

## **Aesthetics/Ascetics: Visual Piety and Pleasure in a Strictly Kosher Cookbook\***

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### **Abstract**

This article focuses on the relationship of aesthetics and ascetics with regard to the publication and popular reception of *Kosher By Design*, a cookbook published by a major American Jewish Orthodox press, ArtScroll Publications. The article analyses the ideological, rhetorical, discursive, and iconographic modes of address embedded within this text, treating them as instances of popular religion, and also as elements of a project in and through which the Orthodox Jewish intellectuals associated with ArtScroll seek to assert new forms of religious authority, in the context of a broader culture of “kosher consumerism,” to which this text is directed. The article ends by highlighting the paradoxical character of this form of “post-scripture,” in which books like *Kosher By Design*, and by extension other ArtScroll texts—including their popular prayer-books—are caught between competing demands of popularity and authority, art and asceticism, and religious stringency and bourgeois living.

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Poor spellers notwithstanding, most people locate ascetics and aesthetics on opposite poles of a spectrum. The former term, from the Greek *askein* [to exercise], normally refers to a process of self-discipline and the strict avoidance of sensory pleasures or luxuries as means of spiritual development, whereas the latter term, from the Greek *aisthesthai* [to perceive], is concerned with the beautiful and with the apprehension and appreciation of pleasurable stimuli, whether found in nature or cultivated through artistic habits and tastes. Ascetics are people who are not supposed to indulge in sensuous, let alone beautiful things, and it is only through their denial that the goals of the ascetic subject can be achieved, such as the receiving of grace, the acquisition of secret knowledge, or even the attainment of salvation in the world to come.<sup>1</sup> Aesthetic sensibilities, on the other hand, not only demand the participation of the sensuous body, they are also often regarded as risky (if not anathema) to the religious goals of salvation or transcendence, since every act of aesthetic production or contemplation is accompanied by threats, however distant, of hedonism and narcissism. This is not to deny the importance of aesthetics for religious practice, thought, and imagination. On the contrary, whether through the ornamentation and adornment of sacred objects, texts and images, the preparation of ritual spaces, or in other ways, all religious traditions possess rich histories of creative expression and innovation in art, music, dance, poetry, architecture, and cooking. Nevertheless, such activities are often viewed with reservation among elite circles of religious virtuosi—Buddhist monks, Catholic mendicants, and Hindu renunciants, just to name a few—for whom the “hard path” of discipline and self-denial serves as their most important basis for distinction from the masses.

There is a further danger here of assuming too rigid a distinction between asceticism and aesthetics, since that would risk obfuscating what is in fact a complex relationship of interdependence. As Geoffrey Harpham has noted, despite their apparent differences, artistic and ascetic practices both involve the disciplining of the senses, the repression and sublimation of physical sexuality, and the organization of suffering for the sake of creation, in all these ways suggesting the existence of a shared set of psychic, performative, and cultural strategies for accommodating transcendent desires within

1. In his typology of religious and economic forms of conduct, Max Weber identified asceticism (and its more general underlying principle of *Akosmismus* [“world-denial”]) not only with the disciplining of the body (such as through sexual abstinence or fasting), but also with the disenchantment of nature, most famously illustrated in his account of the “inner-worldly” asceticism of early Protestant Christianity and its formula of achieving divine grace through hard work. Weber also noted how in each case, asceticism is exercised according to differing modes of legitimate conduct, contrasting notions of the body and of nature, and specific protocols for participation in the routine transactions of social and economic life, thus precluding any simple, over-arching definition of the phenomenon. See Gerth and Mills 1946, 290–92, 324–26.

"all too human" limits and needs (Harpham 2001).<sup>2</sup> The intellectual challenge is how to attend carefully to the blurry line that both divides and connects asceticism and aesthetics without indulging in unconvincing generalizations, since, after all, their relationship changes over time and from one cultural context to another. This is all the more pressing an issue in contexts of rapid change, such as our own, which has been marked by the proliferation of new aesthetic forms, and of new mechanisms for the production, distribution, consecration, and consumption of art.

We also bear witness today to the proliferation of new forms of asceticism, epitomized in the current historical juncture by the rise of so-called religious fundamentalist movements on the world stage (see Marty and Appleby 1991–95). Through strict applications of religious law, punctiliousness in ritual practice, and stringency in the interpretation of customs governing everything from dress codes to matrimonial relations to entertainment to participation in the labor market, so-called fundamentalists have ardently contested the *pax moderna* of liberal civility, secular sovereignty, and unfettered scientific curiosity. And in the eyes of many observers, fundamentalists are modernity's ascetics *par excellence*. By developing and exploiting a range of discursive repertoires, techniques, and tools, they seek to democratize the ascetic way of life, bringing it out of the confines of religious elite culture and onto the broad terrain of mass society. But among these various discourses, techniques, and tools, do we find things that we might call "aesthetic"? Should it surprise us to find them? Would their existence suggest something paradoxical about the fundamentalist performative goal of inculcating a more stringent way of life among "the masses"? In this article, I pose these questions from the vantage point of a specific example of creative tension and interdependency between ascetics and aesthetics: the recent publication of a Jewish Orthodox kosher cookbook that has enjoyed a remarkable reception in the English-speaking Jewish world—Susie Fishbein's bestselling *Kosher By Design* (2003). In order to appreciate the significance of this text, it is necessary to locate it within the material, economic, and symbolic circuits of exchange that have enabled its public prominence. In particular, as I shall discuss below, *Kosher By Design* needs to be understood as part of a larger cultural politics surrounding the book's producer, ArtScroll Publications, a publishing house noted for its dramatic interventions in the field of contemporary Jewish public culture, and its ambitions to engage with a broad range of audiences, both within and outside the world of Jewish Orthodoxy. In these ways, as I hope to demonstrate, *Kosher By Design* epitomizes an emergent form of "post-scripture," elaborating and transforming historical standards of legitimate conduct, patterns of religious authority, and perceptual practices, and in the process opening up new ways of negotiating the ascetic/aesthetic divide.

