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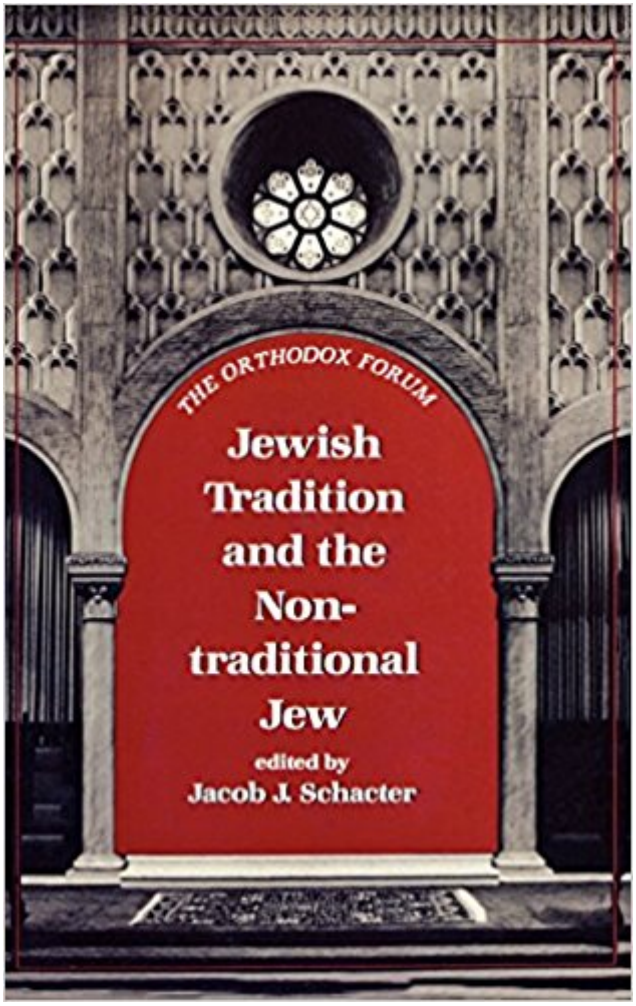
Jewish Tradition And The Non-Traditional Jew (The Orthodox Forum Series)



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Synopsis

Another addition to the "Orthodox Forum Series", this book is a collection of papers from the Second Orthodox Forum in New York and provides compelling insight into the minds of highly respected scholars in the Orthodox Rabbinate. Two of the papers include a brief account of non-observance and the Rabbinic view throughout Jewish history. The Orthodox Forum, convened by Dr. Norman Lamm, President of Yeshiva University, meets each year to consider major issues of concern to the Jewish community. Forum participants from throughout the world, including academicians in both Jewish and secular fields, rabbis, rashei yeshivah, Jewish educators, and Jewish communal professionals, gather in conference as a think tank to discuss and critique each other’s original papers, examining different aspects of a central theme. The purpose of the Forum is to create and disseminate a new and vibrant Torah literature addressing the critical issues facing Jewry today.

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Customer Reviews

One of the central problems facing the contemporary American Jewish community is the progressive deterioration of the relationship between Jews who identify with the various denominations within Judaism. Orthodox Jews, in particular, face a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, they are committed to the notion that the halakhah (Jewish law) is normative and binding not only for themselves but for all Jews. They believe that it is God’s will that every member of k’lal Yisrael (the community of Israel) observe Jewish law as presented in the Bible and the Talmud, as

codified by the Shulhan Arukh, and as applied to contemporary times by authoritative religious decisors or posekim. No deviation from this fundamental commitment on either ideological or practical grounds can be tolerated, they claim, for it would undermine and deny the very essence of a divinely revealed Judaism. Yet, many contemporary Orthodox Jews find it difficult to accept the practical implications of this position. The classic manner of dealing with an apikorus - the nonbeliever or skeptic ("one is required to actively destroy them and to bring them down to the nethermost pit") - and the obligation to hate the wicked feel harsh to many who are unprepared to adopt such a policy toward neighbors, co-workers, and, often, close relatives. But the issue goes beyond mere sentiment. Strong arguments are also made on purely halakhic grounds against the stricter, more extreme position. Indeed, while some continue to argue that halakhah today mandates hating other Jews, others find such a conclusion to be indefensible and untenable. This volume seeks to address this issue from the perspectives of Jewish history, Jewish law, andJewish thought (hashkafah). The contributors to this volume were participants in the Orthodox Forum, an annual gathering of scholars who meet to consider major issues of concern to the Jewish community.

Dr. Jacob J. Schacter is Rabbi of The Jewish Center in New York City. He received rabbinic ordination from Mesivta Torah Vodaath and a Ph.D. from Harvard University. He has written many articles on Jewish themes and is the editor of The Torah u-Madda Journal. He is also the author of a forthcoming study of Rabbi Jacob Emden. He currently lives in New York City with his wife and two daughters.

