I have been asked to comment on the role of popular culture in contemporary modern Orthodoxy in light of the current research by social scientists and cultural critics. I offer this cognitive gesture as a chance to discuss the theoretical issues.

As someone personally committed to high culture, and also as someone observing the empirical community around me, this commentary should serve as an introduction to the current literature on the topic along with a few descriptive observations. That being said, the views in this work should not to be taken as sociological generalizations or as metonymic representations of the community. This essay attempts neither to document the sociology of the community nor to explain the causes of these phenomena. A quantified survey would be needed to start the process of analysis in the form of stud-
ies on particular neighborhoods, schools, rabbis, the products of the Center for the Jewish Future, youth movements, coffee shops, family dynamics, and popular culture objects. Studies of the approach to popular culture in our current individual communities as well as historical communities in Italy, Eastern Europe, and Germany are a desideratum for showing not just the official ideologies but also actual lived practice. Additionally, for the sake of brevity, all examples and discussion will be limited solely to the east coast enclaves of Centrism. Furthermore, the trajectories of Israeli Religious Zionist communities contain so many differences from Modern Orthodoxy in New York, in respect to history, authority, cultural background, and values, that conflating the two communities would only obscure matters.

This paper will ultimately suggest that the changes in society have definitely changed the conceptual framework. Popular culture is considered intrinsic to a particular community, regardless of size, and thus should not be viewed as an external or deviant activity. This notion relates to both high and low culture in complex ways. The theorists discussed assume that Torah and the ways of understanding Orthodoxy are, in themselves, cultural, and therefore that one needs to consider subcultures of Torah as well as particular conflicting cultural activities. Neither Torah nor culture is unified. This paper seeks to explore some of the texture and depth of these complexities. In order to facilitate navigation of a long essay, here are the basic rubrics:

1. By stating brief, starting definitions of high, middlebrow, and low culture, there will be a clear distinction between terms.
2. The contributions of Michel de Certeau, John Fiske, and Gordon Lynch are crucial in the creation of the concept of popular culture. This section explains that Torah is not something separate from popular culture but rather that Torah becomes popular culture, and vice versa.
3. The contributions of Nancy Ammerman and Skye Jethani show the combination of suburbia, life, and popular culture, thus creating Torah suburbia. If the Centrist community has defined itself as requiring earning in the top
6 percent of U.S. income, then to fulfill one’s “station and its duties” as part of upper-middle-class suburbia, one becomes part of popular culture and consumerism. The Torah of the Centrist community may not be Torah.

4. The contribution of Pierre Bourdieu to current concepts of social distinction and what it means for the Centrist Torah community. Bourdieu’s followers, namely Annette Lareau and Ann Swidler, offer insight into the upper-middle-class concepts of parenting, schooling, and everyday life.

5. The biggest change has been in the rise and advancement of technology. We look at generation theory to explain to the older audience the role of the new media for both Generation Y and Generation Z. This has been so significant as to create new terms, such as “half-shabbos.”

6. There has been a change to culture in our era of postsecularization, globalization, and spirituality. We now say that religion is immanent within society. Charles Taylor and Robert Wuthnow define the theory of secularism as having a religion immanent in one’s own life as a personal “meaning and moral order.” Among the changes are pop culture forms of religion, which serve a dramaturgical function and contribute to the widespread defining and experiencing of religion vis-à-vis music and art. This turn toward meaning and moral order has led to the success of evangelicals and Orthodoxy. This leads to a discussion of Christian rock and Oprah as showing the religious uses of music, TV, and prosperity gospel. Religion itself is part of popular culture and serves the needs of spirituality and certainty.

8. We turn to H. Richard Niebuhr and Christian Smith to answer: How do we conceptualize religion and culture? Has the turn to religion changed our culture?

9. Concluding observations. What is the relationship between Centrism and popular culture?

10. A personal coda on high culture.
High- to Low-Brow
Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), poet and cultural critic, made famous the identification of culture itself with the highly intellectual concept of “high culture.” Arnold was concerned about the danger of the masses on society and was livid that the working classes were not showing subordination and enough deference to elites. Aspiring children of immigrants, particularly East European Jews, were typically the first in their families to attend college. Educational institutes set up the ideal as applying to everyone, yet few ever expected the whole of the group to reach the level of high culture. They often found that entering or accepting the dominant culture was only achievable by accepting “high culture”—such as classical music, modern luxuries, etc.—and abandoning their parents’ immigrant culture. They sought to move themselves from low- to mid-brow and to foster more high culture interests.

In the early twentieth century, another category, called middlebrow, was introduced. Middlebrow literature is, as its popularizer Virginia Woolf explains, “betwixt and between” and is “in pursuit of no single object.” The middlebrow value system rewards quick gains through literature already designated as “classic or “great” in which the reader is far from the source of the original critical taste that labels a work as great. In 1954, Russell Lynes distinguished among “brows” and divided middlebrow into upper- and lower-middlebrow. The former’s arts patronage makes highbrow activity possible, as it appears that museums, orchestras, operas, and publishing houses are run by upper-middlebrows. The latter group attempts to use the arts for self-enhancement: “hell-bent on improving their minds as well as their fortunes.” More recently, Janice Radway argues that middlebrow culture is not simply a diluted impersonation of highbrow but rather has defined itself in defiance of avant-garde high culture. Middlebrow literature is already selected by expert and “generalist” judges, and its culture allows readers to access the emotional and intellectual challenges that good reading provides.¹

For the last twenty-five years, middlebrow cultural products which clearly demark that one is college-educated and no longer part of the masses have not been enshrined; rather, one can now demar-
cate that one is college-educated and still aspire to non-highbrow instincts. Furthermore, in the last few decades, middlebrow has stopped nodding to the ideal of high culture.

In 1986, a chart appeared in *The New Republic* which showed that once again the classes had changed. There were now four classes: highbrow, high-lowbrow, midbrow, and lowbrow. High-lowbrow encompasses people who have good careers and are educated but act lowbrow in their own educated way. Examples of such products that cater to a professional, educated audience include *Men’s Health, South Park*, news from CNBC, *Sex and the City*, and Buffalo wings. All of these products make use of references and knowledge gained in college that distinguish one from the working class, yet without having to give a nod to high culture. At the time, college graduates, as well as doctors and lawyers, were freely choosing to spend their leisure time in high-lowbrow rather than strictly highbrow.

David Brooks chronicles much of this breakdown and notes that demarcations of wealth, subculture, style, and whatever is hip have replaced high culture. In his alternative understanding of the breakdown, graduates of elite institutions create earthy yet consumerist material lives Brooks terms them “Bourgeois Bohemians.” Those who work for American companies in an age of globalization, high-tech knowledge, capitalization, and medical institutions are cultivated in the corporate world and go hand-in-hand with American popular culture and consumerism; there is an American ethos and set of values that does not separate the two. Brooks’s more recent works are discussed below.

Currently, the media defines “high culture” and “low culture” based on the exclusiveness of an object along with ancillary values of originality, creativity, and distinctiveness. *Fashion Week* is considered higher than readymade clothes, engaging in collegiate sports is higher than actually watching sports, Carpaccio and ceviche are higher than sushi. Reading *Granta* or the *Prairie Schooner* is higher than reading a bestseller or one of your college textbooks, a Ph.D. in English is higher than being a high school English teacher, and attending a publishing party for a recent book is higher than a participating in book club discussion of a classic.
It is important to note that the new media and social networks are mediums of culture and not intrinsically lower than book knowledge on the high-low spectrum. While there ought to be some differentiation among the new media, the social network, popular culture, and consumer culture, there still exists overlap.

The first topic that I wish to turn to in some detail is that the high-low spectrum is not the same as popular culture.

Michel de Certeau

Michel de Certeau (d. 1986) was a Jesuit monk, historian, and philosopher whose work is essential for conceptualizing religion as well as popular culture. His oeuvre touches on many important issues for understanding the entrance of religious communities into modernity. His scholarship on mysticism and religious polemics offer some of the most fruitful ideas for an understanding of Hasidism, Mitnagdim, and Neo-Hasidism, or the in-between groups within Orthodoxy. For the sake of brevity, only those points important and relevant to the understanding of popular culture will be addressed.5

Certeau once gave a talk to a group of intellectual clergy who were debating the issues of the age in a European Catholic version of the Orthodox Forum that centered on how much pluralism the unified teachings of the Catholic Church could bear. As in the Jewish community, the papers presented addressed the matter from liberal and conservative viewpoints and focused on how to either increase or limit pluralism’s influence within the Church. Certeau undercut the discussion by arguing that pluralism is everywhere. Everything that goes on in the practice of everyday life is interpreted differently by everyone; the fishmonger and the lawyer, the bishop and the doctor, all people hear things differently. The average person, the teenager, the householder, the senior citizen, the high school teacher, the doctor, and the lawyer all create their own individual versions of the Church’s teaching.6

In the case of Orthodoxy, Certeau would emphasize how Rav Soloveitchik means different things to different people. Most are used to the debates about Rav Soloveitchik and revisionism, situating the diversity on a left-right spectrum. Certeau would undercut this and
looks at the reception of Rav Soloveitchik from a real-life perspective. To illustrate, a few years ago a local New York high school gave students a short essay by Rav Soloveitchik on the axiological importance of Torah study in our lives. As homework, they had to answer questions about how to apply that concept in their lives. There were different responses, all of varying applications: one student, showing his commitment to Torah study, started to paint signs for his youth group; another spent time each day on AskMoses, the Chabad question-and-answer site; one diligently studied Akiva Tatz’s book; a different student read frum message boards on the Web; one downloaded Torah shiurim on MP3s; another worked on a video for the NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth) regional chapter; others spent extra time on their navi class, where literary approaches to the chapter were emphasized. None of this plurality relates to the left-right divide or can be directly found in Rav Soloveitchik’s words. According to Certeau, the religious person can cull the products of the community and adapt it to his or her own life and worldview; thus, Rav Soloveitchik can be combined with and adapted to the twelve steps, kiruv, Neo-Hasidism, or sports, and be seen to support ArtScroll, Hatam Sofer, Kahanaism, or the Internet.