2. My thanks to Elizabeth Castelli for drawing this text to my attention.

First, a few words are in order with regard to the larger social milieu of contemporary Jewish Orthodoxy. Although there is a tendency to think of Jewish Orthodoxy as the more “traditional” form of Jewish identity and practice, this is a quite specious assumption, since Orthodoxy is a strikingly modern phenomenon. To the outsider, Orthodox Jews are situated within a bewilderingly diverse range of often intensely competing cultural communities, each marked by distinct organizational frameworks, relations of authority, traditions of textual study and ritual practice, as well as differing attitudes toward non-Orthodox Jews, and more broadly, toward the high-tech, culturally hybrid, “late modern” universe in which they find themselves. Nevertheless, in recent decades, Orthodoxy has been greatly influenced by the growing presence of so-called “ultra-Orthodoxy,” or *haredism*,<sup>3</sup> a term that encompasses various *hasidic* sects, followers of the Lithuanian tradition, as well as some Sephardic Jewish groups. These factions differ in many respects, but they are nevertheless distinguished by a similar pattern of opposition to “liberal” tendencies in Jewish thought and practice, punctiliousness in the performance of Jewish ritual, stringency in the interpretation of Jewish law, and promotion of intensive study and submission to the authority of a narrowly defined rabbinic elite.<sup>4</sup>

While strict observance of *halakhah* [Jewish law] has always been regarded as a sign of religious piety and a passionate desire to serve God, the tradition of Rabbinic Judaism is not noted for its unreserved approval of asceticism. On the contrary, canonical sources, such as the Talmud, are replete with cautions about the dangers of self-imposed stringency. Ascetic practices were understood to carry with them the risk of transforming genuine piety into arrogance and condescension toward “the masses,” which in turn would undermine Jewish unity.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, one of the

3. The word *haredism* is based on the substantive, *haredim*, which literally means “those who tremble,” a scriptural reference to the righteous ones who fear the word of God (as in Isa 66:5). Unlike “ultra-Orthodox” or “Jewish fundamentalist” (which are ostensibly neutral, but in fact subtly pejorative terms), the label *haredi* is more readily recognizable among those so designated, although even this is not universal. In the social circles of the ArtScroll cadre of authors and editors, the preferred terms of self-identification are “Torah-True Jews” or “the Torah community.” Vexing problems of historical provenance, ideological variability, and cultural specificity have plagued scholars in their efforts to produce a consistent definition of *haredism*. Given the considerable ambiguities and contestations surrounding the terms *haredism*, *haredi*, and the *haredim*, the reader should understand their use here as figurative, referring to a loose constellation of cultural forms and ideas.

4. On the rise of *haredism*, see, inter alia, Friedman 1987, 1993.

5. As Sara Weinstein argues, on the whole Talmudic sources are quite critical of “super-erogatory” or ascetic behavior, such as fasting for extra days, reciting extra prayers, practicing sexual abstinence, and so on. She summarizes: “the Jew has been commanded to take good care of the body that was given by God.... Self-denial is criticized not only because it is wrong to deny that which is permitted, but because God wants human beings to actively pursue the enjoyment of the world that he gave

defining features of the modern *haredi* movement has been precisely to overturn these traditional attitudes by promoting the conscious adoption of stricter norms within the framework of *halakhic* decision-making, known in *halakhic* language as *humra* [stringency].<sup>6</sup> A noted commentator, Haym Soloveitchik, describes this trend in terms of a larger social shift from mimetic to textual modes of pedagogy: the supplanting of knowledge and patterns of practice acquired from parents, friends, and neighbors with knowledge and practice that has been codified in print, and commensurate with this process of textual abstraction, an ever-greater demand for precision in the interpretation of Rabbinic law. Stringent behavior, epitomized by *haredi* society, is thus tied to the ever-more prevalent practice of conceiving and practising Judaism “by the book.” As Soloveitchik puts it, “when the mean is perceived as unconscionable compromise, the extreme may appear eminently reasonable” (Soloveitchik 1994, 72). In recent decades, the expansion of this “scriptural economy”<sup>7</sup> has led to a blurring of the line dividing so-called modern from ultra-Orthodox, to the point where strict standards of observance of Jewish law and custom can now be found across the spectrum of otherwise ideologically opposed groups, in a move that some have characterized as part of a more global “rightward drift” in Jewish identity and practice.

On these terms, *haredi* or ultra-Orthodox Jews have been inscribed—whether for good or ill—into larger historical and sociological narratives about the rise of religious fundamentalisms in the modern world and the promulgation of ascetic forms of everyday life practice through diverse channels of media and social mobilization. This is not the place to review and assess the extensive literature concerning *haredism* as a form of

them. These attitudes thus fit along a continuum that ranges from the position that self-denial is praiseworthy behavior, all the way to the opposite extreme that holds that enjoying all [kosher] foods is actually a religious obligation” (Weinstein 1997, 104–5).

6. *Humra* [stringency] and *qulla* [leniency] together constitute a central, dynamic basis of *halakhic* interpretation, expressing a dialectical tension between the theoretical inclination to interpret legal codes without contradiction or compromise (i.e., as “strictly” as possible), and the more practical need to confine and isolate this tendency for the sake of the everyday functioning of the local community. See, e.g., Friedman 1993, 196–99. The tendency among recent *haredim* has been to criticize community standards as “too lenient”—even at the risk of broaching the traditionally guarded respect for elders, or the proscription against *la'az al ha-'avot* [slander of the progenitors]—in order to establish themselves as a more authentic, faithful, pious, and competent religious vanguard and to clarify the inadequate or compromised character of customs and practices known to Jewish communities throughout the world, including many which claim to adhere strictly to “tradition.”

7. This term was coined by Michel de Certeau, referring to the assembly of technologies, practices, and procedures that privilege texts, and in so doing, “transform individual bodies into a body politic. It makes these bodies produce the text of a law” (Certeau 1984, 182).

religious fundamentalism (if indeed such a thing as “fundamentalism” exists outside the context of the few Christian communities that explicitly identify themselves as such).<sup>8</sup> Instead, I am interested in tracing the growing influence of *haredi* religious authority and cultural power through their implication in processes, institutions, and materialities of mediated communication. This requires attention to a range of media forms that *haredi* Jews have embraced, including books and periodicals, radio stations, audiotaped sermons, or recorded music, all of which *haredim* produce both for their own consumption and also to assist them in the capillary work of promulgating, publicly legitimating, or otherwise seeking to advance the cultural power of *haredism* within the modern Jewish imaginary, both in Israel and in the diaspora. The success of new publishing houses (such as ArtScroll) cannot be understood without reference to this broader field of cultural production.

But as I shall attempt to demonstrate in the following pages, such mediated forms of publicity also point to a quite paradoxical relationship between the principles of asceticism and aestheticism. On the one hand, in order to secure a hegemonic position among diverse constituencies of Jews (not all of whom are necessarily sympathetic to the *haredi* way of life), *haredi* intellectual and cultural producers are increasingly preoccupied with the need to establish and to cultivate ever-more accessible points of entry into the “hard” and uncompromisingly ascetic world of “pure” Jewishness they proclaim as the only legitimate one. On the other hand, however, such tactics end up transforming that inner world of ascetic purity, by bringing it into intense dialogue with a range of interpretive, performative, and material elements, including ones that we might happen to think of as “aesthetic.” This paradox is strikingly illustrated in the case of ArtScroll Publications, and the commanding public presence of many of their books, including their cookbook, *Kosher By Design*.

