

# Ghetto Judaism In America

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

It is the belief that in order to maintain the pristine, unadulterated quality of Torah, Jews are obligated to avoid any but essential contact with the general society. It is the belief that just as in the Temple, the Ark containing the Torah was cloistered in the secluded Holy of Holies, so we too should be secluded in our own communities, concerned only with our own learning and observance. It is the belief that our connection with the outside world should be a utilitarian one, limited to obtaining services and education needed to sustain our communal life. For those who do not believe that Jews should live in isolation from the world, the real issue is this: Now that ghetto Judaism is emerging into the public square, are we projecting an alternate view? Are we liberal Jews making our beliefs known, to our own children and to all those in search of Judaism's essence? Are we aggressively articulating our own very different vision of what Jewish tradition is about? You see, we refuse to live in an ivory tower precisely because that would limit the impact, the message, and the grandeur of Torah. We believe in the significance of Torah in all times and in all areas of human endeavor, and we are confident that the general society will benefit from the Torah values that we espouse. A belief in a dynamic encounter with the world in which we live is at the heart of Reform Judaism, even as we know that this encounter will entail some losses along the way.

## FULL TEXT

Ghetto Judaism In America

ERIC H. YOFFIE

American Jewry, which has achieved unprecedented success in the 20th century, is faced with a new challenge as we approach the millennium: the emergence of ghetto Judaism in American life.

What is ghetto Judaism?

It is the belief that in order to maintain the pristine, unadulterated quality of Torah, Jews are obligated to avoid any but essential contact with the general society. It is the belief that just as in the Temple, the Ark containing the Torah was cloistered in the secluded Holy of Holies, so we too should be secluded in our own communities, concerned only with our own learning and observance. It is the belief that our connection with the outside world should be a utilitarian one, limited to obtaining services and education needed to sustain our communal life.

Ghetto Judaism exists in Israel, as we all know, and has caused much grief there. It has existed here, too, in Williamsburg and Borough Park, but it has always been a tiny and marginal phenomenon.

Now, however, it is moving from the fringes of our world into the very center: the campus of Yale University, an Ivy League campus that has produced many of our most distinguished American citizens.

Four Orthodox students have filed suit against Yale University, charging the university with religious discrimination for requiring all freshmen and sophomores to live in university dorms.

Yale's position is that a Yale education includes not only classroom learning, but also living in community with other students.

The students respond that dorm living at Yale involves the mixing of sexes, even on single-sex floors, and is

therefore immoral and contrary to their religious beliefs.

Do the students have a right to be exempt from the dorm requirement? I don't know; matters of legal principle and precedent are involved, and I am happy to have the courts sort them out. But what is important here is not the details of a lawsuit, but the underlying attitude that the lawsuit reflects.

I say this because of what the students themselves have said about their case and their cause. They report that they do not choose their courses until they consult with their rabbis, that they remain silent in class rather than engage in discussion on topics such as abortion and evolution, that female students in music classes obtain female tutors so as not to violate religious law by singing for a man, and -- specifics aside -- that they fundamentally reject the culture of modernity which Yale represents, except to the extent that this culture serves the practical purpose of advancing their own specific interests.

Do Jews in North America have the right to live circumscribed, isolated, inward-looking lives? Certainly. Who are we, in pluralistic America, to suggest otherwise? Having said that, this does not mean that ghetto Jews should expect Yale or any other mainstream institution always to accommodate their needs; this is a matter to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, consistent with constitutional requirements.

But for those who do not believe that Jews should live in isolation from the world, the real issue is this: Now that ghetto Judaism is emerging into the public square, are we projecting an alternate view? Are we liberal Jews making our beliefs known, to our own children and to all those in search of Judaism's essence? Are we aggressively articulating our own very different vision of what Jewish tradition is about?

This has become an urgent matter. Because the challenge, utterly unthinkable a generation ago, is now there. I speak only for the Reform movement, but I believe my fellow liberal Jews share my conviction. The matter is urgent because we are different, profoundly different. Yes, we share a commitment to Torah, and study, and Jewish renewal. But our view of Torah is far grander, far more ambitious than theirs.

You see, we refuse to live in an ivory tower precisely because that would limit the impact, the message, and the grandeur of Torah. We believe in the significance of Torah in all times and in all areas of human endeavor, and we are confident that the general society will benefit from the Torah values that we espouse. A belief in a dynamic encounter with the world in which we live is at the heart of Reform Judaism, even as we know that this encounter will entail some losses along the way.

And this too: while North Americans have the right to live in isolated communities, this does not mean that such an existence reflects our ideal of what America should be. If we look only within, we forget the meaning of this country, which has embraced us as Jews like no other country in our long history. Reform Jews have a very different vision.

Here, groups can retain their culture, and their customs, and their space, but they do not surround themselves with impenetrable walls. To look only within, to close ourselves off to the society around us and the needs of others, is nothing less than a betrayal of America.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie is the president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

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