For Certeau, an understanding of culture is an understanding of consumers and how they “poach” knowledge for their own purposes. Certeau calls it poaching because it follows an operational logic of disguise and survival against a background of obligation and orthodoxy. Certeau is concerned with how objects are used, not in their original purpose for usage. For instance, Certeau is interested in how people buy books solely to have them on a shelf, or to make a polemical point, or else to show allegiance. Individual readers misquote books they adopt just as much as they quote correctly what is said in the book; in doing so one simultaneously gives the object privileged space and subverts its meaning. A common practice of religious thinking is to harmonize the given sacred book with whatever we are actually interested in or actually use in our lives.7

When Certeau views everyday life, he simultaneously views activities of resistance and evasion, and how people resist under the radar by means of tactics. An example of a tactic might be something
as mundane as using office supplies for personal purposes or using instant messaging services at work. They are committed to work, but their hearts and minds are elsewhere.

Certeau would see students who are committed to study Talmud but successfully evade the very activity to which they claim to be devoting their efforts. They may start the morning’s learning by talking about their dates, the entertainment they recently attended, and sports scores. They also know that if they play along enough to cover the Gemara, they will be left alone to deal with their own path, where they can concentrate on Neo-Hasidut, kiruv, current events, the seforim sale, or the MCATs. They can spend their learning sedering uploading to the Web reverential pictures of the roshei yeshiva, sending Twitter messages about what they are currently learning, or collecting all the political and polemical comments made by the Rosh Yeshiva. They can reminisce about the popular culture experience of the gap year in Israel. Or they can enter into a language weave of steig and stark by focusing on how they dress, their props, and the books on their shelves, rather than the content of the Talmud. Each of these is a tactic of evasion that simultaneously circumvents and supports the system.

These activities have no clear authority or no proper location, but are, rather, opportunistic moments that we use to construct our daily lives. According to Certeau, all institutions, books, and ideas are now conversations and everyday common practices. He focuses on space, not time or ideas, to explain this behavior, and uses the metaphor of the fishwife going to market and walking through the streets of Paris in order to opt out of the grand metaphors about history, ideas, and social change. For Certeau, everything is a network and has potential to contradict all other things without upsetting the public confession.

There are a variety of sources of knowledge that continuously undercut the main narrative. Certeau makes the point that ideas get played out so radically differently in real life that it becomes hard to talk about them. Every work has multiple receptions in society that are incorrigible. Storytellers have no power in the hierarchal religious system, yet they gain authority that people use in their personal nar-
ratives. Other tactics to undermine include referring to something as a secret, because clandestine knowledge provides status; this also applies to those who claim authority through religious experience. Singularity is also a good tactic; if something is portrayed as different, one is able to opt out of participating. Mystics and pietists are masters of this. Even hecklers and those who criticize the system have mastered amassing authority without power.

In Certeau’s theory, it is important to note when the personal overrides the supposed orthodoxy. Someone may have heard a rabbi give a proper lecture on a topic, but a story by a lay preacher or a Neo-Hasidic tale may speak to one’s individual and personal narrative in a much stronger way; thus, the religious person allows for the story to override the formal teaching. If asked whether he or she follows a given Rosh Yeshiva, a person can give a resounding yes as an answer of obedience. But Certeau would observe that when the details are discussed, the same person may give complete deference to his or her individual religious meanderings, including what is read outside of a formal religious setting, such as on a blog, a singular halakhic opinion once heard, the statements of one’s high school rebbe, Artscroll, a former NCSY adviser, or something in the name of a Hasidic text. In all of these cases, there is no rationalization for the contradictory harmonization but the natural evasions create their own authority. In addition, Certeau shows, when a religious person is asked about compliance with a religious principle, other factors might come up in conversation, such as the way one is dressed, a class previously attended, an event in the news, something recently read, and so on, without ever retuning to the original question.

From Certeau’s ground-level vantage point, high culture reveals itself as subject to the same cultural forces as popular culture. Ideological products are exorporated into daily life, meaning they are incorporated along with the distortions and evasions generated by fears, desires, distortions, pragmatic decisions, and misreadings of daily life.
Popular Culture and Religion

Originally, when one compared high culture to low culture, the literary image of the library would be compared to the more gregarious activities of bingo in a crowded hall or to stock car racing. However, according to the media scholar John Fiske, who applies the thought of Certeau to popular culture, there is a major difference between low culture and popular culture. Popular culture is itself a shared environment made up of practices and resources that are part of everyday life. It is not a debased high culture, but rather a culture that actually resists manipulation and restructures reality.

Popular culture functions as a mirror to express people’s desires, fears, and needs for sex, money, and power, and thus should not be treated as a text comparable to that of high culture. Today’s world is one in which popular culture—Hollywood, the Billboard Hot 100, professional sports, New York Times bestsellers, and the like—constitutes the lingua franca, society’s “common language.” Modern pop culture functions as a key location for the shared exploration of what it means to be truly human, as will be discussed further in the section on Bourdieu.

According to Fiske, popular culture is always opposed to something else, whether the opposition is high or folk culture. It typically takes the form of resistance and the adaptation of a product created elsewhere. It is not an object, such as popular book, a video, or a blog; rather, it is what Fiske terms a process of excorporation: the incorporation of a cultural product from elsewhere into popular life, and the changes that transform the original product. Pop culture is implicit in its intrinsic otherness and is a process more than a product. In everyday life, the appropriation serves for value clarification and reflects the implicit ideologies and politics of the popular culture. Popular culture makes do with what is at hand by accepting the pragmatic, contradictory, and eclectic. Finally, popular culture reflects personal desires, fears, and needs.

An older generation of Chicago sociologists, among them Edward Shils, assumed a triadic descent of ideas—from highbrow philosophy, to articulated middlebrow ideology, and then to unarticulated popular worldview—in which there was a tight relationship
between the philosophy and the worldview. In Shils’s approach, the philosophy of the Orthodox Forum is able to create the articulated ideology of *Torah u-Madda* Centrism, which in turn creates the unarticulated worldview of Teaneck or Riverdale. The new post-Certeau approach is typified in the study of popular culture and looks at the changes that occur when ideological products are excorporated into daily life, including the fears, desires, distortions, pragmatic decisions, and misreadings of Teaneck and Riverdale. Popular culture is the means by which people deal with products that are outdated, oppressive, or out of touch with experiences or aspirations.¹⁰ The application of the study of popular culture to religion occurred, according to Lynch, from the influence of Nancy Ammerman’s call to look at how people actually practice lived religion.¹¹

When media is appropriated, it is not done passively, but rather in a way whereby people can respond to it and use it for their own education, the formation of contrasting identities and values, and as a story for creating a plan for life. People need depictions of home-life drama. *All in the Family* reflected its era, *Thirty Something* reflected its era, and now *Modern Family* and *Mad Men* reflect ours. People use popular culture to determine their place in the world, and the discussion among peers afterwards is just as important as the media presentation itself.¹²

Even when considering the supposedly negative aspects of violence or lack of virtue, studies show how these lyrics or actions are done using a particular persona and a clear sense of distancing. The goal is not to directly identify; these qualities were already in the pulp fiction of an earlier era. To use *The Simpsons* as an example, the show consistently portrays the tension of duty and self-interest, concern for others, and apathy and lack of concern. The show thrives on the fact that nothing is black and white. Even when it is ironic, it acknowledges that there is a post-ironic also. Another example is that the occult and heavy metal are about adolescent confusion, rebellion, and masculinity—not satanic alternatives. Yet popular culture always seems to have a happy ending: the students in our Centrist schools have those tensions and live in the world of popular culture.
Gordon Lynch, who works in the field of popular culture, offers criteria for evaluating popular culture and its place in our society. His standards include technical skill and originality. More importantly, he includes how much the popular culture reflects human experience, whether it gives meaning and provides a moral universe, and whether it leads us to be in constructive relationships.13

Studies of popular culture focus particularly on objects utilized and encountered almost daily. Consider the artifacts of the particular popular culture of Orthodoxy: crib ornaments, birth gifts, wedding dance props, children’s room decorations, berakhot charts, and Israel mementos hung at home. Popular culture looks at the year in Israel for males by examining the different types of objects acquired: neat tzizit (tassels), woolen tzizit, cartoon tzizit, table shtenders, CDs, micrography, souvenirs, gedolim pictures, and seforim bought. These items create a yeshiva experience and popular Torah that corresponds to the same needs as popular culture, and shares much of the same cultural language.

Twenty-five years ago, Neil Postman wrote the classic preemptive critique of popular culture. Postman claimed that television was trivial, incoherent, lowered our word count, and turned serious matters into entertainment.14 Current approaches to popular culture claim that Postman romanticizes the past and has an imagined golden age while ignoring the vulgar popular yellow journalism of prior ages. Postman still pits the older book knowledge against technology. He does not consider the positive changes in society due to, and accommodating, technology and assumes that television is passive, unskilled, and does not acknowledge the skill to read a visual image. Now current events are in our living rooms and many elements of our knowledge in social science have increased. At this point, everyone lives with the diversity of the immense amount of knowledge given on the Web. In fact, there is a heavy sensory overload. Today, education and good jobs go hand in hand with mastering media, social media, and the realm of the visual.

To move the discussion to religion and popular culture, the Fordham theologian Tom Beaudoin points out how popular culture has become a valuable and necessary tool for expressing religious pur-
suits. It is often overlooked as part of the fundamental religious quest and the cultural understanding of what religion is about. The popular arts and media not only explicitly portray religion and religious ideas, but also serve the religious purpose of conveying meaning in the people and values they represent. Popular culture itself becomes the place where the marketplace of ideas occurs. Ideas are found, downloaded, debated, and connected to others; one sees the opinions of others. In Beaudoin’s opinion, realism goes further than didactic religious culture because it lets one grapple with life. Popular culture allows people to feel connected with others and to be part of a wider community.\textsuperscript{15} Beaudoin reminds his readers that there is no theology apart from life in the world, from life in culture, stating that “In order to understand our culture, we must think theologically. And in order to comprehend our theology, we must know our culture.” He uses the word “religious” rather than “religion” to avoid the institutional connotations. The “religious” involves a profound experience of a limitation, a hunger for depth.\textsuperscript{16}

Foundational to Beaudoin’s engagement with popular culture is the belief that people who profess to know little or nothing about the religious may form, inform, or transform religious meaning for people of faith. He refers us to Richard Mouw, at Fuller Theological Seminary, who exposes the snobbishness of theologians who overlook the popular culture in their backyard.\textsuperscript{17} In real life, this creates such diverse products as a theology of weight loss, religious values from \textit{Star Trek} and \textit{The Matrix}, or the spiritual meaning of the stock market. We find mixed a New Age quest to find God in the everyday, to raise sparks in the secular, or to seek a better life in forty days. The ironic and post-ironic are pasted together, as are broken faith and source of faith, and a blurring of rock and roll with pious devotion. Religious events currently include funerals produced like parties or videos. It is important to note that for a Centrist audience, students gain knowledge of the wonders of Torah from the textless and sourceless world of the Internet. Torah \textit{shirurim} as MP3’s are now subject to the same forces of human need and commoditization.
Suburban Life: Religion as Consumerism
At the end of the nineteenth century, F. H. Bradley presented his ethical theory in “My Station and Its Duties,” in which he argues that humans are bound in an organic way to communal responsibilities. The Centrist Orthodox community has created a supportive community that Bradley would recognize in which there are clear expectations of communal duties, family life, and education for the children. Orthodox Jews seek to fulfill the duties of their station in life. If we want to understand Orthodox popular culture as its own entity based on the appropriation of culture as part of the practice of everyday life, then we need to look at everyday life in the United States, specifically the upper middle class’s suburban and professional life in the Centrist community.