### **ArtScroll and Its Mission**

Based in Brooklyn, NY, Mesorah Publications, more popularly known by its main imprimatur, ArtScroll, has arguably become the dominant Orthodox Jewish publishing house in the English-speaking world, furnishing an international market with a broad range of material of interest to Jewish readers and especially to participants in the routines of Jewish ritual life. Their output encompasses the diverse genres of prayer books, Bible translations, commentaries of major canonical texts, such as the Talmud, as well as works of a more catechistic nature, such as popular manuals dealing with the minutiae of correct conduct in everyday life situations in the home, at work, in financial transactions, and so on. ArtScroll is also a major publisher

8. Elsewhere, I have tried to suggest some lines of critique that might contribute to these debates. See Stolow 2002.

of a wide range of other material of interest to Orthodox Jewish readers, including historical encyclopaedias, biographies and memoirs, youth literature, adventure novels, self-help books, cookbooks, and curriculum materials for primary Jewish education.<sup>9</sup> These books have found their way into the homes and public spaces of diverse constituencies of Jews—not all of them Orthodox—in the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia and South Africa, and Israel, not to mention the growth of ArtScroll texts (principally prayer books) translated into French, Spanish, and Russian, which have made their appearance in Judaica book markets in the former Soviet Union, France, Argentina, Mexico, and elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

ArtScroll presents itself as a “totally independent Torah publisher,” without ties to any of the major institutions of Jewish public life, and this independence is reflected, among other things, in the distinct orientations and religious affiliations of the authors that publish with them, which includes university-trained modern Orthodox Jews, *yeshiva* [Talmudic academy] students, professional translators, rabbis, and housewives. Nevertheless, an overview of the editorial policies and general publication trends of the press and of the social location of ArtScroll’s key editors, supporters, and patrons reveals an intimate relationship between the press and a distinctly *haredi* academic culture constellated around several major *yeshivot* in the New York area and in Israel.<sup>11</sup> From this one can infer that ArtScroll is not simply a business venture, but also the institutional embodiment of a moral mission to expand the frontiers of *haredi* standards of interpretation and practice into the diverse and diffuse realm of Jewish public culture.

Unlike other outreach organizations, ArtScroll’s mission is restricted to the apparently disinterested tasks of translating and producing commentaries on Jewish canonical texts. Their project consists of supplanting what they and their supporters regard as inadequate, distorted, or otherwise illegitimate translations and commentaries on Jewish ritual practice, historical imagination, and theoretical knowledge, and replacing these with new,

9. For an overview of the press and its output, see their website, <http://www.artscroll.com>.

10. Elsewhere I have discussed some of the terms of reception of ArtScroll books in local settings, and among specific constituencies of Jewish readers and consumers, based on field research I have conducted in the Jewish communities of London, Toronto, and New York. See, e.g., Stolow 2005.

11. Specifically, there are clear links—both ideological and social—between the ArtScroll cadre and *Agudat Israel*, one of the preeminent organizations devoted to the defence and cultivation of Jewish Orthodoxy as defined from a *haredi* perspective. See Stolow 2004. In fact, many of the *yeshivot* related to the ArtScroll cadre also have close links with *Agudat Israel*. These include: Mesivta Tifereth Jerusalem (in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, NY), Yeshiva Torah Vodath (in Brooklyn), the Yeshiva Gedolah (in Monsey, NY), the Beth Medrah Govohah (in Lakewood, NJ), the Telshe Yeshiva (in Wickliff, OH), the Mir Yeshiva (in Jerusalem) and the Ponevitz Yeshiva (in B’nei Brak, Tel Aviv).

“corrected” editions. As ArtScroll director Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz puts it, “we see our goal as bringing the insights of the *yeshiva* to the outside world, giving the ‘spiritual innards’ of Jewish texts” (Furstenberg 1995, 47). In other words, by excavating and distributing a content to which access is normally gained by entering a *yeshiva* and participating in its pedagogical methods, its disciplinary practices, and hierarchies of value, ArtScroll performs the conceptual and practical work of a social hinge. Its texts are designed to conjoin the intellectual milieu of the *yeshiva* with the more socially diffuse Jewish public sphere, and in the process, to re-calibrate the lines dividing elite culture from popular sensibility.

Every communicational medium presents itself, among other things, as a horizon for mobilization: the performative demand to reach others, sometimes many others, or to orchestrate different activities, sometimes at great distances. ArtScroll instantiates this larger narrative concerning the social effects of accelerating modes of textual production and circulation. In this case, we can see how, and with what effects, a once inwardly directed academic culture gets transformed into a portable Orthodoxy: the distribution, and redistribution, of *haredi* public presences according to shifting relations of power and exchange among the various human and non-human actors that make up Jewish public life—readers and their books, authors and their markets, ritual performers and their institutions.

ArtScroll’s project is paradoxical, not least because it takes ostensibly “authentic” representations of Judaism, rooted in what are proclaimed to be reliably traditional modes of interpretation and conduct, and mediates them through the commodified formats and material infrastructures of the most advanced modes of print production and circulation. In this sense, questions of design and aesthetics stand at the very heart of ArtScroll’s project to both authorize and popularize a body of Jewish norms and practices authenticated by the *haredi yeshiva* world. “Let’s not kid ourselves,” adjures editor-in-chief Rabbi Nosson Scherman, “people do judge a book by its cover. If the contents of a book aren’t good, then the most beautiful presentation won’t sell it. But the outward appearance of a book does help sell it” (Ephros 2001). Through the introduction of visual and typographic elements not commonly found among Jewish publishers, including state-of-the-art techniques for layout, illustration, and binding, ArtScroll has in fact been praised for its pioneering role in Orthodox publishing. This is not simply a question of generating sales, but also of drawing in widely diffused, and in some cases otherwise inaccessible, constituencies of consumers and readers, and inculcating them into *haredi*-legitimated standards of textual interpretation and practices of reading and recitation.

We should also note here that the word “design” refers not only to aesthetic form but also to *function*: to the organization of social relations embedded in things, which constitute “society made durable,” as Bruno Latour has called it (Latour 1991). “Orthodoxy designed” is thus also



Orthodoxy as it comes to be known through the medium of its material culture. This perspective requires us to treat books, not only as things possessing ideational content, but also in terms of their physical properties, their constraints upon the body, and the requirement to deploy complementary technologies (such as artificial illumination). We might say that “design” constitutes a key medium in and through which scenarios of conception and production of ArtScroll books can be articulated with scenarios of their consumption and use: the work of desire and the acquisition of books; the activities of reading, recitation and ritual performance; and the less noteworthy practices of transporting, displaying, storing, or even disposing of books.

