

H-Net Reviews

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Jeremy Stolow. *Orthodox by Design: Judaism, Print Politics, and the ArtScroll Revolution.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. xvii + 265 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-26425-0; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-26426-7.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Gurock (Yeshiva University)

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Effective but not Compelling

Making Jewish texts accessible to wide readerships has been one of the foremost keys to the success of the ArtScroll Revolution. Rarely has religious fidelity and fundamentalism—in any faith community—been coupled so effectively with entrepreneurial acumen to create and sustain its remarkable buying public. For now more than a generation, ArtScroll has proffered works ranging from the renowned *Schottenstein Talmud* to popular kosher cook books, to self-help texts and children's books, etc., producing authoritative voices to the most revered sources and guides to living the *frum* (staunchly observant life) that have flown off the shelves of Jewish book stores. In some places, half of the books for sale carry that imprint. Remarkably, ArtScroll has done such a good job in getting its message and product across that it has stimulated answers to ArtScroll (p. 74), alternative works (p. 82) emanating from liberal Jewish religious camps to stem the tide of congregants who are taken with the style and substance of these works.

I only wish that Jeremy Stolow had taken a page from ArtScroll's book in examining this religious and publishing phenomenon. Plowing through his work is an arduous task. Ultimately, for the scholar it is rewarding endeavor—even if such readers are advised to have a dictionary nearby. But general audiences may not have the patience to wade through Stolow's rhetoric and frequent historiographical references to other scholars' works to appreciate the author's impressive research

and thoughtful conclusions, cogent conclusions that are all too often repeated—I imagine, for sake of emphasis—chapter by chapter.

ArtScroll has both followed the wave and led the way in a sea change in how Jewish traditional behavior and attitudes are being transmitted. Building appropriately upon Haym Soloveitchik's cogent observation that in contemporary societies learning how to be a highly observant Jew cannot be naturally gleaned through emulating the practices of parents and even rabbis, Stolow explores how ArtScroll has helped books replace community custom as the repository of and guide to wisdom and direction. In so doing, he is keenly aware that to deliver their Orthodox messages widely and successfully, editors and publishers have had to immerse themselves in the mediums and methodologies of their time. Seemingly, its production crews have become well attuned to language, management skills, and other techniques from a secular world that is not their own, without falling prey to the pitfalls of profaning the sacred rather than sanctifying the profane (p. 104). They have quickly learned that the books must be handsome, the orthography and rhetoric clear, and pricing in line with the market place for ArtScroll is not alone in the Orthodox book industry. One interesting chart notes the names and ranges of the multiple competitors in the field (p. 81). Secondly, its projected audience is a variegated one, including not only those who have long been part of the deeply obser-

vant world but also those who have only recently been attracted to their faith commitments, whose interests need to be continually spiked.

Interesting enough, for all its accomplishments—including using its publicity arms and the political clout of its stakeholders to have the *Schottenstein Talmud* edition added to the Library of Congress’s collection—some of Stolow’s creative field work explorations reveal soft spots in its ultimate goal of “filling up the life” (p. 87) of the widest possible audiences. While ArtScroll has generally outstripped its Orthodox book publishing opponents, not all of its titles do equally well. Bibles, its Talmud, prayer books, and other such core volumes have sustained the outfit as a major player in the English-language Judaica world. (Here, not incidentally, more should have been said, beyond an explanatory footnote, about the dynamics that underlie its several editions of the *siddur*, most notably the business decision to produce a modern Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America iteration that includes prayers for the State of Israel and its IDF troops reflective of an ideology that ArtScroll’s authorities do not unquestionably support.) And its cookbook, *Kosher by Design*, has been gobbled up through many editions, making its author Susie Fishbein, arguably, the Martha Stewart of the *frum* world. But when ArtScroll has ventured beyond its strictly Torah or culinary comfort zones, it has achieved much less success.

Its weakest point may be its history series, basically hagiographic biographies of rabbis, characterized by one librarian as “amazingly bland and repetitive. Rabbis are seen in a uniformly pink glow, their human complexi-

ties are just not addressed” (p.84). The apparent problem here is that to write critically of revered figures would require authors to adopt methodologies of the academy and not the Torah community; a world that is replete with questions that might challenge faith. They write Orthodox history, not the history of Orthodoxy, which many discerning customers do not buy. What sales figures ultimately suggest is that in the end, those who eagerly await *everything* that ArtScroll produces are ultimately parts of a niche market that is deep but not exceedingly wide. It is made up primarily of the most devoted, either by birth into the so-called *haredi* community or those who have been attracted fully to its lifestyle. Others pick and choose among the offerings and walk to the cashier with those volumes that help them better understand the sacred literature without necessarily fulfilling ArtScroll’s ultimate mission: adoption of its prescribed lifestyle. In a sense, this shopping around in the book store, or online for that matter, by both devotees and the intrigued, is metaphorical for the varieties of Jews who feel both fully connected and partially disengaged from the totality of Orthodox teachings and traditions. Though it may be true, as ArtScroll’s editor in chief claims, that “there is even this guy on the North Pole who orders all our books,” and on many levels its books “reach, instruct, inspire and otherwise satisfy the needs of all Jews” (p.176), its book-buyers, given the personal and intellectual autonomy they possess in an open and voluntaristic American Jewish society, retain the right to define for themselves precisely what are their religious needs. ArtScroll is a most effective service industry but cannot compel the views of those who subscribe to its product.

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