It is important to note that to follow the dictates of an upper-middle-class job involves following the guidelines of one’s co-workers for dress, recreation, knowledge of popular culture, and entertainment patterns. There are clear class, caste, and community standards, as can be seen simply by viewing a person’s choice of car, suit, and food. The discussion of media is only a small part of popular culture. In order to become a law partner, one must learn to lead a certain lifestyle; in the language of Bourdieu, this means living in a certain type of habitus. Centrism was originally situated in a push to create Orthodox professional doctors and lawyers who by inclination and training were, in their youth, comfortable in a book culture. There are many second-generation Centrists who are now pursuing careers in marketing, advertising, sales, public relations, or personnel, where their career advancement is bettered by the served skills and values of club culture, social media, and self-promotion rather than book knowledge.18

In the early 1980s, the majority of Orthodox synagogues were old synagogues in the Bronx, in small-town New England and the Midwest, and in declining neighborhoods. Centrist Orthodoxy basically wrote them all off and focused on about twelve major communities of professionals who send their kids to day schools and have ideally spent a year in Israel. Orthodoxy went from Shapiro’s wine to Cabernet Sauvignon, from clerks to physicians, and from old-time
Jews to the new, heroic, halakhic Jew. The real criterion for any further discussion is that Centrism requires its members to live in the top six percent of U.S. income. The community is known for kitsch engagements and weddings, and other signs of conspicuous consumption in the name of religion. In the face of the recent economic downturn, many will remain in the community and follow whatever guarantees survival in suburbia.\textsuperscript{19}

To understand where Centrists appropriate popular culture, one must look at Golden Rule Jews or Family Value Orthodoxy, as well as the more ideological evangelical form of suburbia. Nancy Ammerman turned the field to the study of lived religion and notes that most members of congregations in the United States base their membership on the choice of a lifestyle. The religion of much of the laity is not on a left-right spectrum or a frum–less frum spectrum. People choose their denomination for its lifestyle and family values. Being Orthodox is about family on Shabbat, shiva calls, hospital visits, sharing simchas, and helping others. They consider the warmth of the community as their Orthodox Judaism, yet are oblivious to doctrine and practice demarcations. The emphasis is on education, opportunities for children, and caring for others in the community. Reliance on religious influence provides a framework for doing well and making the world a better place. Many define faith as “everyday morality” rather than institutional commitment or theological orthodoxy.

The lived religion of suburbia might not measure up to orthodox theological standards, but it cannot be dismissed. Ammerman refers to the Christian equivalent as Golden Rule Christians. She argues that despite their lesser observance and liberal beliefs, Golden Rule Christians are not liberals and are not to be contrasted with evangelicals, because they are oblivious to most right-left issues. Judaism is not the same as Protestantism. Nevertheless, her work is a good starting point for empirical discussions.\textsuperscript{20} Many congregants are only concerned with whether the rabbi is good at shiva calls and hospital visits. They care about whether the rabbi participates in their lives, welcomes new members, and gives divrei Torah or sermons about suburban life, not about the left-right flash points. And they are completely oblivious to
ideology confusing books and ideas and see themselves as neither lax nor liberal.

Many Christian thinkers and social critics have noted the change from old-time religion to the new Golden Rule faith and have attempted to discuss the new suburban Christian and grasp the ironies. Of these thinkers, Albert Hsu and Skye Jethani provide insight into suburban living. However, no one has yet fully presented a comprehensive and exact definition and prescription to the complex issues involved in the change.

Albert Hsu discusses the consumerism of suburban religion, including product branding, megachurches, and attempts to create community at places like Starbucks (which is a gathering place of sorts but primarily a place of consumption). He also addresses challenges to the spiritual life. “People in the suburbs seldom experience scarcity, and that makes us less likely to depend on God for provision. This shapes how we think about ourselves in relation to God and others. People can escape most struggles and hardships and thereby develop indifference toward God as our provider, protector, and sustainer.”

Skye Jethani, on the other hand, discusses the matter from a more prescriptive, rather than descriptive, perspective. Jethani claims Americans live in a consumer-driven society; however, one must note there is a difference between being a consumer and having a worldview of consumerism. Consumerism is “a set of presuppositions most of us have been forced to carry without question or critique.” It has become the subconscious framework by which we view everything, including God, religion, worship, and the synagogue. Consumerism competes with the Kingdom of Heaven for the hearts and imaginations of God’s people. For Jethani, the concept of imagination is crucial. However, the church fails to provide an alternative vision that will captivate the hearts and minds of consumers and thus break the chains that bind their imaginations. Instead, churches are catering to consumers without challenging the worldly assumptions that leave them undernourished and anemic in their faith.

People only buy from their own denomination. Image is everything. Thus consumerism has turned the church from an “ocean-
liner,” designed to move people from point A to point B (connecting people with God), to a “cruise ship” that is, in itself, the destination. With this notion, the church simply leads to a faith that is insatiable, unable to delay gratification, and averse to suffering. It causes alienation from others who are not dissimilar, and forces the creation of isolated, homogeneous communities. Conspicuous consumption is followed by a devotional pilgrimage, itself a form of consumerism.

Even the modern Orthodox Muslim community is expressing the same qualms about Suburban Islam. Their formulation is close to that of the Centrist Orthodox dilemma:

One can study much “contemporary law” and one can debate for weeks whether something is permitted or forbidden but that debate obscures the real issues that one is no longer living in the religious world of the past. . . . Since Islam is a filter of good and bad, one needs to obtain religious knowledge in order to learn how to behave. . . . What most Muslims in the West experience as the Islamic message is actually the American culture filtered through certain Islamic injunctions. Under this paradigm, Muslims are able to argue day in and day out over details as to which particular filters/knowledge/“ilm” they should apply in their lives, while ignoring the overarching logical breakdown and inconsistency between their belief system and their actual lifestyle, filled with TV, video games and shopping.23

The question in religious communities becomes, How does one tell such people that they do not acquire the world-to-come simply by paying a mortgage in a religious neighborhood and by being a good Golden Rule neighbor in the community?

Pierre Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) was a French sociologist and philosopher who developed theories of social stratification based on aesthetic taste in his 1984 work, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment
of Taste. Bourdieu claims that how one chooses to present one’s social space to the world—in essence, one’s aesthetic disposition—depicts one’s status and distances oneself from lower groups. He specifically hypothesizes that these dispositions guide youth toward their appropriate social positions toward the behaviors that are suitable for them. These dispositions also serve as aversions toward other behaviors.

According to Bourdieu, tastes in food, culture, and presentation are indicators of class, since they often correlate with an individual’s place in society. Each fraction of the dominant class develops its own aesthetic criteria. Because there are different social positions, consumer interests are broken up into fractions where each has its own outlook vis-à-vis art and philosophy, just as it has its own barber shop or café. Bourdieu himself believed that class distinctions and preferences are encompassed in everyday things such as choices of clothing or cooking styles, which shed light on deep-rooted dispositions that exist in society. Children in lower social classes are predicted to choose less expensive, generic, and/or fattening foods when it comes time to eat, rather than try new and exotic options, whereas children in higher classes have more options and choose the opposite. In the course of everyday life, people constantly choose between what they find aesthetically pleasing and what they consider tacky, merely trendy, or ugly.

There is a class distinction between those who seek traditional heavy Jewish foods and those who define themselves by ceviche and carpaccio. Engaging in yachting and gymnastics differentiate them from the masses who merely attend sporting events. To be of a higher culture, one goes to music camp, competes in athletics to earn a Rhodes scholarship, goes for a summer M.F.A. In terms of literature, one does not read the more middlebrow Harper’s, Atlantic, and New York Review of Books, rather one reads the journals of distinction, such as Granta, Paris Review, Prairie Schooner, or Kenyon Review.

Bourdieu defines habitas as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions and structures, predisposed to functioning as principles of generation and structures of practices.” In other words, habitas refers to the fact that one is part of a system, and a system of praxis. Bourdieu talks about capital, but this is no longer an economic term,
but has meaning in terms of culture, education, society, body, language, and politics, among other things. For instance, social capital is the ability to know important people and talk to them correctly. Body capital is about having a proper body, whereas linguistic capital is about the ability to command the language. Professors have social, educational, linguistic, and social capital which allows them to hobnob with their economic superiors. Cultural capital is described in three forms: the embodied state (in which culture is literally embodied over the course of an extended time), the objectified state (when culture is made manifest in art or literature), and the institutionalized state (in which cultural status is recognized by awards, degrees, etc.).