ArtScroll’s design revolution lies at the heart of the publisher’s claim to have helped reverse what in *haredi* circles are regarded as the great challenges to authentic Jewish survival in the modern age: liberal compromise, impiety, ignorance, intermarriage, hedonism, idolatry, and even the far more insidious menace of laxity. As Rabbi Scherman puts it, “by utilizing modern technology, we have for the first time presented Torah literature in a format equal to secular books. This has brought a new respect for Torah and has removed the barriers so that Jews today can study in the same way as their grandfathers did.”<sup>12</sup> By offering both “true words” and “good layout”—as good as anything available on the so-called secular market—ArtScroll books thus function as a kind of “post-scripture.” They activate a range of techniques of legibility and textual edification in which the sinews of intergenerational transmission can be repaired, and new claims can be made upon the Jewish masses, extending outward to encompass even the “lost generation” of marginally or unaffiliated Jews who now constitute the majority in English-speaking countries, such as Canada, the USA, and the UK.

For their part, ArtScroll’s key editors, authors, and patrons do not admit any contradiction between, on the one hand, their promise to reproduce traditional Jewish texts and reading practices and, on the other hand, their desire to render such texts popular and accessible to a wide constituency of readers, including those who do not possess the requisite competencies for ritual performance. It is always possible, they insist, to pour old wine into new vessels. From this perspective, the so-called ArtScroll revolution would appear quite unproblematically to instantiate a long-standing Jewish principle known as *hiddur mitzvah*: the enhancement or beautification of a religious commandment in order to exceed the minimum requirements of correct observance, and to glorify God through practices of adornment or ornamentation. In other words, when Jews not only maintain the minimum effort to perform the observance of a *kiyum hamitzvah* [basic fulfilment of the *mitzvah*] correctly, but engage in “extra efforts” that will enhance that

12. Personal communication, February 2004.

performance, a *hiddur mitzvah*, they glorify God. It is ritually sufficient, for instance, to drink wine mandated by certain prayers (e.g., the *kaddish*) in a paper cup; but it is even better to drink the wine from a beautiful cup made of silver. In the Rabbinic tradition, the principle of *hiddur mitzvah* has been applied to such diverse practices as the illumination of manuscripts, the refinement of ritual objects, and even the practice of circumcision.<sup>13</sup> By some interpretations, such acts of *hiddur mitzvah* also possess a theurgic function, whereby God is provoked to reciprocate “in kind” by providing the gift of a miracle.<sup>14</sup>

As this principle reminds us, the Jewish tradition encompasses a very long history of practices of ornamentation and adornment, and familiarity with the arrangement of formal elements to create visual effects. It would therefore be historically naïve to proclaim ArtScroll’s emphasis on the aesthetic as unprecedented, let alone to suggest somehow that it rubs against the grain of what is in any event a much-exaggerated notion of Jewish aniconism (Bland 2001).<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, it is instructive to note the discontinuities, rather than the continuities, within religious frameworks of artistic production, since these often point to counterintuitive trends. What, we might ask, is the status of design within the work of religious imagination, and more specifically, in relation to efforts to promote stringency in everyday conduct? Are “aesthetic” practices of ornamentation and adornment merely supplementary to the “proper” business of textual interpretation and performance? Is it possible to convey a message about ascetic conduct within such a frame? Do these very questions presuppose a series of specious distinctions between center and margin, form and content, and medium and message, with regard to the public life of texts? How might answers to such questions generate new insight into the ways innovations in design and technique are implicated in the production of new forms of religious imagination and practice, especially in the case of (post)scriptural works?

### **Kosher Consumption and the Jewish Martha Stewart**

There are various cultural artefacts that one could examine in order to address the questions I pose. Let us consider the case of a cookbook published by ArtScroll, authored by Susie Fishbein, which has turned out to be

13. In the case of the *milah*, the ritual cutting of the male foreskin, the Talmud mandates that only a certain portion of the foreskin, the *tzitzim ha’meacvim*, must be cut away in order to ensure the fulfillment of the *mitzvah* (Shabbat 137a). However, a *hiddur mitzvah* can be produced by cutting away a further part of the foreskin, the *tzitzim she’ainum meacvim*. See Hochberg, n.d.

14. See, e.g., the Chabad interpretation of the miracle of Chanukah oil, “Days of Destiny.”

15. For related arguments concerning the myth of Protestant aniconism, which is belied by the rich traditions of Protestant art, see Morgan 1998.

among the best sellers of the entire ArtScroll booklist.<sup>16</sup> *Kosher By Design* has been marketed as “an engaging and elegant new cookbook that delights the senses and feeds the soul” (Fishbein 2003, back cover). Comprising 250 recipes, 120 full-color photographs, and distinctive organizational features (such as a holiday menu guides, complementary wine lists, or a special index indicating recipes appropriate for Passover), all encased in a laminated cover with a sturdy “concealed wire” binding, this cookbook is designed for both ease of use and “inspiring” visual pleasure. From its first appearance in 2003, *Kosher By Design* has been a runaway success within the Orthodox Jewish community, and well beyond it, as evidenced by the marketing of this book in the US-based *Williams–Sonoma* home decor retail chain, or by Fishbein’s newly launched career as “the Jewish Martha Stewart” on the American television day-time talk show circuit, and most strikingly, a growing popularity of this text among Christian evangelical booksellers in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

Cookbooks are particularly fertile sites for tracking the materialization of religious sensibilities in everyday life settings. Food, after all, is one of the key media conjoining the individual and the social body, precariously situated between sustenance and pollution, desire and taboo, and governed by complex rules of taste, commensality, and etiquette. The procurement, storage, distribution, preparation, consumption, and disposal of food thus constitute routines of labor and exchange—predominantly, the labor of women—by virtue of which the religious imagination is able to penetrate into the habitus of everyday life, and especially of domesticity and family life (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1990, 1999). For these reasons, culinary practices can also be regarded as forms of popular religion: minor traditions that might very well conform with, but can never be reduced to, abstract formulations of religious law, as in the case of *kashrut* [Jewish laws

16. Within its first week, *Kosher By Design* had already sold 24,000 copies, forcing ArtScroll to rush immediately to print a second run. By 2004, its sales surpassed the 70,000 mark, a very high figure for the Jewish cookbook market (and even more remarkable for a text that is explicitly kosher). Fishbein’s successor volume, *Kosher By Design Entertains: Fabulous Recipes for Parties and Every Day*—already in its second printing—took only eight days after its release in 2004 to appear on Amazon.com’s Top 500 list. See Sanders 2005.

