

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JAN FELDMAN, *Lubavitchers as Citizens: A Paradox of Liberal Democracy*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003, xvii + 212 p.

I had looked forward to reading Feldman's book on Lubavitch Chassidim. Feldman, a political scientist, Orthodox Jew, close to the Lubavitch community but not part of it (though her children attend Lubavitch schools) promised a "form of political ethnography" (ix) and even includes a chapter about the group in Canada. Lubavitchers, as a "non-liberal" group, would be examined within the framework of liberal political theory, with stress on the limits and possibilities of liberal democracy. Unfortunately, the promise was, in large part, not kept.

Feldman's case for treating Lubavitchers as a non-liberal group within a liberal democratic society is convoluted and descriptive. Lubavitchers are, as is the case for most Orthodox Jews, decidedly non-secular in their world view and this is the key to understanding their political and social behaviour. That this non-secular world view may be either "liberal" or "non-liberal" would not come as a surprise to those familiar with the Orthodox Jewish world. Furthermore, there is a process of modernization in Orthodox society, as suggested by the research of Menahem Friedman, which allows for a more comprehensive understanding of groups, such as Lubavitch, than the "liberal/non-liberal" model used by Feldman. Lubavitchers now seem to differentiate between the "private domain" and "public responsibility" as a result of this process. That "public responsibilities" are influenced by the "private domain", but not totally determined by it, is obvious from the behaviour and attitudes of individual Lubavitchers. This provides a more comprehensive and understandably explanation of Lubavitch behaviour than a "liberal/non-liberal" model. The book is descriptive which would not be a draw back, in and of itself, except for the fact that it suffers from many, many inaccuracies. To list them all is beyond the scope of this review, but several examples amply demonstrate the problem.

The 1985 dispute over the Lubavitch library was about the collection assembled by the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe and not the fifth Rebbe (49). It involved Agudas Chabad (the organizational arm of the Lubavitch community) and the sixth Rebbe's eldest daughter and her son (the seventh Rebbe's sister-in-law and nephew, respectively). Its importance lies in the fact that the case exposed something that the Lubavitch community would have preferred to keep quiet – the defection from the group and Orthodox

Jewish life, as they define it, of the sixth Rebbe's grandson, whose *yikhes* (status based on lineage) was impeccable. The chapter on Canada should have been titled "Lubavitch in Quebec" since there is no mention made of other Lubavitch communities elsewhere in the country, particularly, the large Toronto one. The anti-Semitism of the Duplessis era was not a product "of the 1920s and 30s" (66) since Duplessis did not come to power until August 1936. The statement "that the percentage of Jews with university educations is over 41 percent compared to the general Canadian population in which 7 percent are university educated" is simply not true. A few minutes checking either the 1991 or 2001 census would have given correct data. The assertion that the weekly Canadian Jewish News, with 80,000 readers across the country, "reportedly has the largest readership of any single newspaper in Quebec" (68), might come as a surprise to anyone familiar with newspaper circulation figures in the province. The Federation CJA (Combined Jewish Appeal) primarily serves the Jewish community of Montreal and not "the Jews of Canada and Quebec" (68). Finally, the book could have used a good copy editor. It is repetitious and inconsistent. For example, each time Schneur Zalman of Laidai is mentioned, it is noted that he was the founder of the Lubavitch group. The seventh and last Lubavitch Rebbe is variously referred to as The Rebbe, The Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Menachem Mendel Schneerson and Menachem Mendel (something that no good Lubavitcher would do). English is generally used to indicate the titles of references from Jewish religious texts but not always. There is a reference to "Genesis" (147) which is followed by two references to "Bereshis" (149, 150) which is the English transliteration of the Hebrew name for Genesis. I suspect that it would be difficult for most non-Jews, some Jews, or non-Hebrew speakers to make sense of these references. In the end what can be said about Feldman's book? It is an interesting but highly flawed effort, one that has certainly not lived up to its promise. Those who are interested in how groups, such as Lubavitch fit into liberal and democratic societies, must look elsewhere.

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