Since every distinction is a question of class and caste, which are not entirely arranged in a clear nineteenth-century hierarchy, Bourdieu treats each group and subgroup as its own entity. Hence, academics are not a natural peak of high culture, but rather one of several forms of social capital competing with the others. In his famous analysis of academic sociology Homo Academicus, Bourdieu analyzes tensions and trends in French higher education. Faculty members of different disciplines inevitably hold positions of greater or lesser institutional influence, with the greatest prestige in France accruing to the faculties of medicine and law. These disciplines often have a very different concept of research and scholarship than is held in disciplines within the humanities. Underappreciated scholars appear pretentious in their creation of an implied superiority. In the context of our Forum, Bourdieu would not use the categories of high and low culture, but instead would compare the value of knowledge and distribution of social capital of “Homo Orthodox Forum” or “Homo Torah u-Madda” to that of “Homo Academicus” or “Homo Church Lady.” To avoid the humorous European terminology, the distinction creates the Orthodox Forum participants, the academic, and the sisterhood member.24

In Bourdieu’s understanding, Centrist youth would want to show that they are ordinary upper-middle-class suburban youth and to distinguish themselves from those who do not share their expendable wealth, suburban values, or religious choices. When Centrist Orthodox youth watch television or videos, they see their lives as re-
The Emerging Popular Culture and the Centrist Community

Reflections of what they are viewing, such as potential cast members on *Glee* or singers on *American Idol*. Concurrently, however, they are not really part of secular society but rather are in an Orthodox enclave that would actually restrict their participation in the high culture of actual television performance. The Centrist world is seemingly reading itself into the world of television and its values. However, the more that Centrists hold up a mirror to see themselves as American, the more they reveal their provincialism. The Maccabeats show that Centrist Jews can also be ordinary Americans; this makes the community feel that it really has made it in the American world. Yet, for the rest of America, they remain a human interest story like an Amish a cappella group.

The same desires are shown in the recent bevy of Orthodox videos that use hip-hop, boy-band, and “Glee” styles. If you look closely you will also see an undercurrent of integration with non-Jews and situations of gender pluralism not found in their home communities. Matisyahu’s recent Hanukkah video and performance at Yeshiva University contains a variety of religion-bending associations with Santa Claus, pro sports, Greek culture, and non-Jews. This popular culture desire was especially evident in the recent Purim *megillah* reading sponsored by Aish Hatorah that featured as emcee and guests of honor the non-Jewish Chris Noth, who played Mr. Big on *Sex and the City*, and Snooki, of the MTV show *Jersey Shore*. These events display both the desires of the community and the distinctions its members make from those who do not share their *habitas*.

Pierre Bourdieu’s work shows that people’s tendencies to say one thing and do another, combined with that ideal and reality, do not necessarily match. People posture accordingly to win face-offs and compare themselves to others. In practice, Talmud is the major intellectual concern of an elite group for only a few years of their lives. The demands of ordinary life—the practice of law, medicine, or accounting, maintaining a home, raising children according to upper-middle-class values—leave little room for Talmud. But in Bourdieu’s categories, the yeshiva where one once studied Talmud, and for how many years, offers distinctions in the local community. If compared to one another, someone who spent two years at Yeshivat Har Etzion, though
currently a busy lawyer without time to learn, trumps someone who went to Yeshivat Reshit Yerushalayim, and, what is more, both weigh superior over someone who genuinely studies Mishnah in English on a daily basis. Someone who went to Drisha and Migdol Oz, but now spends her free time on trash TV, fashion, and chick lit, trumps someone from a lower limmudei kodesh level who is an aidel maidel doing hesed. In both cases, the former expresses, by choice of institution, the ideal as well as the values of the upper middle class.

**Bourdieu on Education**

In her *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, Annette Lareau offers valuable ethnographic insights into contemporary family life in poor, working-class, and middle-class American households. Lareau argues, using Bourdieu as her guide, that parenting styles vary more by class than by race. In working-class and poor households, parents do not attempt to reason with difficult offspring, and children are often expected to find their own recreation instead of relying upon the family to chauffeur them to lessons and activities. Further, children of working-class and/or poor families accept financial limits, seldom talk back, experience far less sibling rivalry, and are noticeably free of a sense of entitlement. Middle-class children, on the other hand, become adept at ensuring that their selfish needs are met by others, and are conversant in social mores such as shaking hands, looking people in the eye, and cooperating with others. They also know about the latest in technology and popular culture.25

In concerted cultivation, middle- and upper-middle-class parents seek opportunities to help their children cultivate talents and inclinations, largely through organized activities, lessons, and programs. The hope is that this panoply of opportunities and activities will not only make their children well-rounded individuals, but will also give them the skills—conversational, leadership, and intellectual—to function in the “real world.” According to Lareau, this has transformed contemporary middle-class life into a life centered on the calendar, as children are busy participating in sports, music, scouts, and playgroups. Middle-class children are more likely to be argumentative, complain of boredom, demand attention, and foster a sense of
entitlement. Centrism functions as a form of busy upper-middle-class life. Even if one removes television, the parenting and schooling styles retain the same involvement in a popular culture schedule of birthday parties, play dates, and continuous recreation.

When David Brooks published his *Social Animal* last March, I had simultaneously just written this Orthodox Forum paper. In reviewing the footnotes in Brooks’s book, I noticed that we had very similar reading lists, kept up with the same authors, journals, and schools of thought, but had arrived at different conclusions.26

Brooks is happy to paint a community of shallow popular culture yuppies who are happy in their own neighborhoods. They achieve success by their shallowness. His book says that we have intuitions, feelings, habits, and reactions which give way to a happy, successful life. An unreflective middlebrow outlook combined with an upper-middle-class lifestyle teaches one to get the “right” schooling, make connections, create the “right” home life, and join a house of worship. Those who follow this path possess what economists refer to as non-cognitive skills—in other words, they have good character and possess street smarts. Centrist Orthodoxy is defined by this same know-how of how to attain a good life, and those who adhere to the upper-middle-class lifestyle live the good life.

Brooks picked out only the good sides of these changes, but neglected to examine the negative aspects. He neither addresses the problems of consumerism, selfishness, and lack of seriousness, nor does he deal with harmful and dystopian elements of the lifestyle. Whereas Brooks tells his story as comic and ironic, I tell the story with a greater sense of paradox, concern, and rejection, suggesting that we must be searching for something deeper in life.

Commenting on Brooks, the sociologist James S. Bielo compares the heroic religion of the mid-twentieth century to the self-absorbed religion of today. Bielo asks: What happened to the hero of modernity? Where are the heroic visions of Camus, Unamuno, or Niebuhr? Our community has become Rav Soleveitchik’s Adam the First, without Adam the Second. Responding to the world described by Brooks, Bielo notes that “most contemporary religious American life was dogmatic hierarchy grounded in an absolute transcendent
with contrasting foreground of the self-obsessed contingent individuals lost in money, sports, and consumerism.”

**Logic of Practice**

Can we change the situation of Centrism and its relationship to popular culture by ideology, sensible guidelines, or moralism? What does this mean for our communities?

Ann Swidler, an American advocate of Pierre Bourdieu, stresses that all culture is fragmentary, and thus there is no comprehensive weave. Individuals lead complex lives with a myriad of conflicting elements as guides. For instance, someone could be a successful professional and Torah scholar while concurrently still turning to popular culture and a childhood lifestyle to make daily decisions.

A leader who wishes to change actual practice must alter the common, everyday practices within the cultural construct. Swidler, critiquing both Weber and Geertz, assumes that most activities are embedded in a logic of practice and do not have an ideological element. For most people during stable periods, culture is a set of skills, habits, styles, and stratagems which teach one how to succeed in the community. Only during periods of unsettled tension and transition do values and ideology play a significant role. When ideology does play a role in American life, it generally is used in fragmentary and contradictory ways, and as part of a toolbox for situating daily life. Ideals have symbolic value, and there is real competition between them, but their actual application remains ambiguous and piecemeal without conscious considerations.27

Theory generally does not change the logic of practice during stable eras. Human life is lived based on mastering the rules of daily life and not on autonomous ideological choices. Contemporary social theory shows how we follow teachers and institutions through an imminent experience of practice presumed to be similar to that of our role models and confirmed through our daily practice of cultural life. Modern Orthodox Jews are neither falling away from an ideal of Torah u-Madda nor muddling through without a theory, because theory does not play a role in their logic of practice. The nonideological practice of Modern Orthodoxy consists of a variety of skills, styles, and
stratagems needed to live within the community, but not necessarily the strict upkeep of the ideology. Popular knowledge functions in as fickle a way as any other consumer product; it is transformed into a more comprehensible and approachable means of understanding that is far from the original theoretical exposition.

The practice of the ideological elements of Modern Orthodoxy is similar to the practice of a basketball coach or of a dentist who may teach meditation as a practical technique without any need for a theory or recognition of its oriental philosophy. So, too, the suburban Modern Orthodox lifestyle does not need a philosophy of change as much as it needs practical changes in the current set of skills, habits, styles, and stratagems. For most people, madda (secular knowledge) has no meaning without a pragmatic value. Therefore, to change the situation, one would need to change the necessary and pragmatic elements of one’s everyday life, not its ideology.28

The logic of practical Modern Orthodoxy consists of a set of responses allowing one to combine professional advancement and suburban home life with Torah. Secular studies play a role in professional advancement, but the cultural discourse of suburban home life does not need secular studies; high culture does not offer cultural capital to those who possess them. In the little time that remains after the lawn is mowed, parent-teacher conferences are over, and trips to Disneyworld have been made, most people are too tired to do much else than watch television or read popular magazines. Those truly virtuous souls who have time for Torah learn daf-yomi, or printouts from the Web, or at best have once-a-week havrutot. The decision to enter a profession and move to the suburbs is defining of the structures of their lives. The logic of practice within the community points to how culture is embedded in suburban life. For most Centrist Orthodox Jews, discussions of culture should start with the assumption that we are producing suburbanites. A motto for the community might be “Torah and popular culture”; Torah becomes combined with Dougies, the NCAA playoffs, and Netflix movies. The community works with an ideology of Torah combined with a suburban logic of practice.

As Ann Swidler notes, ideology plays a stronger role when needed at several crucial points, but this is not the case in everyday life.
In the case of Modern Orthodoxy, ideology plays a bigger part in the choice of schools for one’s children, one’s reading on Jewish holidays, and one’s reaction to a guest lecturer in synagogue, than in support of secular homework, use of time on the holiday, and daily expectations of one’s rabbi.

**Generation Theory**

The biggest factor contributing to the rise of popular culture is the generation factor. The younger generation has embraced the new technologies. Most of the members of Generation X, as well as the Millennials and now Generation Z, live with and understand reality through media. One must ask how this relates to their religion.