17. To market *Kosher By Design* to Christian consumers (as an “authentic” representation of Jewish holiday food and its meaning), ArtScroll enlisted the Connecticut-based PR firm, *Martino & Binzer*, in order to attract attention among editors of national daily newspapers, at public book signings, and at cooking demonstrations, as well as advertising and promotionals on Christian cable television and at major conferences, such as the International Association of Christian Schools. The widespread availability of *Kosher By Design* on Christian booksellers’ websites is one indicator of the success with which this text has “jumped tracks” into the non-Jewish book market. See, e.g., <http://shop1.daltonschristianbooks.com/e/pdf/kosher/KosherAd.pdf>. Accessed 30 August 2005.

concerning food preparation and consumption].<sup>18</sup> As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has shown, the genre of the cookbook reflects culturally specific notions about how to prepare and eat Jewish food, while at the same time presenting shifting images of domestic sociability, the staging of commensality, or the creeping presence of the commercial food industry in the kitchen. Through recipes, commentary, prefaces, illustrations—and where they exist, photographs—cookbooks reproduce the “traditional” while at the same time extend the repertoire of legitimately “Jewish” food into new domains, through the incorporation of new technologies and techniques, ingredients, styles, and dietary principles, inspiring both novices and culinary virtuosi to expand their repertoires. On these terms, cookbooks also register changing relationships between author and reader, where neither faith nor locally acquired knowledge provide a sufficient basis for the successful (re)production of Jewish food. By supplementing, if not replacing, culinary competencies that would otherwise have been acquired interpersonally (such as recipes or techniques passed down from parent to child, or among neighbors and friends), cookbooks help to establish a new role for the text and its instructive powers, and in this sense they provide an ideal locus for tracking the historical constitution of new forms of scriptural addressivity and authority.

Susie Fishbein was inspired to write *Kosher By Design* by what she claims (quite groundlessly)<sup>19</sup> to have been a glaring hole in the kosher cookbook market: “I wanted to do something like what Martha Stewart does—meals that are easy to prepare, and elegant and healthful, and that appeal to all the senses” (quoted in Durbach 2004). In other words, her goal was to realize “a gourmet potential in kosher cooking never dreamed possible in Grandma’s day” (Seigel 2003).<sup>20</sup> Like many of her predecessors, Fishbein’s entrée into cookbook writing was through charity fundraising initiatives. And like many cookbook authors, she derives her authority from her experience as the head of her household, in this instance as a mother

18. The term popular religion refers to one of a series of overlapping distinctions made between elite and popular, official and unofficial, “great tradition” vs. “little tradition,” religion as proclaimed (or prescribed) vs. religion as practiced (Sharot 2001, 14–16, *passim*). For the purposes of this discussion, by “popular religion” I mean to refer to the overall complex of religious practices, habits, sensibilities, and ideas, which represent local adaptations of a “great” religious tradition (in this case, that of Rabbinic Judaism), and which exists despite (and in certain respects also because of) the proscriptions of the elite.

19. There are in fact dozens of kosher cookbooks that are comparable to Fishbein’s (although admittedly, few have enjoyed such public prominence). See, for instance, Blau 1997; Garfunkel 2004; Kinderlehrer 1995; Levy 2000; Michel 2002; Miller 1983; Nash 1995; Roseman 1991; Zeidler 1999.

20. Again, it is worth noting how the theme of intergenerational crisis is linked to the recuperative powers of the text, which stands in here for a “lost tradition.”

of four children.<sup>21</sup> But Fishbein supplemented her authorial voice with a team of “experts”: Larry Sexton, the florist at the New York Plaza Hotel, Renee Erreich, a “world class” party planner, and John Uher, a professional food and lifestyle magazine photographer. Working together, they produced a text that offers the reader not only recipes but also table setting plans, ideas for floral arrangements, party themes, wine lists for holiday menus (featuring “cutting edge” kosher wines), resource guides for purchasing exotic kosher ingredients, and even corporate tie-ins, where the cooking tools and housewares featured in the photographs are also promoted for sale at the back of the book.

These features are innovative, but many of them are also variations on the genre of Jewish cookbook writing as it has existed since at least the eighteenth century. Fishbein’s recent success was in fact prepared by a *long durée* of sedimented social patterns of distinction and habit with regard to print matter, as well as patterns of leisure and economic upward mobility that secured an expanding consumer base for “Jewish products,” including food, clothing, ritual objects, artwork, music, memorabilia, and the like (Joselit 1994; Heinze 1990). The history of this advancing Jewish embourgeoisement was staged, among other things, through a succession of cookbooks that addressed readers who were assumed to be familiar with the basic laws of *kashrut*, and presumably with Jewish specialities, but not with the techniques and aesthetic standards required to produce culinary elegance. By “upgrading” the cuisine, one was promised a means of overcoming the social embarrassment of kosher food as “not stylish.” By the mid-twentieth century, this mode of address was well ensconced within an expanding market—especially in the USA—emphasizing the importance of style and artistry, including the aesthetics of ritual performance, such as key festival meals that were accompanied by floral arrangements, color schemes, table decor, and other details of display that signal elegant dining. Such texts operated through a mode of address that articulated the continuity of dietary requirements by materializing the “spirit” of Jewish rituals (in particular, rituals of commensality) through pleasurable visual stimuli.

21. In a recent interview, Fishbein explains: “I love cooking and entertaining. I’m not necessarily the most talented cook. In fact, when I do cooking classes there’s always a sigh of relief when I say I didn’t go to cooking school. The appeal is that I’m just like the audience in my kitchen in New Jersey” (quoted in Brozman 2004). This quote may give us pause for further reflection on the claim that Fishbein is a “Jewish Martha Stewart” since it is virtually unimaginable that Martha Stewart would ever attempt to efface her authority as a highly competent culinary expert (and thereby, the symbolic power she enjoys over her “illiterate” audience). That said, I would argue that Fishbein and Stewart *do* enjoy comparable positions as what the Marxist critic Antonio Gramsci would call “organic intellectuals”: both are devoted to the transformation of “common sense” into “good sense,” and it is on these terms, perhaps, that Fishbein merits continued comparison with the likes of Martha Stewart.

