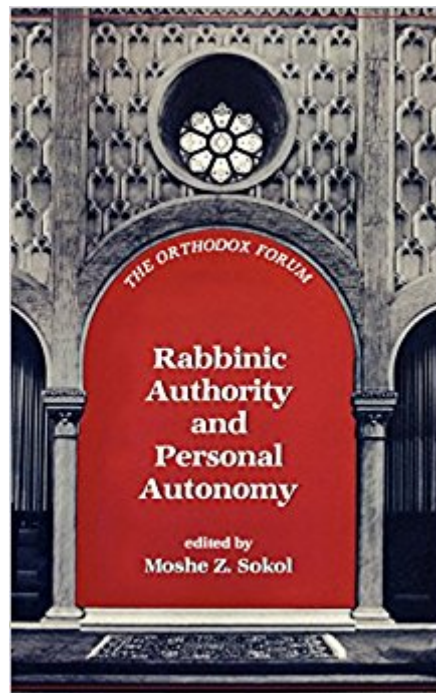




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Rabbinic Authority And Personal Autonomy (The Orthodox Forum Series)



Synopsis

Does traditional Jewish life encourage or discourage personal autonomy? To what extent are decisions of Jewish law influenced by subjective factors? Does rabbinic authority extend to all areas of life or does it confine itself to a narrower field of influence? What freedom does a rabbinic authority have to make innovations, and are there grounds for pluralism within the system of Jewish law? These questions cut to the core of Jewish life in the modern world. With the advent of modernity, great emphasis has been placed on the value of personal autonomy. Yet traditional Judaism has historically emphasized the authority of the rabbinic decision maker. The essays in this volume are concerned with exploring the tension between these two poles. Experts from such diverse fields as history, sociology, philosophy, and Jewish law explore the questions raised above. Their analyses are informed not only by their academic expertise but by their deep understanding of the Jewish legal system and Jewish life and their abiding concern for what it means to live that life in the modern world. The contributors to this volume were participants in the Orthodox Forum, an annual gathering of scholars who meet to consider major issues of concern to the Jewish community.

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This 1992 book is part of a series; other volumes in the series are: *Engaging Modernity: Rabbinic Leaders and the Challenge of the Twentieth Century* (Orthodox Forum Series), *Tolerance, Dissent, and Democracy: Philosophical, Historical, and Halakhic Perspectives* (Orthodox Forum Series), *Israel as a Religious Reality* (Orthodox Forum Series), *Jewish Tradition and the Non-Traditional Jew* (Orthodox Forum Series), *Toward a Renewed Ethic of Jewish Philanthropy* (Orthodox Forum), *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah* (Orthodox Forum), *Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Thought and Law* (Orthodox Forum Series), *Yirat Shamayim: The Awe, Reverence, and Fear of God* (The Orthodox Forum), *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering* (Orthodox Forum Series), etc. The editor states in the Preface, "Belief in the nature or religious authority naturally leads to an inquiry into the nature and scope of its counterweight, personal autonomy. What exactly is personal autonomy, and to what extent is it consistent with any approaches to mainstream normative Judaism? ... Are there grounds for halakhic pluralism within the halakhic system itself? How is halakhic innovation possible, given the weight of the past and of traditional authority? ... The chapters in this volume are intended to respond to these questions directly." Here are some quotations from the book: "We live in an era in which extravagant claims march under the banner of religious pluralism... Primarily, this phenomenon can be traced to the bold assertions of the Conservative and Reform movements..." (Pg. 94) "The overarching halakhic issues have not been formal ones... We remain in a kind of metahalakhic limbo, for these basic questions have not yet been resolved within Orthodoxy itself... More than one interpretation is possible. And we have not yet reached consensus." (Pg. 143) "When my wife gave birth to our eldest daughter, we were overjoyed... One thing, though, distressed me: that I was unable to make

the blessing... (which) is mentioned in the Gemara in connection with the birth of a boy, not a girl." (Pg. 149)"There is an equally strong logic against the inclusion of women in the 'keter kehunah.' Why this should be so is a matter for historical conjecture, but it is certainly not because priestesses and other women religious functionaries were unknown to the pagan background against which the Torah is a sustained protest." (Pg. 161)"A failure of talmud Torah will eventually lead to a failure of halakhah, for there will then be exactly the cognitive dissonance between law and sensibility that we find in the Conservative responsa. The answer to this is NOT halakhic change." (Pg. 167)"In sum, our review of the evidence for HARD autonomy in Judaism appears to have yielded decidedly mixed results... Perhaps the tradition did not wholeheartedly embrace autonomy because it SHOULD NOT have wholeheartedly embraced it. Hard autonomy in most of its manifestations runs up against perfectly sound external reasons for questioning its validity." (Pg. 198)

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