Tom Beaudoin outlines that members of Generation X, born roughly in the 1960s and 1970s, share experiences of popular cultural “events.” He is referring to a variety of pop culture phenomena, including bodily costuming, music videos, cyberspace, movies, popular songs, television shows, board games, products, and trends. Beaudoin contends that Generation Xers live religiously mainly through the popular culture. In addition, he identifies the ways in which his generation shares a widespread regard for magic and mysticism. Religious institutions are spurned as people take symbols, values, and rituals from various religious traditions and combine them into their personal spirituality.29

The next generation, the Millennials or Generation Y (according to the author and economist Neil Howe, who coined the term “Millennial” in the early nineties in his first of several books on Generation Y), is “civic minded,” rejecting the attitudes of the baby boomers and Generation X. Characteristics of the millennial generation vary by region and by social and economic conditions. However, its members are generally marked by increased use and familiarity with communications, media, and digital technologies. The Millennials grew up at a time in which the Internet caused great change to all traditional media.

They were able to combine family and school life together with heavy mass media exposure and thus became more self-confident, incredibly social, technologically sophisticated, and overall action
bent and goal driven, with the ability to function as part of a team. Howe claims that if Millennials have a professional problem at work, “They’ll start IMing each other, a few will get Mom and Dad on their cell phones, someone will call the local media, another will alert the congressman.”

This generation does have its downsides however, including impatience, demanding personalities, high levels of stress, generally materialistic tendencies, and sheltered lifestyles. They also have little time or desire for reflection (self or otherwise) or for free-spirited living like the preceding generations. Of course, blanket statements about an entire generation always apply to only a portion of its members.

A newsletter aimed at professors encouraged them to respond to the change by first acknowledging that the older generation has different values:

Our generation has difficulty connecting and identifying with the Millennials. We prize the life of the mind, books, and working long hours for practically nothing; however, we must remember that this generation values money and what it can buy. Our modest material status, along with all of our education, does not inspire a great deal of respect.

Millennials are busy and plugged-in, while at the same time they acknowledge that they have no interest in books, introspection, rebelliousness, or psychological reflection. They do not like authority but do like emotional parental units and respect expert knowledge.

To conclude the discussion on the prevalence of technology in the younger members of the community, I will turn to a personal example and observation of teens and twenty-somethings and their cell phones on Shabbat. I was asked by a Jewish educator-principal if I knew what it meant when current high school students asked each other if they kept “half-shabbos” or “full-shabbos.” Since I understood the terminology, I explained that it referred to texting. He said I was correct. The students refer to someone who texts (and tweets
and posts) on Shabbos as keeping half-shabbos, and those who do not, full-shabbos. The educator said that the students consider it part of daily verbal communication. These teens text, tweet, and use Facebook casually, are part of a tension which feeds their social media addiction, and remain in the Orthodox fold. They do not think that they are crossing a clear Shabbat boundary accompanied by tremendous trepidation and guilt. Many of the next generation have conveniently managed to side-step all the emotional and theological upheaval by placing themselves on a shomer-shabbat spectrum.32

From Rationality to Moral Orders
Most of my readers at the Orthodox Forum are familiar with the sociological writings of Peter Berger, most notably The Sacred Canopy. In this book, Berger sees culture as giving existential meaning to life, and thus culture is an externalization of inner meaning. For Berger, the world of the East European Jews disintegrated when they came to America out of the “plausibility structure” of their broken-down world. The new order of the twentieth century was based on autonomy, individuality, and rationality.

Current theories, to which Berger himself has acquiesced, question the original emphasis on secularization. Religion, including Orthodox Judaism, has come back with a vengeance. We are living in a postsecular age where “everywhere we look, we have religious problems.” Indeed, “Globalization has propelled traditionalism as a barrier against change,” and “for the prosperous suburbanite, it has become a lifestyle coach.” As market forces reshape the world, the tools for working in the world are going hand in hand with the individualism of evangelical religion. We are now used to religion in the news, since almost every news story has a religious angle.33

The other major change is the movement toward an individualized approach to institutional and organized religion. Scholars concur that society has not so much become secular as it has moved from an external religion to one that is immanent in our lives. Charles Taylor, in A Secular Age, points out that Durkheim’s approach—in which individuals express themselves in collectives and institutions—no longer holds true in its original meaning. Rather, Taylor argues, religion
today can be found in “the continuing multiplication of new options, religious, spiritual, and anti-religious, which individuals seize on in order to make sense of their lives.” He stresses the complex ways in which religion is now even more a part of our daily lives, and the importance of a multiplicity of interpretations to deal with this variety. Meaning and moral order have replaced the concept of religious experience as the defining element of religion.34

In the post-Durkheim reality described by Taylor, issues of modern religion must be rephrased in terms of individual meanings and smaller social units. In other words, religion today must be assessed in terms of human life, and must be based on small changes in meaning and moral order. Take, for example, the variety of religious experiences and ethical principles which might be found among the seats in a single Orthodox congregation on a Shabbat. One will find people for whom Judaism is of varying degrees of importance in their daily lives, but for whom the content of that Judaism is also different and varying. There will be those who adhere to 1950s modern Orthodox theology, those who are pan-halakhic, those who have a revivalist God in their hearts, those for whom Judaism is about being a politically conservative AIPAC supporter, others who stress progressive social action, or who understand reality using twelve-step language, or who like Neo-Hasidism, and still others whose meaning is based on the high attained while in Israel, or who eclectically combine Chabad, feng shui, and Buddhist spirituality, and several Moral Majority Jews who embrace Judaism for its strong family values. Once it is acknowledged that there are dozens of other Jewish moral orders, no single congregation has all of them, and thus the flux between groups is a natural phenomenon. When entering the spiritual marketplace, the contemporary Jew experiences dozens of rabbinical flavors based on different meanings and moral orders. Synagogues and Jewish organizations become specialized into single products for specialized audiences. Multiple choices do not lead to the banal pluralism of the market, but to a variety of constructed finite religious identities.35

In this world of choice, popular culture and popular forms of religion, according to the important sociologist Robert Wuthnow, are so important for our religious quest specifically because they are
underdetermined. Popular culture does not offer meaning; rather, Wuthnow would explain the success as offering an event to serve what he calls a “dramaturgical function” to allow different people from different environments to mold events into diverse new moral orders. Popular religion works because it creates a new moral order outside of the system, in diverse environments, and these “dramaturgical” factors allow diverse individualization.

Even though all popular culture is our externalization of meaning, Wuthnow singles out art and music for their religious role. Most Americans have a strong positive relationship between participation in the arts and interest in spiritual growth. Wuthnow argues that contemporary spirituality is increasingly encouraged by the arts because of its emphasis on transcendent experience and personal reflection. This kind of spirituality is compatible with concurrent active involvement in institutional religion.  

**Evangelicalism**

As a student of Wuthnow, Christian Smith, in his 1998 work *American Evangelicalism*, shows that the solid plurality of America is evangelical, and that evangelicalism is one of the strongest religious traditions in America today. Smith’s model looks beyond evangelicalism to explore more broadly the problems of traditional religious belief and practice in the modern world.

At the Orthodox Forum in 2000, Marc Stern casually remarked from the podium that the description of the modern evangelical professional described in that day’s newspaper would only require the change of a few words to describe the Centrist community. Most sociologists agree and find that the rise of both communities was due to similar, but not exactly the same, causes.

Why is evangelicalism so successful? Smith provides three reasons. The first is that human longings are satisfied by being situated in a group with a morally oriented collective identity. The second reason is that the symbolism of evangelicalism helps form a very attractive boundary. Finally, the third reason claims that evangelicalism is so attractive due to the fact that its religious traditions are exceptional at renegotiating stances toward society. Couching innovative ideas in the
veil of tradition is an effective way to spread innovative ideas. Evangelicalism is exceptionally new but can pull this off by claiming to be old.

According to Smith, the religious revival of the last generation successfully addresses a whole set of basic human needs and desires, offering an emotionally as well as cognitively satisfying experience for ordinary believers. Whether or not various philosophers and scientists raise objections to Christianity, the fact seems to be that in believers’ phenomenological experience, there is tremendous power in living in a theistic universe, having a way to deal with moral failure, believing one is loved and cared for by God, having a community of worship and belonging to be a part of, and so on. For many millions of people, that is much more compelling than arguments Freud or Darwin might have made.

Evangelicals believe their family lives and moral lives are superior to those of others, regardless of the statistics. Evangelicals feel that they lead very different lives than ordinary people. They do not think of commonalities.

Evangelicals generally support science and rationality, but only with an eighteenth-century Francis Bacon type of commonsense realism. Therefore, they accept engineering, medicine, and accounting as value neutral and based only on a rational point of view. They question, however, any science or knowledge based on theory, humanities, or interpretation.

**Christian Rock and Kiruv**

Evangelicals reject the secular culture as not expressing religious values, so they have to create their own versions of secular culture. This develops into an interest inversion: the more religious one is, the more a particular group needs to create its own rock music. The paradox or tension is created amid the amoral world of rock and the Christian version of it. The more the Centrist community becomes part of an open society, the more it partakes of the general secular culture, and the more it experiences sectarianism. When this happens, the community must descend into the realm of rock and roll, hip-hop, and other aspects of popular culture and genres of music in order to produce more accessible products for the Orthodox community.
Andrew Beaujon finds in his recent study that the Preachers of Rock declare: “We preach in an un-Christian place.” Since the youth care about culture, music, and television, the religious community must be adapted to fit their interests, and a popular culture based on that group must be created in order to maintain status amongst the religion and the changing times and youth interests. Those in the world of Christian rock are connected to anti-religious rock more than the average person, yet the believers see themselves as more pure than those Christians who are religious but listen to ordinary music. What does it mean to situate one’s religion in the raunchiest part of culture? A culture that is indebted to MTV and the Internet cheers for red meat, and has pop culture references to Hooters, Paris Hilton, and reality TV. Preachers learn their sermon timing from stand-up comedians like Eddie Murphy.

The parallels to the Christian rock youth movements are found in synagogue youth movements. Kiruv organizations based culturally on videos, songs, and pop culture offer trips to Great Adventure, offer classes in drumming and karate, and offer much of the same raunchiness. The focus is not on Torah study and mizvot but on personal states like commitment, belief, and acceptance of Torah as a freedom from doubt. How much of any youth movement’s use of popular culture is reconnection to Judaism through weaning members away from the evil outside world? How much of it functions as a support group for keeping Shabbat by means of popular culture?

Durkheim distinguishes between “group” and “grid organization.” In the former, the religious moment is the separation from the nonreligious world, the impure. Group identity is formed by excluding things. The latter is a hierarchal arrangement based on knowledge and observance. The religious goals for a grid arrangement, such as the Orthodox Forum, are the aspirations of making oneself a scholar or scrupulous within one’s community’s observance. If people within a grid community are lax, it is necessary for them to re-ascend the grid through Torah study and scrupulousness. Blaming the outside world is futile for a slide down the grid. In contrast, the youth movement kiruv is about group identification and conveying a sense of difference from the outside. For Durkheim, group activities, such as discussing
The Emerging Popular Culture and the Centrist Community

pop culture or enthusiasm, do not and cannot lead to grid strictness in observance.