These trends in cookbook publishing were also closely tied to a broader pattern of evolution in the kosher food industry, which enabled Jewish consumers to enter into a seemingly boundless gastronomic universe, enhanced by advances in technologies of food production and the consolidation of new global distribution chains of both raw and prepared ingredients, as well as an expanding culture of culinary spectacle created by professional kosher caterers at weddings, bar mitzvahs, and other events.<sup>22</sup>

In all these respects, *Kosher By Design* not only follows a well-worn path of predecessors in the genre of kosher cookbook writing, it also epitomizes a more recent publishing trend (extending far beyond the Jewish world) that has seen a proliferation of cookbooks exhibiting high production values, at the far extreme of which one finds the large-format, "coffee-table" style books, featuring the work of an expanding cult of cooking and home design celebrities such as Nigella Lawson, Jamie Oliver, and Martha Stewart. In such books, culinary elegance is conveyed by sophisticated recipes, as well as the material elements of bookbinding, typeface, illustration, and above all, full-color photographs printed on coated stock, depicting prepared dishes artfully arranged according to professional techniques of lighting and composition. One of the most recognizable leaders of this food fashion trend is Martha Stewart, the renowned food and home design mogul, and purveyor of a wide range of media and consumer products: from her award-winning magazine, *Martha Stewart Living*; to internationally syndicated TV and radio shows; to brand-name household products, including lines of housepaint, linen, and drapery sold in retail chain stores. In their ensemble, Stewart's products promote the realization of fantasies of an aristocratic, elegant, and well-ordered lifestyle through skilled technique and attention to detail (rather than through mere possession of great wealth), appealing especially to women readers who wish to make changes in their home environment but do not necessarily possess the time or money for extended projects or hired help. Through cascading images of immaculate homes, gorgeous landscaping, handmade gifts for the holidays, and flawless dinner parties, Martha Stewart's audiences are offered the means of producing an aristocratic lifestyle through skilled techniques of display, substituting the "look" of luxury for a much less easily attained class ascension, while at the same time validating domesticity as an arena of

22. See Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett's analysis of *Jewish Home Beautiful*, a 1941 kosher cookbook which epitomizes the emphasis on style and artistry (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1990). In that book, Jewish religious experience was framed aesthetically by the set table—a trope indexing both the high bourgeois tradition of culinary elegance, *la table dressée*, and also one of the most important codices of Jewish law, the *Shulkhan Arukh* [which also translates literally as "set table"]. Together with its dialogic mode of address, *Jewish Home Beautiful's* images of tables laden with food functioned as tableaux for a dramatic dialogue performed by mother and daughter: a script which was actually performed at various synagogues and churches, and even at the Temple of Religion at the New York World's Fair in 1939–40.

infinitely improvable beautification, an aesthetic project that both transfigures and overcomes the drudgery of cooking and cleaning (Mason and Meyers 2001).

Yet unlike Martha Stewart's media products, the ArtScroll cookbook aims to do more than simply impart the requisite knowledge to produce elegance. It is also designed, as Susie Fishbein puts it, "to help families incorporate more of Judaism into our most important Jewish institution of all time: the home" (Sanders 2005). Recipes, menus, and sample table decor furnish the reader with instructions and models whereby the aesthetics of desirable food is cast as a positive outcome of scrupulous attention to Jewish law, and innovation in cuisine is presented as legitimate variation on religious custom. Here it is important to note that Fishbein's "designer cuisine" often works within the terms of a quite culturally specific sub-genre of the aristocratic look, which one might call the *balebatish* style.<sup>23</sup> With its deployment of courtly signs—crushed velvet and golden tassels, white lace, silverware, and crystal—the *balebatish* style connotes a mood of elegance and dignity, while at the same time invoking long-standing Jewish metaphors of the Torah as a king, adorned with a crown, or of the setting of the Sabbath table as preparation for the arrival of a queen. Thus, it is not luxury *per se* that is the object of desire. Through the visual language of the *balebatish*, signs of luxury function here as an index of a higher order of things, embodied in the sacred covenant between God and his Chosen People. Fishbein is a *Jewish* Martha Stewart not simply because she happens to be Jewish, but more precisely because she draws upon the stock of *balebatish* images and styles, artfully re-arranging and "updating" familiar elements in order to meet the aesthetic standards of the contemporary bourgeois home.

### Seeing and Doing

In addition to offering the means of appropriating the "look" required for bourgeois self-representation, *Kosher By Design* works to extend the circulation of expert knowledge about culinary elegance into the (ideally Orthodox) home, linking the lush visual repertoire of beautiful food and elegant dining with strict interpretations of Jewish dietary requirements and custom in matters of ritual practice. This is especially clear in the book's presentation of holiday meals, which combine suggested menus with wine lists and table designs in order to convey the "spirit" of each holiday. In her introduction to the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah (a celebration marking the conclusion of the year-long cycle of reading the Torah), Fishbein writes:

23. *Balebatish* is a Yiddish adjective, derived from the substantive *balebatim*, meaning persons of high standing. *Balebatish yidn* are respectable Jews, people of substance in the community (such as the board members of a synagogue, or other distinguished figures). A *balebusteh* is a "top-notch" home-maker. My thanks to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett for making this point.

Bursting with joy, our lively Simchat Torah table combines minimum fuss with maximum aesthetic impact. Begin with a floor-length orange tablecloth; then layer it with colored place mats and napkins (which are actually inexpensive dish towels and dish cloths).... A charming touch is to serve foods resembling Torah scrolls. In that spirit, we chose Chicken Negamaki to begin the meal. This rolled chicken dish, with its colorful pepper and scallion strips, offers an innovative angle on traditional fare. (Fishbein 2003, 125)

Even for such an austere occasion as Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, Fishbein provides some helpful design hints:

Yom Kippur is not about food. However, eating before the fasting begins is as much of a *mitzvah* [commandment] as the fast itself. It should be a full holiday meal. Spend a few minutes setting a beautiful table to help put you in the proper frame of mind for this holy day. We selected a simple white tablecloth because white is a symbol of Yom Kippur.... The simple menu omits salty and spicy foods because they cause thirst.... Time can run short, so we suggest store-purchased sorbets for dessert. Serving them in crystal martini glasses will elevate them to holiday elegance. (Fishbein 2003, 70)

On such terms, *Kosher By Design* does more than just provide a guideline for the performance of acts of *hiddur mitzvah*. Through techniques for “elevating” the dining experience, Fishbein’s text participates in a broader process of re-engineering of the kosher home, where habits formed through religious discipline can be conjoined in new ways with an expanding culture of commodified leisure and practices and techniques of spectacle and display. The idea of “entertaining,” for instance, is understood here as a staging of commensality against the backdrop of elegant home decor, and at the same time as the fulfillment of the *mitzvah* known as *hachnasat orchim*, the sacred obligation to “bring in guests.” But once religious obligations are re-cast as opportunities for aesthetic expression, the terms of legitimate conduct and ritual observance are transformed. Home-makers must now negotiate between competing sources of authority—the guardians of religious customs and laws, and the experts on interior decorating and party planning—and learn how to accommodate their respective expectations.

