each group assigns to Torah study, their attitude towards the State of Israel, the role that they assign women in religious society and their degree of interaction with non-Jews. (2009, p. 2)

To date, there is a paucity of research focused on the relationship between the Internet and Orthodox Judaism, despite the fact that Internet technology dominates and has decisively transformed 21st-century communication practices (Rashi, 2011). In a discussion of Internet forums utilized by Orthodox Jewish women, Baumel-Schwarz (2009) points to a number of methodological issues “…connected with the nature and problems of the Internet in general and virtual communities in particular,” citing veracity, representation, and research scope as some of the most essential (p. 6). The question of veracity asks whether the people communicating in the forums and blogs really are who they claim to be. Baumel-Schwarz responds by noting that the “close-knit nature of the Orthodox Jewish world” makes it likely that many of the virtual discussants have some level of personal acquaintance with each other that enhances the level of trust in their online communication. This observation is confirmed by material contained in this chapter, as is her comment that it is not unusual for some bloggers to eventually volunteer personal information online.

The second issue Baumel-Schwartz addresses is representation: to what extent are the founders of and contributors to the Internet forums and blogs representative of their respective communities? An answer to this question can be approached by attending to a small body of research treating the phenomenon of alienation in fundamentalist Jewish communities, which corroborates blog content and confirms the existence of estrangement as a verifiable phenomenon (Margolese, 2005; Winston, 2005). The third methodological issue asks how a “circumscribed study” can avoid becoming merely anecdotal (Baumel-Schwartz, 2009, p. 6. See also Siegel, 2008). Baumel-Schwartz, in particular, responds by acknowledging that her study describes a series of trends and developments.
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