Beaujon points out that personal testimonies are the secret currency of evangelicalism. The question is whether or not hip-hop should be used to convey a religious message, to which the answer is neither yes nor no, but “Did it save anyone?” Anything can be used, regardless of how raunchy, as long as one believes it will lead to commitment. How do we know hip-hop is good to use? It works. Christian rock preaches not to curse, yet Beaujon notes that some of the more successful preachers curse for shock value. The preacher shows he is cool by doing it, and, in so doing, somehow teaches that despite a rejection of pop culture, one is still part of it. Needless to say, mainstream preachers do not have to tell their congregants to swear like a rapper and can still maintain their status as cool.

Especially interesting and relevant is Beaujon’s discussion of second-generation evangelical children. They maintain that they have gained much through Christian rock despite being raised in a religious home and having done little tangible in the year to repent or change their ways. They do not have more of any criteria of observance or attendance. Beaujon claims that since the second-generation offspring do not truly want more demands or stricter behavior, they are resentful that they cannot get the euphoria and freedom from doubt. There are many Centrist parallels with second-generation Centrists, especially their greater ability to mix popular culture with Torah yet find a way to demarcate themselves from their parents through more yeshivish clothing.

Beaujon compares Christian rock to jam bands. Christian rock is a religiosity situated in the simultaneous acceptance and rejection of pop culture. The attraction of comparing it to a jam band is not in terms of the artistry but in terms of the ability to tap into a sense of freedom and adventure. Jam bands have a sense of swagger, the fun of winging it, heartfelt muddled beliefs, and the promise of self-guided education. Beaujon believes Americans assume different identities and need maps to navigate the tangled areas of life. Religious popular music offers a chance to try on identities and boundaries.
One must ask a question begged by both Beaujon and the whole of the Christian music industry: What makes music religious? Is it the mission statement of the label? The theological content of the lyrics? The faith of the musicians or producers? The faith of the listeners? The profit margins devoted to the poor? Patton Dodd, an editor at the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, answers none of the above, for “the only one who can make music Christian is Christ.” 38 We can substitute the word “Torah” in the last sentence. Popular culture, however, serves to provide *hizzuk* and *kiruv*, translated as mission, outreach, dedication, and faith commitment; Torah in the traditional sense takes a back seat.

Katy Perry is currently one of the most recognized and famous popular singers. She was raised by evangelical parents who did not allow her to partake in nonreligious pop-music immodest dress. In her late teens, Perry was a popular Christian singer and provided the enthusiasm for other teens to be religious by adapting popular music to Christian themes. Now, she is entirely beyond her evangelical upbringing. However, there are particular points one must consider. More or better enthusiasm at Christian camp would have not kept her right-wing. In fact, she was the singer providing the enthusiasm and spirit (*ruah*). Better advisers would have not kept her religious—her family was the leader. As part of a generation rejecting the religion of the 1990s, she is not arguing for a greater role for women, and prefers sensuality, sexuality, and popular culture over liberal theology and feminism. She remains evangelical in the sense that she is against blasphemy or speaking against religion. She continues to directly read the Bible, but now finds that the apostle Paul speaks in the short Twitter forms of New Age universalism. (It is beyond the assignment or scope of this paper, but this is an influx currently seen coming out of Centrism.)

**Oprah and Narrative**

This human narrative is often the rubric for one’s religion. It is also the rubric for the Oprah Winfrey show. Oprah is not interested in abstract knowledge or knowledge not relatable to one’s life. All the books one reads have to fit into the “first-person journey of my life.”
However, how does that book better oneself or present a vision of an alternative reality?39

Popular culture plays an increased role in Orthodoxy as one needs products which relate to the first-person journey of one’s life. Talmud study, halakhah, and philosophy do not deal with the individual. The large amount of Neo-Hasidism, self-help, evangelical purpose-driven Orthodoxy, and narrative books are all needed to offer suggestions of a better self or an alternative reality. The religious teachings of Oprah (and others of similar media stature) are filtering down, and the world of Orthodoxy is being transformed into that of Oprah.

Winfrey’s online world creates a social ethos where people think they are part of a tightly knit group even though they have less actual connection. She holds the model for bringing religion into the social network age. If everyone is reading the same book, posting on the same message board, and feeling that they are telling their story, a personal social connection is established. Oprah praises her followers for forming bonds, and people desire that praise. Oprah is against institutional religion, and has maintained a type of spirituality outside institutions, yet her followers see her as supporting traditional values. The inner self is known through the purchase and mastery of commercial commodity products. The inner self is prepackaged as ready to buy units. They prepackage the statement that people are not alone in their problems, and they can buy into solidarity with others in similar situations.40

Oprah’s religion postulates the daily life of a false self as having to make pragmatic decisions, and a true inner self which possesses infinite potential for solving problems, creativity, and individuality. The religion of Oprah promises the oxymoron of instructions for personal creativity while maintaining how precious each person’s individual narrative is. It is not necessarily that one is directly promised a better marriage, better children, better health, and/or a richer life in an ordinary and prosperity gospel sense, but rather that the true self, the inner self, and the inner spirit must flourish. Oprah is a passionate advocate for a kind of prosperity gospel, insofar as she believes in a correlative relationship between one’s disposition and one’s materiality.
Joel Scott Osteen (b. 1963) the televangelist and the senior pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, reaches over seven million broadcast-media viewers weekly with the leading Christian message prosperity gospel, in which God wants you to be the best you can be: wealthy, happy, and successful. Rev. Joel Osteen is quite popular among Centrist Jews because he shows that the Bible has stories of how God will help you attain wealth, a good career, a happy life, anything you deserve.41

I sat next to someone recently who told me that he loved the stories of Hanoch Teller. Since he was very far from our projected image of Teller’s audience, I asked him what other books he liked. What had he read recently that was similar? He answered that he loved the recent Keith Richards’s book Life, the autobiography of the former member of the Rolling Stones. In both books, what mattered was the human narrative and how people responded to life. In neither case did the protagonist have a heroic change or a transformation, just little moments of everyday life. He volunteered that he also liked the stories of Studs Turkel. This human narrative was the rubric for his religion.

Niebuhr

What should be the response of the religious person to culture? The mid-twentieth-century answer was penned by the renowned theologian H. Richard Niebuhr (d. 1962) in his influential work, Christ and Culture. Niebuhr describes five approaches of religion to human culture: against culture, of culture, synthesis, paradox, and transformation. Whichever attitude is chosen affects the society one lives in by mediating the call of the religion and the human world in which we live.41

The first model, against culture, is the fundamental approach of wanting to opt out of society through rejection, separatism, and anti-intellectualism. The second, of culture, embraces civility, universal values, and current ideas. This model has the advantage of reaching people.

The synthesis model involves a synthesis of religion and culture, and accepts the positive value of secular culture. Yet there is a serious problem that Niebuhr detects here. The synthesis approach
might have basic familiarity with secular sources, but it does not linger on them. Synthesis people assume that the combined relationship exists, but they never educate themselves to attune themselves to the tensions. They create an amalgamation which works in a given time and assume it is able to work in all instances, creating concern about archaic tones or applicability to social contexts. This approach has the advantage of its popularity with clergy. Yet there is always the lingering discomfort with glossing over the tensions, the human element, and earthly temporality between culture and religion.

The fourth mode, paradox, is an approach, Niebuhr claims, that understands the true tensions. Here, he uses Kierkegaard and Otto, the tortured figures of paradox who know about the completely other (ganz andere), as examples of people who feel both sides of the dialectic. This model is seen most clearly in the neglected anthropocentric thought of Rav Soloveitchik.

The model that Niebuhr advocates most strongly is the transformational model. This model believes in the positive ability to change the world. It has all the paradoxes of society, yet thinks there must be a workable solution. On the one hand, one is able to understand society, but the transformational model thinks there is a way to get it to actually produce change within that society. Niebuhr claims that the true world can be restored, and that everything can be brought together. This is not done to create a synthesis, but rather to move forward in transforming ourselves and society. Twenty-first-century thought starts with this fifth approach out of necessity, to be part of the cultural realm yet to also make a religious statement.

Can Religious Leaders Change the Culture?

James Davison Hunter, in his recent To Change the World, asks, “Did the religious turn of the last thirty years change anything in the United States?” He gives a sharp answer: Only if the religious group entered the broader culture.

One changes the culture by being part of the mainstream culture; however, to stand on the sidelines and offer commentary does not change anything. Changing oneself or pledging oneself to devotion to one’s faith does not change society. Either one gets to be a ma-
jor politician, editor, academic, writer, or television figure who creates values, or one is not influencing the broader culture at all. Being published by a religious press and working at a religious college does not change society. If one becomes a member of the Supreme Court or writes for the *New York Times* op-ed page, then one changes society. Hunter shows the importance that Catholic moral thinking has taken on in the United States because of the rise of Catholics in the courts and academia. But to be an evangelical Anabaptist author, or an Orthodox Jew who has disdain for the institutions or criteria of establishment does not change anything. These religious groups pride themselves on their sense of periphery and devotion to their own aspects of culture.42

Hunter assumes that the individuals, networks, and institutions most critically involved in the production of culture or civilization operate at the center of society, where prestige is the highest, and not on the periphery, where status is low. According to Hunter, championing a “Christian worldview” (or a halakhic worldview) accepts the premise that once the hearts and minds of ordinary people are properly revived and informed, the culture will change. “This account,” Hunter says flatly, “is almost wholly mistaken.”

Those religious institutions that tend to be the least effective address the “lower and peripheral areas” of culture, such as secondary education rather than university research, popular culture rather than high art, ministries of mercy rather than public policy. At their worst, they find glory in their marginal status and feed a subculture that churns out substandard intellectual products for consumption only by others of the same group, simultaneously the most energetic and least effective culture-makers you could imagine. Hunter calls religious Americans to “faithful presence,” or full participation in every structure of culture, as deeply formed religious people who also participate in the alternative community of the church. For example, Fordham University has recently held conferences on religion, popular culture, and twenty-somethings. The university brought the best experts in each field to speak.43 This followed after Fordham had a supported Center of Religion and Culture for a decade. It is just now
that the topic is being addressed in Centrism, rather than in the 1990s when the center was established.