This entanglement of the performative demands of “fashion” and of “religious law” is registered most forcefully in the cookbook’s lush visual imagery, and indeed, its ocularcentric mode of address, which carries with it the promises of perfect mimesis. By following the (easy) instructions in the text, one is guaranteed the precise reproduction of the referent to which the image points. A typical account of this relationship is furnished by the following “impressed reader”:

I haven’t made a recipe I didn’t like. It also turns out exactly as pictured in the book. I just made the white and dark chocolate mousse dessert and it looks incredible. My sister-in-law told me that my Sunken Apple



and Honey cake looks so good it should be pictured on the cover of a magazine!<sup>24</sup>

It would seem that the visual takes precedent even over the gustatory. Food becomes not just sustaining, not just ritually permitted, not just tasty, but *visually desirable*: food that is designed to be seen, good enough to be photographed. *Kosher By Design's* photographs thus form a visual repertoire that is both iconic and indexical, referring at once to the prepared food that might appear somewhere on a "real" table, as well as the desired spectacular effects of such food on social gatherings and family life. According to one customer reviewer on the Amazon.com website, "the photo layout and designs of the dishes prepared are so beautiful and vibrant. It makes the reader feel like they are sitting at the table with the rest of the guests" ("Customer Reviews of *Kosher By Design*"). And if the photographs possess this cathetic power to transport their readers into a simulated world of aesthetic contemplation and harmonious fellowship, it is precisely because their scenography depends upon highly coded techniques of lighting, distance, and texture that can excite the passions. Not unlike the "haptic" field of perception described by Laura Marks (2002), in which the visual synaesthetically references the other senses, such as the tactile, cookbook pictures offer a feast, not just for the disembodied eye, but for the whole body. In her preface, Fishbein writes:

During the photo shoots for this book, my food stylist taught me that when we cook, we cook with all our senses. Listen for the sizzle as the meat hits the pan, feel the food to determine its doneness, smell the nutty aroma of grains as they toast, behold with your eyes the plate's appeal, taste with your palate the delight of your creations. This is true about entertaining, too. It is not only what you serve, but how you serve it. A simple garnish, a beautiful table, an unusual floral arrangement, a colorful plate filled with assorted delicacies—all these things elevate the mundane to the magnificent.... Look around your house for things that can be used to achieve the ideas shown in this book. Mix and match concepts and adapt them to the various events of your lives. (Fishbein 2003, 3)

24. Quoted from "Customer Reviews of *Kosher By Design*." A word of caution is in order here about the nature of the evidence I am drawing upon. I have deliberately chosen to discuss advertised customer reviews (such as are found on the popular Amazon.com website) as instances of what I call "public testimonials." Following the long tradition of letters to editors of mass circulation print, such entries constitute a public sphere wherein judgments can be rendered, debated, confirmed, or disputed by a collection of strangers, and before an anonymous—and at least in principle, unlimited—audience. As such, I propose, published (and even self-published) testimonials regarding *Kosher By Design* exert a disproportionately influential role in the formation of a publicly circulable discourse regarding this text and its cultural significance. I am *not* claiming that these are the precise interpretations activated in the very local situations of individual readers and consumers, whose reception of texts, and whose ability to develop their own interpretive strategies, are of course always highly variable.

Through the visual language of food photography, the cookbook can even be detached from its ostensibly original locus in the kitchen, in order to become a work of aesthetic contemplation in its own right. In the words of one enthusiast, "it is so beautiful, the illustrations, if the book was not so practical, I would suggest to place it in a display case in a museum" ("Customer Reviews of *Kosher By Design*").

### A Soft Entry into a Hard World

What are we supposed to make of this iconophilia? Is this simply a matter of registering the creeping presence of the logics of consumerism and fashion within the religious sphere, commensurate with the rising economic affluence of Orthodox Jews? This is surely part of the story. But there is something more going on here. Anchored by the framework of texts and paratexts, *Kosher By Design's* photographs also stage a quite remarkable reformulation of the balance of piety and pleasure in relation to religious conduct. As Fishbein warns us,

Don't be fooled by the stylishness of the photos. The emphasis of *Kosher By Design* is on easy to do and enjoyable to do. With so many food-based events to prepare for in our communal and personal calendars, *our team worked very hard so that you won't have to*. We want you to spend more time being a gracious host than a chef who sweats it; but while you're wearing your chef's hat, *we'll help you cook with confidence and inspiration*. (Sanders 2005, emphasis added)

In other words, rather than assuming the tone of moral injunction, or providing a systemic review of adjudicatory principles for the application of religious law (many such manuals exist, including ones published by Art-Scroll),<sup>25</sup> *Kosher By Design* promises to convey the requisite knowledge for religious observance through the voice of a "personal coach" (Siegel 2003).

At stake here is the idea of religious instruction and its relationship with aesthetic forms and ascetic practices. To the extent that virtuosity and competence in ritual conduct have always involved effort, sacrifice, devotion, and training, religious instruction can be defined in terms of its techniques and technologies for disciplining the self through the constitution of bodily regimens, the ordering of time and space, and attentive focussing of the mind in order to transcend the ever-present threats of inertia, self-indulgence, or laxity. From ancient monastic regimens of athletics, exercise, fasting, and diet, to contemporary biopolitical practices of regularization and control of the body or, for that matter, competent exercise of the laws of *kashrut* within the modern domestic sphere, one can trace the history of a relatively continuous definition of "training" in terms of an economy of

25. See, e.g., Lipschutz 1988; Cohen 1991. For a comparable text, written from a Conservative Jewish perspective, see Stern 2004.

pleasure and pain, of pleasure *in* pain, and the rewards of purification that accompany virtuosic performance, rigorous application, and self-denial.<sup>26</sup> But with the intrusion of the “personal coach,” who functions not only as a guarantor of knowledge, but also as a palliative and a psychological motivator, this much older economy of pleasure and pain is reordered. The *reduction of effort* now emerges as a key organizing principle for the successful replication of authentic Jewish practice. So, for instance, with the help of *Kosher By Design's* personalized mode of address, the Passover *seder* meal can now be defined as “a time to celebrate our historic liberation, not to feel oppressed by the cruel taskmaster of the menu” (Sanders 2005).

