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Aryei Fishman

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This study examines the capacity of traditional Judaism to renew itself in response to the challenge of modernity. Concentrating as it does on the major Jewish Orthodox movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the book focuses especially on the Religious Kibbutz Federation in Israel, whose pioneering settlements attained a sophisticated synthesis of modern, and traditional Jewish, culture at the community level. Professor Fishman provides the first sociological study of the formation of modern Orthodox Judaism, as well as the first scholarly study of the religious kibbutz.

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# JUDAISM AND MODERNIZATION ON THE RELIGIOUS KIBBUTZ

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*In memory of my beloved parents,  
Leah and Shmuel Fishman*

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## *Preface*

This is a study in the transformative capacity of traditional Jewish religious culture. I shall examine the ability of the historic Jewish religion structured around *halakhah* – Torah law – to sustain a modernizing thrust and systematically to design rational life-patterns toward the achievement of religious goals; in other words, to undergo rationalization in regard to modernization. I intend to show that within the bounds of Orthodox Judaism, traditional Jewish religion can provide vigorous mechanisms for legitimate innovation in response to modernity, as well as limit change.

The study's historical point of departure is the traditional Jewish society that preceded Jewish Emancipation. Its social agents are the major nineteenth- and twentieth-century Orthodox modernizing movements. And its main focus is a fairly small subsection of the Jewish national community of Israel: the Religious Kibbutz Federation, or RKF. In 1990 the RKF comprised seventeen kibbutzim, about six percent of the total number of collective settlements in Israel, with a population of about 8,000 souls. Yet despite their small numbers, the members of the religious kibbutzim play a significant role in Israeli society: they have enacted, and continue to enact in their daily lives, the creative tension between twentieth-century ideologies and a time-honored religious culture.

The Religious Kibbutz Federation formally came into being in 1935. The founders of the RKF were Orthodox pioneering youth, mostly of German origin, who opted for the kibbutz form of settlement as the pre-eminent route to Zionist self-realization. Drawing upon what Max Weber would have termed the “rationalizing thrust” of the major Orthodox Jewish religious modernizing movements that preceded it, but adding a new impetus, the RKF appears to have achieved the most far-reaching degree of rationalization *vis-à-vis* modern life attained by any sector of Orthodox Jewish society



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to date. In this process it has gone beyond its parent modernizing movements in successfully integrating universal with particular Jewish values.

The uniqueness of the RKF lies in its having formed a modern religious community patterned after the secular kibbutz, which had spearheaded modernization in the national community under the joint influences of nationalism and socialism. Born as an intentional community before World War I, the kibbutz had become institutionalized in Jewish national life in the 1920s; it had proved itself as the vanguard of Zionist pioneering in settling barren regions of Eretz Israel\* and in establishing and defending the political boundaries of Jewish national society. The secular kibbutz had also developed a distinctive socialist mode of life through collective production and consumption in an egalitarian and democratic system of shared living.

The RKF, in the process of building its own self-contained settlements, developed and actualized within the Orthodox framework a religious subculture that incorporated the central values and norms of both Jewish nationalism and socialism. The efforts of the RKF pioneers to integrate a modern secular kibbutz culture grounded on ideology with a religious culture rooted in tradition, all within the virtually closed system of their communities, provide almost “laboratory” conditions for an assessment of the ability of a traditional religious culture to assimilate modern secularism. At the micro-social level, then, I see the religious kibbutz as a test case for the measure of Judaism’s capacity to evolve a coherent modern religious life.

The study’s theoretical framework is linked to the classical studies of Max Weber and Werner Sombart on the relationship between Judaism and modernization. Its core conceptual framework draws upon Edward Shils’ theory of the “center.” The religious innovators of the RKF, and of its antecedent Orthodox modernizing movements, invoked the sacred in what Shils calls the “transcendent center of the universe” to legitimate their religious thrust. In other words, they invoked Torah as religious charismatic authority. I shall show how the perception of Torah as charisma, flowing from Jewish religious tradition, enabled the Orthodox innovators to invalidate

\* This book employs the historic Hebrew name for Palestine, *Eretz Israel* (the Land of Israel), because the name links the pre-state Jewish national community to the State of Israel and because it is a cultural as well as a geographical term in Jewish religious life.

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accepted religious elements and create new ones in their stead, thereby rendering Torah a constituent element of institution building. And I shall analyze the interplay between religion and ideology in these innovators' invocation of the sacred, and in their building of new religious systems.

In writing about these systems I have drawn chiefly upon primary sources. In the case of the RKF these sources include: publications of the religious-pioneering youth movements in Germany, eastern Europe, and Eretz Israel; the central periodicals of the RKF; the bulletins of the individual religious kibbutzim; and pamphlets and books written by leading ideologues of the religious kibbutz movement.

The span of years to which I have given closest attention extends from the RKF's embryonic phase in the 1920s to about 1960, when the rationalizing thrust of the RKF had leveled off, and to the spillover of that thrust. Viewed from the perspective of the early 1990s – a time of resurgent traditionalism within Israel's Orthodox Jewry – those pioneering decades stand out in bold relief for their innovative religious endeavor.

Part I of this volume explores the nature of Torah as religious charisma, and the relationship between religion and ideology. Against the background of traditional Jewish society, this section also introduces the Jewish modernizing movements that set the scene for our discussion. Part II presents the RKF's parent Orthodox modernizing movements that helped inform its religious ideology. Part III discusses the formation of the RKF and the relationship between charisma and rationalization in the RKF experience; it then considers religious rationalization at the symbolic ideational level, the motivational-commitment level, and the normative level. This section concludes with a discussion of the conflict between the major reference groups of the religious kibbutz movement, as reflected in the tension in the movement's identity between its charismatic and traditional authority.

In its first incarnation this book was a doctoral dissertation that was submitted to The Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1976. In its second, it was published in Hebrew by Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi in Israel, in 1990, under the title of *Beyn Dat Le-Idyologiyah*. The English edition constitutes an expanded version of the Hebrew; it was given its basic shape when I was on sabbatical leave at Harvard University

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Finally, I wish to record my thanks to The Lucius L. Littauer Foundation for funding the preparation of the English edition, and to The Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture for supporting the writing of the first version of this study.

Jerusalem,  
Israel