"Jewish Tradition and the Non-Traditional Jew", is a fascinating journey into the minds of highly respected scholars in the Orthodox Rabbinate. The great dilemma currently faced by traditional Judaism, is well presented and on some points resolved in this volume. It is a collection of papers that was presented at the 2nd Orthodox forum in New York. Two of the papers include a brief account of non-observance and the Rabbinic view throughout Jewish history. It was incredible to discover some of the ways in which non-observant Jews in medieval times were reprimanded for such actions as desecrating the Sabbath. In some cases severe punishment such as "lashes" was enforced.The majority of the book deals with how non-observant Jews should be "dealt with" in modern times. The Rabbis cite many passages from the teachings of great Jewish sages presenting a case against using violent penalties such as death and stoning for non-observant actions. They argue that Jews of all "denominations" that do not adhere to Halakhic laws, are still part of the Jewish people and are simply in need of the proper guidance. It is ironic that the Orthodox Rabbis in

this volume, in a sense "justify" the actions of non-observant Jews by citing the teachings of Halakhah, and yet they refute the case presented by early Reform Jews that were attempting to justify their position by using the same teachings.I have to conclude by saying that it doesn't matter whether you are a Reform, Conservative or Orthodox Jew, you will find this book absorbing. It is definitely worth reading, if not just to come to terms with how Orthodoxy views the behaviour of other Jewish denominations and whether or not there will ever be reconciliation between them.

This 1992 book is part of a series; other volumes in the series are:Â Engaging Modernity: Rabbinic Leaders and the Challenge of the Twentieth Century (Orthodox Forum Series),Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy (The Orthodox Form Series),Tolerance, Dissent, and Democracy: Philosophical, Historical, and Halakhic Perspectives (Orthodox Forum Series),Israel as a Religious Reality (Orthodox Forum Series),Toward a Renewed Ethic of Jewish Philanthropy (Orthodox Forum),Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah (Orthodox Forum),Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Thought and Law (Orthodox Forum Series),Yirat Shamayim: The Awe, Reverence, and Fear of God (The Orthodox Forum),Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering (Orthodox Forum Series), etc.The editor wrote in the Preface to this 1992 book, "And if they cannot accept any other interpretation of Judaism as valid, then clearly Orthodox Jews will have serious problems with those Jews who do not accept those interpretations as legitimate expressions of Judaism and certainly with those who propogate them as a matter of religious principle and personal prerogative. Yet, many contemporary Orthodox Jews find it very difficult to accept the practical implications of this position... While some continue to argue that halakhah today indeed mandates hating other Jews, others find such a conclusion to be indefensible and untenable."Here are some quotations from the book:"In bemoaning the motives of the Reform leaders, many of the respondents underscored the desire of the innovators to ingratiate themselves with non-Jews and to assimilate." (Pg. 48)"Our original question, then, remains: How can Maimonides conceive of a simultaneous mitzvah of love and hatred, both on the emotional level? Maimonides believes, in my view, that it is psychologically and therefore legally possible to maintain a position of ambivalence." (Pg. 148)"Since Maimonides is the supreme rationalist, who holds that metaphysics is beyond halakhah, and that the loftiest goal is the forming of correct concepts about the Deity, it is in the area of ideas and theory that the test of faith takes place. It is in that realm, rather than in behavior, that one stands or falls as a Jew." (Pg. 157)"Most people especially in our days but in days of yore as well, abandon religion not because they are sure it is false. They leave it because they are unconvinced, in doubt, and pehaps uncertain whether any kind of certainty can

ever be attained... In other words, they are not 'deniers' but 'nonbelievers.' On the basis of this distinction, we maintain that the great majority of nonbelievers of today are not equivalent to the 'apikores' ('heretics') of talmudic times." (Pg. 166-167)

This little book is really two very different books. The first two chapters discuss the history of relationships between rabbis and their less observant congregants. The first chapter focuses on the Middle Ages, drawing a distinction between Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities. Sephardic communities, like today's rabbis, tended to rely on persuasion rather than coercion, and included less observant Jews. By contrast, some Ashkenazic communities were more state-like; in some communities, freedom of religion was not an option, as congregants were flogged for ritual violations. The second chapter similarly addresses how Ashkenazic rabbis reacted to the birth of Reform Judaism in the 19th century; many rabbis chose to be more stringent than before, out of a fear that any change would lead to a "slippery slope" of liberalization.The second half of the book is more noble but less interesting, basically saying that frum (ritually observant) Jews should be nice to non-frum Jews so the latter will become more frum.

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