These linked themes of accessibility, clarity, and effortlessness, I propose, lie at the heart of ArtScroll's project to market and publicly to legitimate *haredi* standards of Jewish practice. What is initially posited as an easy and enjoyable point of entry into a life-path of ever-greater stringency ends up re-defining the very terrain of religious stringency itself. By lowering of thresholds of competence and ability—in order to reach an audience that cannot be assumed to know enough, or to be sufficiently or properly motivated—texts like *Kosher By Design* also open the door for the stringent to become aestheticized. Pleasurable images and superior design do not simply frame instructions about hard work and the vigilant exercise of *kosher* living; they oblige a reconsideration of the principles of ascetic conduct, measured now in terms of the visual pleasure they are able to elicit.

ArtScroll's apologists are loath to attribute such a role to their texts. Books like *Kosher By Design* might look beautiful and might also speak to their reader in a friendly and “comforting” tone, but as far as the conveyance of legitimate religious knowledge and practice is concerned, they are simply remedial technologies. In her prefatorial remarks on the maintenance of a well-arranged kosher kitchen, Fishbein proposes that “a rabbi's phone number is kept handy for consultation if a mistake occurs” (Fishbein 2003, 8). Similarly, ArtScroll's general editor, Rabbi Scherman, insists that “we've always stressed the importance of having a teacher. You can't learn life from a book. Ideally, ArtScroll books shouldn't be stand-alone texts. They are only meant to be adjuncts to rabbis and teachers.”<sup>27</sup> But in this regard, what can be said about ArtScroll's cookbook might also be said about the whole range of the ArtScroll corpus: where Rabbi Scherman sees mere adjunction, others attribute far more expansive roles. For example, according to its enthusiasts, the ArtScroll *Siddur* [basic prayer book] “takes the reader by the hand,” it is so “full of information...it could almost replace my rabbi,” it will “end up being one of your best and most faithful

26. See, e.g., Asad 1993; Brown 1988; Fine 1992; Griffith 2004; Mellor and Shilling 1997. For a more general treatment of religion and the body, see Coakley 1997.

27. Personal communication, February 2004.

companions in your attempt at leading an ordered and observant life. Once you've tried it, you'll have a hard time doing without."<sup>28</sup>

Not unlike the ArtScroll cookbook, the designation of the ArtScroll *Siddur* as surrogate rabbi and teacher, as faithful companion, and as holder of hands, is rooted in its unambiguous and explicit mode of address, and above all, its superior design. As one ArtScroll fan puts it,

[ArtScroll books such as the *Siddur*] basically give you everything from the beginning without making you feel like something's wrong with you for needing it. It gives you the confidence to tackle situations you otherwise would be scared or apprehensive of, because you're, like, okay, I don't have to worry about not knowing when to stand, sit, when to do this or that, because it says it right there.<sup>29</sup>

As another ardent consumer elaborates,

They make it basically like *Praying for Dummies*. ArtScroll is kind of like the *For Dummies* series because it provides everything at a very basic level, but at the same time it really is not for dummies, because of everything it's throwing at you. I mean, it's a lot easier when it's laid out the way they do, but that doesn't mean in any way that they are going to shortchange you in what you're getting out of it. To a certain degree I guess some of their publications end up being a bit of a crutch for some people. But I don't think that—I mean, I suppose it might hinder somebody's ability to be able to learn something for themselves. But the end result with ArtScroll is that it's going to be much easier for them to learn the facts that they need in order to be more observant. It's just much easier to know exactly what you are doing when you are trying to keep a kosher kitchen, for example. You can read a book that breaks everything down and makes everything simple and clear, as opposed to something that just confuses you and leaves you wondering if everything is right at the end of the day.<sup>30</sup>

As these comments reveal, ArtScroll's "adjunctive" role is never simply adjunctive, since in practice their appropriation provokes a redistribution of competencies and sources of legitimate authority among written texts and their users.<sup>31</sup> Commensurate with the spread of ArtScroll books, therefore, is a reshuffling of the discursive and performative conditions that once constituted religious authority in "traditional" Jewish contexts. The balance of power between locally situated teachers, legal interpreters, and ritual

28. These comments are culled from field research I conducted in London, New York, and Toronto, between 2000 and 2004. For a selection of public testimonials that convey comparable sentiments, see "Customer Reviews of *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*."

29. Personal communication, Toronto, November 2002.

30. Personal communication, Toronto, January 2003.

31. Here I follow the example of Bruno Latour's rethinking of the relationship between human and nonhuman (i.e., technological) forms of agency, whereby the former delegate specific skills and tasks for practical action to the latter, through processes of inscription and transcription. See Latour 1991.

leaders—or for that matter, of mothers in possession of knowledge about how to maintain a kosher kitchen—and the commanding voice of the text are re-negotiated. Now it is the text alone which commands, in a voice that is simple, direct, and clear. And the reader, unencumbered by any need for the disciplining presence of teachers, judges, rabbis, and other communal authority figures, is thereby afforded a new opportunity to engage in the acquisition and application of what is presented as “authentic” Jewish knowledge. Among other things, readers can now associate the pleasures of accurate performance of an authentic script with the pleasures of good design.

In conclusion, texts such as *Kosher By Design* point to an emergent form of scriptural authority, evincing the success of so-called fundamentalists—in this case, *haredi* religious authorities—to adapt to the opportunities and demands of mediated communication and public presence in the late modern age. Among other things, advances in the production and circulation of print commodities enable new articulations of the age-old relationship between artistic and ascetic practice, setting the scene for new strategies to channel desire and to discipline the self. On these terms, “design” can be understood as something more than “mere form,” in the sense of an external frame that has no bearing on the content of the message being conveyed. Design is better understood here, as I have suggested, as a capacious medium conjoining form, content, functionality, and use. This is forcefully conveyed in the formal organization, the mode of address, and also in the legitimating discourses (including public testimonials) surrounding texts like *Kosher By Design*, which are hailed as both beautifully crafted and authentically authoritative. But by this same token, as I have also argued, the notion of design at the same time points to a deeper paradox embedded in the project to communicate ascetic principles in a “pleasing” form. The greater the concern to “draw in” a geographically, culturally, and socially dispersed readership, and the greater the desire to account for diverse practices and objects in a rapidly changing material culture, the greater the likelihood that asceticism itself is transformed into something quite different from that which its authors might originally have intended, such as by conjoining it with the performative demands of accessibility and effortlessness, or with the styles, fashion trends, and fanciful improvisations available to local subjects in their everyday life situations. This paradox, I suggest, lies at the heart of much of our thinking about religion and its others in the contemporary moment.

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