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## Eleff on Shapiro, 'Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History'

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## [Eleff on Shapiro, 'Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History'](#)

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**Marc B. Shapiro.** *Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History*. Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015. 364 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-904113-60-7.

**Reviewed by** Zev Eleff (Hebrew Theological College) **Published on** H-Judaic (January, 2017)  
**Commissioned by** Katja Vehlow

Earlier this year, Feldheim Publishers produced a biography of Vichna Kaplan, the educator most responsible for transplanting the Bais Yaakov movement to the United States. Unlike more right-wing Orthodox publishers that hold themselves to severe forms of “modesty,” Feldheim included images of women in the book. Notwithstanding this open-mindedness, Kaplan’s biographers did not permit every image to go untouched. For at least one picture, Feldheim extended the sleeves of young female campers and changed the neckline of a teacher to reflect more conservative standards.[1] Perhaps others were doctored, too.

This is the sort of example of censorship that fills the pages of historian Marc Shapiro’s most recent book. His *Changing the Immutable* documents hundreds of instances from a variety of times and places in which traditional-leaning Jews confronted the realities of history and historical figures—and chose to avoid them. In truth, Shapiro’s eight chapters are stand-alone essays. The first introductory chapter, though, is the most important one. It links Orthodox attitudes toward history with censoring impulses. Shapiro outlines Orthodox conceptions of history and the relative values leaders of this community have placed upon historical precision and authenticity. Like others before him, Shapiro marshals the provocative writings of Rabbi Elyahu Dessler and Rabbi Shimon Schwab, who led the Orthodox Right’s theological battle against the forces of scholarly rigor and truthfulness. For these men and so many of their followers and readers, history was of little use if it could not provide spiritual and moral uplift. Better, argued Schwab, any given generation of Orthodox Jews should “put a veil over the human failings of its elders and glorify all the rest which is great and beautiful” (p. 3).

The balance of this enlightening—sometimes shocking, other times humorous—chapter demonstrates how Orthodox Jews of all stripes grappled with the truths of history. Sometimes they left it as is, while on other occasions Orthodox Jews changed or suppressed the material. They deleted paragraphs from books, photoshopped “controversial” figures from photographs, mistranslated “objectionable” liturgy, and omitted information from biographies that seemed too unseemly for modern-day Orthodox readers.

Shapiro’s other chapters are arranged by subject and probe more deeply into specific Orthodox communities and their struggle to present figures like Rabbis Abraham Isaac Kook and Samson Raphael Hirsch in the best light, and to “clean up” halakhic and sexual materials. On these two towering personalities, Shapiro proves just how tricky it was for the Orthodox Right to incorporate the nineteenth-century Hirsch and his positive attitudes toward secular learning. Similarly, many of Kook’s leading modern-day disciples felt obliged to purge some of the more radical Zionist notions

from the turn-of-the-twentieth-century ideologue and scholar.

His final chapter is probably the most creative. This section, entitled “Is the Truth Really That Important?,” engages, almost like an English-language responsum, classical sources and codes to figure out Judaism’s stance toward censorship and historical reporting. Like so much else, the matter and conclusion are quite nuanced.

Shapiro’s tome is most impressive for its command of so many textual genres and overall breadth of knowledge. His examination of texts leaves no Judaica library’s stack untouched. However, there are some important weaknesses. Earlier reviewers have rightfully acknowledged that “Shapiro does not offer much by way of conceptual tools with which to help the reader make sense of the different phenomena he describes, even by contextualizing a given matter.”[2] Rarely does the author draw comparisons between Orthodox Judaism’s tendency to censor and the editing impulses of other communities. For instance, Reform-professing biographers of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise have tended to skim over or suppress information about this leading architect of nineteenth-century Reform Judaism in the United States. Only recently did Janice Blumberg dare to address some startling examples of Wise’s politically heavy hand and his struggles with the improprieties of his children.[3] A reader is therefore left to wonder how much more egregious are these Orthodox acts of censorship compared to other religious enclaves (Jewish and non-Jewish), particularly those in the United States, where most of Shapiro’s censorship moments were staged. Similar relevant fields of study such as “history of the book” might have also offered a useful scholarly scaffolding.

Nonetheless, this is a welcome and substantial contribution to the anthropological study of contemporary Orthodox life. Students of Orthodox Judaism and culture—especially those who fancy Clifford Geertz’s “thick description” method—will readily situate Shapiro’s book into a growing literature that includes fine works by Kimmy Caplan, Yoel Finkelman, Sylvia Fishman, Samuel Heilman, and Jeremy Stolow. Their monographs and articles throw light on the ways that ultra-Orthodox Judaism has reacted to revolutions in technology and media. Likewise, Shapiro is at his best when demonstrating how innovations within print culture have forced the hands of Orthodox leaders, compelling them to suppress and change rather than appear exposed to internal and external forces.

Moreover, *Changing the Immutable* will be an essential work as historians continue to probe how Orthodox Judaism differed in specific epochs and locations. To be sure, Shapiro offers a number of censorship examples from periods before Jews started to identify themselves as “Orthodox.” Many more, though, are derived from evidence of the editing proclivities of Hasidic sources and the so-called Mitnagdic (those opposed to Hasidim) in the nineteenth century. As well, Shapiro examines various Orthodox groups in the United States and Israel in the twentieth century. The dynamics of these acts of censorship differ for all of these various Orthodoxies, as the author himself implies in his chapters on Hirsch and Kook. For instance, it appears from Shapiro’s research that the Orthodox Right is far more willing to delete passages and change images for the sake of its contemporary moral principles. The modern Orthodox, on the other hand, censor and edit on a much less drastic scale. As well, technology and societal openness seem have played a significant role in determining the frequency of Orthodox censorship.

No doubt, further research on Orthodox culture will refine how the various communities who have affiliated with this “Orthodox” religious moniker at one point or another engaged their pasts. Marc

Shapiro's book has therefore opened up new vistas. Hopefully, he will continue charting the intriguing path in this growing field of scholarship.

#### Notes

[1]. See Leslie Ginsparg Klein, "The Troubling Trend of Photoshopping History," *The Lehrhaus*, November 17, 2016. Available at <http://www.thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/2016/11/16/the-troubling-trend-of-photoshopping-his...> (accessed December 15, 2016).

[2]. Yoel Finkelman, review of *Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites its History*, by Marc B. Shapiro, *Tradition* 49 (Spring 2016): 95.

[3]. See Janice Rothschild Bloomberg, *Prophet in a Time of Priests: Rabbi "Alphabet" Brown, 1845-1929; a Biography* (Baltimore, MD: Apprentice House, 2012), 79-120.

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