**Conclusions**

To return to the question of popular culture and as a mean of a tentative conclusion, here are some ways to discuss the options for solutions that take us beyond Niebuhr and Christian Smith.

George Marsden, an evangelical historian, proposed modifying Niebuhr’s theory. First, Marsden points out that Niebuhr’s abstract category of religion is inadequate and misleading. The fact is that every individual’s or group’s way of understanding Christianity and following the faith is itself a cultural product. Torah is already in culture, and there is a Centrist Torah popular culture that confronts general popular culture. There are also Centrist high cultures, Centrist consumer cultures, and Centrist outreach cultures.

Second, Marsden emphasizes Niebuhr’s undifferentiated use of the word “culture” and argues that it must be refined and used “in more specific and discriminating ways.” For example, in talking about subcultures or particular cultural activities, conversations should be held in ways other than the monolithic way Niebuhr discusses culture. There is no reason that what should be done about war, about farming, epic poetry, elementary education, pornography, mothering, and about heavy metal would gain by our attempt to treat each of those segments of “culture” in the same way.44

Before any serious discussion of any of these topics, studies on the role of the laity in Judaism can be used. Questions such as “What were the past expectations of the laity in Judaism?” and “How was the Jewish laity viewed in the past?” present a major desideratum.45

These questions would lead to the formulation of a proper theology of what it means to be a householder. What guidance do we offer for suburban life? What specific papers do we write offering guidance for parenting, professional life, or living in a consumerist life? These are the major questions behind our current topic within the realm of popular culture.

In the meantime, based on the social science material in this essay, here is a typology of prescriptive approaches to popular culture.
Each of these approaches needs to be fleshed out. The question is how the community should address the age of media, popular culture, and commercialism.

The first answer, offered by George Marsden, is analytic. He claims that we have all five reactions to culture in everything we do. We need a complex narrative, and we need to confront the irony, paradox, division, dissent, and fragmented responses to culture. This paper was written in Marsden’s voice, which is best suited for the historian seeking description.

The second answer is to create a more extreme form of Niebuhr’s paradox approach by seeking an impossible Gnostic redemption from our suburban lives. In this approach, we seek to call out to God because of our embeddedness in the human condition. An example of this approach is the way that Rav Nahman of Bratslav mocks the material life of the bourgeois in his story “The Master of Prayer.” But what if one is not looking for _reductio ad absurdum_, but rather for insight?46

Recently, however, people have been turning to R. Itamar Schwartz’s _Belevavi Mishkan Evneh_, which calls for the abandonment of cellular phones, suburban homes, nice clothes, and urges people to flee into devotion toward God. A shock treatment to remember what life in this world is all about (i.e., the service of God). But not everyone is ready for such radical change. Since this approach is personal and does not change the community, one often opts out.

A third approach is to accept the new media in a natural way, in the same way we have accepted newspapers, comics, and television. If there is no explicit reason to forbid popular culture, then why look for a problem? Slouching toward Orthodoxy is certainly better than banning popular culture, and besides, it is a continuation of our current trajectory. Better than the opposite of banning it.

A fourth approach is to create an Orthodox popular culture separate from other societal pop cultures. We are already busily creating Orthodox videos and music. This, however, has many of the paradoxical elements of the Christian rock movement.

A fifth approach creates an Orthodox middlebrow culture. Sarah Guggenheim and Rabbi Markus Lehrman created popular lit-
erature for the Hirsch’s Frankfurt community, but it creates a simulacrum, as described by Jean Baudrillard, of being a secular fiction when in reality it was entirely Orthodox.\(^4\)\(^7\)

Another approach would be to embrace the new media and use it as a moment to reflect creatively, to disrupt the temptation toward religious insularity, and to imaginatively expand the horizons of self-reflection. This approach would take conferences, journals, and public debate by the Orthodox artists themselves. A single article is not self-reflection and does not contribute to a discussion. Discernment and a moral compass are not gained in a single essay. We would benefit from popular culture critics who could write weekly columns for several years. We can use the creation of an American edition of *Dimui* or a Jewish version of the journal *Image: Art, Faith, Mystery*.

The answer of outreach is to try to reach people where they are. The goal is to find Jewish values in popular culture. In this approach, episodes of *Glee, Grey’s Anatomy,* or *Gossip Girl* are explained using general Jewish categories. For example, a mosh pit shows the Jewish value of how we all have to show trust and take care of each other. Or from an NCSY site, TV is connected by whatever means to Jewish values.\(^4\)\(^8\) This approach allows accommodation to those in transition, such as adolescents, and those who are marginal in the community, like those who join subcultures of emo, metal, deadheads, bikers, as well as those involved in twelve-step, having personal troubles, or working in media.\(^4\)\(^9\)

This approach has also been discussed in the Christian literature and is referred to as “mission,” in order to distinguish it from the church. The category of “church” involves scripture, doctrine, membership in the community, and Christian values. The mission approach suspends judgment and does not approach a cultural product to ask if it agrees with Christianity. Rather, there is a starting premise that everything can and will be connected in order to reach people. A community is stable and has limits, but an organization engaged in outreach can change and has no fixed limits to the accommodation. In the Orthodox community, we still confuse the two.

In outreach, the goal used to be to adapt to mainstream culture. We are now watching the reverse, and people raised in the system be-
come involved in kiruv to deal with the needed accommodation to popular culture.

One of the new narratives being created is the concept of eyn od milvado (“there is nothing but the divine”). I will spend extra time on it because it is one of the few new ideologies currently proposed to deal with the changes. It has been adopted by the OU as part of program called Wings, which was created to bring people into the synagogue. It is similar to some of the post-evangelical phenomena of churches that use media, swagger, and rock-like approaches, such as “Emerging Church” and “Café Church.” In this approach, there is a need to be able to see eyn od milvado, all things as connected to God, as a total celebration of Judaism. Many Orthodox Jews list this as their religion on Facebook.

The power of this approach can be seen in the allowance of an Orthodox synagogue to host a rock-and-roll Shabbaton, with the lead singer of The Who, Roger Daltrey. The organizer, Rabbi Einhorn, was interviewed by Zev Brenner about his approach. He said that these programs give strength (hizzuk), that they serve as an entry point to Jewish life for many people, and as a bridge between where people are and the synagogue. There is wisdom among the gentiles, so we try to pick up the best. This approach is not pulling anyone out of the more sectarian communities, but our congregants are already immersed in rock and roll. The sources for Einhorn’s daily examples of how to live life are from rock stars, athletes, celebrities, and other avatars of pop culture. They are the appropriate mussar to reach us where we are at.

Rabbi Einhorn declared, “There is nothing but God, or there is no ultimate source but God,” meaning that God can be found everywhere in culture.

Brenner asked several times: “Where do you draw the line?” The rabbi answered “We draw the line only if we find someone whose values are antithetical to Judaism.”

Rabbi Shlomo Einhorn describes the need for his rabbis in his age group, between the younger Generation X and older Generation Y, to seek the experimental. His followers grew up with a strictly halakhic diet and a rationalist worldview that did not sustain their cravings for the religious experience they were taught to value in Israel.
They transitioned from iPads and MTV to a year in Israel, where they acquired black hats, allegiance to rabbinic authority, and complete submission to Torah. As entirely outside of the academic culture as Einhorn’s generation is, they developed a yearning for spirituality.

Einhorn himself found his own spirituality when he discovered the world of motivational management books and could not get enough of them. He devoured books on how to improve one’s leadership, how to motivate those under you and how to push yourself to your potential—an action-centered gregarious form of self-fulfillment in the real world. Rabbi Einhorn is absolutely sold on Tony Robbins’s program for fire-walking to be transformed and to release the potential within. Not only has he undergone the fire-walking seminar, he encourages other Orthodox rabbis to do the same. Einhorn has also attended Landmark seminars (a derivative from Werner Erhard’s Erhard Seminar Training) and appreciates the importance of Neuro-Linguistic Programming for motivating others. For him, these seminars show our potential to grow in our service to God and be like the gedolim.

There are good and bad points in this approach. It is similar to the sixth approach of mission, but it has a positive redefinition of what it means to be Orthodox. This creates the Orthodoxy of popular culture. At some point, it will likely clash with other elements of the community.

Another approach, and the most thoughtful, would be to answer the question of what it means to be a Jew or what it takes to do God’s will that has built within it the ability to distinguish between the good and the bad, the pure and the impure, the holy and the profane. We need a new narrative that incorporates a bigger and more expansive vision. To judge as a ben Torah only those who devote themselves to rabbinic texts does not take account of Centrist life. Many of the classics of Jewish thought offered a broad vision for the age in which they were written. We may need a new narrative for the twenty-first century. What is Orthodox Judaism, and how can one be expansive?250

A theology of beauty or imagination in which art and creativity can renew awareness of the ultimate questions of who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. We need to be part of
the culture influencing the artists who will create the visual images, stories, and music that shape our time.

Unfortunately, we will probably put little effort into this endeavor and eventually accept one of the answers developed from the broader society. Since these issues have been acute for a decade, criteria will likely emerge from the educational, social theory, and religious literature of other groups.

Personal High Culture Coda
I will state clearly before ending this essay that I am in favor of high culture in all senses. I do not wish it to be misconstrued by those who assume that description means prescription that I am not in favor of high culture. I am in favor of high culture, humanism, and the avant-garde. I am *homo academicus* and have been part of the closed Orthodox Forum before. I want my high culture to come from the academic conference, the graduate seminar, the major publishing houses, and from major intellectuals of the age. I support the visions of Rabbis Belkin, Soloveitchik, Lichtenstein, and Wurzburger for synthesis and creating a high culture Orthodoxy.

I have many opinions on high culture, each requiring a full essay; perhaps I will get a chance at some point to write them out in great detail. In the meantime, I believe we should do more to create a community in which high culture has social capital. Personally, I would appreciate greater emphasis on humanities, social sciences, arts, and literature in the community. To make this possible, I would also encourage conferences, funding, journals, and curriculum reform. We would need to create a climate where the leadership actively encourages entry into high culture with all its social and intellectual difficulties. Separate from that, we would need to start having a greater dialogue between high culture and Torah. “To be part of an engaging high culture, we need to actively engage with it.”51 But what would it take to accomplish this? The problem is not the outside culture that we need to protect against, nor is it the deviance of some from the ideology of the community. If we are to move the community to a greater application of high culture, or even middlebrow culture, there needs to be the creation of a culture in which high culture matters.
Do we reject rabbis who are cultural boors? No. One can proclaim in the community with impunity that one has not read a work of literature or social science since high school or in required freshman-year courses. One can freely say that all one needs to learn about the humanities and social sciences to be part of the high culture can be done in a three-year English major.52

Proponents of the liberal arts, from John H. Newman to John Dewey to the contemporary Martha Nussbaum, see a college education as a conversation and life of the mind. It cannot be just great books, but rather must include free inquiry, critical engagement, the ability to weigh historical evidence, a sense of imagination and creativity. Today we would phrase it as the ability to think well about social science issues, the ability to imagine a variety of complex issues in global age, and to recognize fellow citizens as people with equal rights and their own viewpoints.

At an earlier point in life, I taught at the Maimonides School in Boston and then in a Torah u-Madda high school in New Jersey. In the former, popular culture symbols were banned, and popular culture achievements by the students were barely acknowledged. In contrast, in the New Jersey school, pop culture was discussed from the bimah after davening, and popular culture was a major part of the school ethos. In the former, the curriculum was geared to enter an Ivy League college, and in the latter they were proud to offer functional college preparatory education in order to be Torah u-Madda. At Maimonides, the curriculum emphasized a highbrow approach to the teaching; in New Jersey, AP exam review books were emphasized. At that time, Boston parents aspired to work at Mass General or Harvard, and the wealthy supporters of the school did not control the curriculum. In other words, there was serious social capital in engaging in high culture; this was not the case in New Jersey, where there was little of this aspiration or demarcation.

The writings of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein shlita are replete with statements about the limits of materialism for a Ben Torah. Yet, no one is culling out his statements that one should not seek the best car, the biggest house, or become a gourmand. His statements condemning RCA rabbis who spend their time while in Israel entirely in res-
taurants instead of visiting other rabbis and attending *shiurim* are not used to discuss the fitness of American rabbis for leadership.

Everyone is familiar with John Bunyan’s 1678 work *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come* and its focus on the difficulty of surviving religiously in the real world—life is a Vanity Fair, and we have to steer clear. That being said, few know that Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) wrote a sequel called *The Celestial Railroad* in which he showed how the religious establishment of his time provided a celestial railroad in order to make a clear way for the pilgrim’s progress without having to enter the Vanity Fair of life. This railroad was, however, a plush, this-worldly railroad. Rather than fighting the vices, the railroad has built all the vices into the religious community and its leadership.

We must squarely face that many elements in the community are not in favor of highbrow or even middlebrow culture. Some members of our rabbinic leadership are on record as considering all literature “the drunken words of adulterers” and *hukkat hagoyim*. They are the ones whom our students see as the bearers of the *mesorah*. Quietly saying in a small gathering that the community holds conflicting views about high culture will neither create social capital for high culture nor change the reality of the community. If one is inclined, then the community certainly permits the study of secular humanities, but are we comfortable being grouped with the evangelical colleges?53

On the other hand, there are many lay leaders who openly say that they are not interested in Torah study, were never into Torah study, and in addition dislike high culture, yet are enamored of Orthodoxy, outreach, and political activism. They create events entirely based on popular culture, such as “beef and guns” nights, or youth groups focusing entirely on fun events devoid of religious aspiration. Their influence continues to grow in the community as the rabbinic leadership reaches out to this laity for organizational leadership.

Again, the question must be asked: Where do we go from here? Rav Soloveitchik was a staunch advocate of the intellect in general and in Torah; in addition, he appreciated the values of the Boston Brahmins. He was convinced that the modern era was going to require an intellectualist approach to religion, and decried religion as offering
solace. Soloveitchik believed that Americans think “whatever promotes human comfort is correct.” In my era, he made fun of President Reagan as a plebeian, uneducated fool and not someone the Torah thinks should be a leader.

In a Purim derashah, Rav Soloveitchik used the midrashic statement that Ahashveros was a foolish king to show how America and Jewish values are different:

The Second Characteristic (Persia versus U.S.): In Persia there was an anti-aristocratic movement where the average citizen was the hero. He was the ordinary and mediocre man. (In America who is the all American boy? Is it the great student, the researcher, the scientist? No, the all American boy is the uncultured basketball or baseball player.) Then, the ordinary man was looked upon as the right man. . . . He himself was a usurper to the throne and he hated the cultured. . . . But, Ahashueros felt out of place in their company. Their fine manners irritated him because he was a plebeian. Then he invited his “crowd,” the citizens, the uncouth of Shushan Habirah. How do we know that he enjoyed the common? Because the megilah tells us that on the seventh day “the heart of the king was merry from wine.” During the 180 days before the cultured, he was not merry.54

Thirty-five years later, how would Rav Soloveitchik look at our communities? Would he like the all-American values of Centrist Orthodoxy? Have we created a Centrist Orthodoxy of Ahashveros? If we want high culture, where do we start?

NOTES


4. Jeremy Peters, “Culture Vulture Stands Alone,” *New York Times*, September 19, 2010. *New York* magazine has an Approval Matrix that plots pop culture activities on X and Y axes, ranking them neatly into one of four quadrants: highbrow/brilliant; highbrow/despicable; lowbrow/despicable; or lowbrow/brilliant. The moral element is a separate variable than the high-low variable. Attending a publishing party of famous authors where everyone acts poorly is highbrow but despicable, teaching high school English is lowbrow but virtuous (see the discussion of Bourdieu below).


liam Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007). His conclusion is to “preserve the best features, improve the weakest parts, and eliminate the worst traits of popular art.”


18. This paper does not deal with the psychological aspects of this halakhic materialism. On the topic, see David Landes, “The Pan-Halakhic Ideology and the Modern Orthodox Subject According to Slavoj Zizek” [Hebrew], in *On Pesak: Ideology and Worldview in Halakhic Discourse*, ed. Avinoam Rosenak (Jerusalem: Magnes Press and Van Leer, forthcoming). The less-than-pious, materialistic, and pleasurable activities and pursuits of the largely upper-middle-class Modern Orthodox are to be considered “built-in transgressions” that, far from threatening the symbolic domination of the halakhic system, are its disavowed “obscene” support. According to Lacan, the *jouissance* prohibited to the subject is expropriated by the superego and redeployed in its command to enjoy transgression. The work of the superego in requiring the obscene enjoyment of transgression is necessarily hidden and disavowed in order to maintain the authority of the Symbolic Law.

19. We may make fun of the Conservative Bar Mitzvahs of the 1970s that were all kitsch, garishness, and entertainment; they are parodied in books and television. But I am afraid that in the near future, our own Centrist communities will suffer the same parodies of garish kitsch materialism. On the 1980s Conservative bar mitzvahs, see Roger Bennett, Jules Shell, and Nick Kroll, eds., *Bar Mitzvah Disco: The Music May Have Stopped, But the Party’s Never Over* (New York: Crown, 2005).


24. Bourdieu actually has essays on the economics and sociology of the church lad
compared to other religious functionaries.
The Emerging Popular Culture and the Centrist Community

40. More highbrow versions of Oprah and Osteen are found in the recent theologies of Paul Ricoeur, Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); idem, Oneself as Another (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). It is also in Theologian under the influence of the narrative theologian Stanley Hauerwas in Readings in Narrative Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).
43. Two other differences are that Centrism does not worry about empirical studies, and at best will bring in someone who did a minor study without controls with a nonrandom sample. At Fordham University, the bad news of empirical data is placed front and center of the conference. Second, a more subtle difference is that Centrism uses a model of deviance similar to Dobson’s. Centrist social psychology stacks the deck in favor of the perfection of the institution; it assumes that the deviance was only in the implementation.
47. Jonathan M. Hess, Middlebrow Literature and the Making of German-Jewish Identity (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010) deals with the popular middlebrow books written by Rabbi S. R. Hirsch’s daughter, Sarah Guggenheim, and those by Rabbi Markus Lehrman. Hess points out the self-serving hubris in Orthodox statements that revealed their self-perception in which they thought that Orthodoxy allows one to offer critical assessments of the greatest authors in literature unavailable to public at large. This literature “enshrines itself as the epitome of high culture in its own insular sphere, with grand gestures that were of little interest to the non-orthodox—and that would have alienated non-Jewish devotees of Schiller, Heine, and other classical writers” (p. 188).
48. Here are two examples from an NCSY site:
“In ‘Easy J,’ Gossip Girl 4x6 . . . Once Jenny is back in the whirlwind of backstabbing sabotage, betrayal, lies and power struggles that comprises the Upper East Side, she turns back into her old self . . . This is a powerful statement about the company we keep and the ways in which it can affect who we are. In Prov-
erbs, a book of pithy aphorisms and statements written by King Solomon, he advises young people not to walk in the path of sinners.”

“In Grey’s Anatomy . . . Alex knows his limits. This same relationship exists between the characters of Moses and Aaron in the Torah.”

“Company We Keep and the Ways in Which It Can Affect Who We Are,” NCSY, November 2, 2010, at www.ncsy.org/ncsy/blog/glee/company_we_keep_and_the_ways_in_which_it_can_affect_who_we_are.


52. An exception to this general trend was the group Mima’amakim, a literacy and arts group founded by Yeshiva University students in 2001 with support and funding from the Yeshiva College dean’s office. The group, which has just reached its thirtieth birthday, still identifies as Orthodox, but its members are actively involved in working toward doctorates in English literature, having their poetry and short stories published, performing downtown, working for the National Endowment for the Humanities, and writing weekly arts columns for newspapers. Most of them also have great involvement in popular culture as rock critics, performers, and social network experts. They would have contributed to today’s discussion, and ultimately they will be the critics of the Centrist community’s difficulties in engaging with culture.

53. Naomi Schaefer Riley, God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation Are Changing America (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005). The dean’s office at Yeshiva College sent a team to a conference on curriculum diversity sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. At one of the sessions the presenter described how some students in parochial colleges demonize secular studies. She offered criteria for assessment of the problem, and Yeshiva clearly fell on the rejectionist far end of the spectrum. When we asked her how we could remedy the situation, she asked us in turn if we had heard that Yeshiva College had a reputation for harmoniously combining Torah and secular studies; could we speak to them for a solution? We answered that we were there representing Yeshiva College and had failed her assessment criteria.