

I consider myself fortunate to have had what I consider an eclectic Jewish background. I attended Shabbat services, went to Religious School and Hebrew School and celebrated my Bar Mitzvah at a historic Reform congregation. On the other hand, my mother, whose father had served as president of an Orthodox synagogue, maintained a strictly kosher home. In the neighborhood where we lived, all of the congregations were Orthodox. Down the block from our house, there was a *yeshiva ktana* (an all boys' k through 12 day school), on the main commercial street were two large and imposing synagogues, and on the side streets several smaller shuls and a Chasidic *shtiebel* (a private home renovated to accommodate daily and Shabbat worship). On the additional days of holidays, when our Reform congregation did not have services, I would often attend one of the Orthodox shuls. Ultimately I developed a preference for services at one of the Conservative synagogues in town, the one to which my mother's best friend and her husband belonged. I liked that the services there had more Hebrew than the Reform worship of that era and that they were more participatory with lots of congregational singing. And I liked that Conservative Judaism seemed to me to be "middle of the road" between the extremes of Reform and Orthodox, which is not to denigrate either of those movements but simply to indicate my personal preference.

When I wound up as a rabbinical student at the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary, I was quite surprised that services in the school's synagogue were closer to what I would have identified as Orthodox and that the standards of observance maintained by the faculty and expected of students were quite traditional. The notion that we were simply aspiring to be "middle of the road" was disparaged. The Kotzker rebbe was quoted to the effect that the middle of the road was for horses. We were a *halachic* movement, upholding the binding authority of Jewish law as derived from the Talmud and Codes and faithful not only to the ethical teachings of Judaism but also to the ritual and ceremonial requirements of *halacha*. Admittedly, our interpretations of *halacha* were more liberal than those of the Orthodox and may have taken into consideration sociological factors they would have deemed extraneous, but even where we deviated from traditional practice - allowing congregants to ride to shul on Shabbat or instituting mixed seating of men and women -we sought *halachic* justification.

It is now half a century since I entered the Seminary, and I must confess that, despite my rabbinical school indoctrination, the idea of Conservative Judaism as the middle of the road appeals to me more than ever. A Seminary professor several years back created a stir with an article in *Sh'ma* magazine that cast doubt on the claim that Conservative Judaism was still a *halachic* movement. If we can no longer regard that claim as credible, then the difference between Reform and Conservative Judaism is more a matter of personal preference than of fidelity to ideology. The latter movement prefers a more traditional style of worship and encourages a greater degree of personal observance, the former opts for a less traditional worship format and advocates for personal autonomy in determining one's level of observing *mitzvot*. The point is that all of us pick and choose. Even the Orthodox do so in ways that are more subtle and hard to detect. Mordecai Kaplan noted 80 years ago that when two Orthodox businessmen take their dispute regarding a contract to a civil court for settlement rather than a *bet din*, a rabbinic tribunal, they are effectively narrowing the scope of Jewish tradition and flouting *halacha*. After all, one fourth of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the authoritative code of Jewish law is *Choshen Mishpat*, the section dealing with property, contract and tort law.

The Conservative Jewish movement in the United States over the past several decades has undergone a steep decline. Where once we constituted thirty plus percent of religiously affiliated American Jews, we now hover somewhere around eighteen percent. I don't know if there's a connection, but the shrinking of the Jewish religious middle seems to me akin to the polarization of political opinion in the United States, the erosion of the middle class in our society, and the losses in membership sustained by mainstream Protestant Christian denominations. The decline of Conservative Judaism has been much analyzed and discussed, attributed in part to the defection of the less traditionally inclined to Reform and of the more involved and committed among our youth, alumni of Ramah camps and Schechter day schools, to Orthodoxy. The Jewish middle, however, should not be exclusively identified with the institutions of Conservative Judaism. Many independent *minyanim* and innovative experiments in creating Jewish spiritual community were founded by alumni of Conservative Judaism and reflect the movement's

influence. Also, the Reform Judaism of today with its greater emphasis on ritual, on Hebrew and on tradition is far closer to the middle than the classical Reform of my youth. On the opposite side of the spectrum, despite the shift of Orthodoxy rightward in recent years (no one today claims to be modern Orthodox; those who are not *charedi* prefer to label themselves centrist), there is also a movement that calls itself Open Orthodoxy and that seeks, among other goals, a greater role for women in positions of Jewish spiritual leadership. In preparation for the weekly Torah reading, I often peruse a website called TheTorah.com. Many of the scholars, whose contributions are featured there, are highly observant and have an Orthodox affiliation, and yet they accept the methodology and conclusions of Biblical criticism, which would suffice to have them denounced as heretics by *charedi* and even mainstream Orthodox institutions.

Professor Jacob Neusner, in an interview several years back, offered an interesting perspective. What most Jews in modern times have sought and what most of us today seek is, in Neusner's words, to be both "Jewish and something else." We want to be Jewish, we're committed to living a Jewish life, however we may define that, to participating in Jewish activities and to supporting Jewish institutions. But we also want to be American and to partake of modernity and general culture, and we believe that it is possible to do both. Neusner's point is that the only people who deny that possibility are, on the one hand, assimilationists, who believe that being modern and being American requires them to shed their Jewishness, and ultra-Orthodox *charedim*, on the other, for whom the perpetuation of Judaism requires isolation and self-ghettoization, limiting of contacts with the non-Jewish world, and the shunning of secular knowledge and education except insofar as necessitated in order to earn a livelihood.

Even acknowledging some blurring of the lines between Jewish denominations and enlarging the middle to include all of those who affirm the possibility of being "Jewish and something else", there is still ample cause for concern. The 2014 Pew survey of the American Jewish community reported a large number of Jews who self-identified as "Jews of no religion." But it's not just us who are experiencing this. According to a more recent Pew research poll, within the general American population at large, there is also a significant percentage of what have been nicknamed the "nones" – people who do

not identify or affiliate with any faith tradition. Among both Jews and non-Jews, the trend is more prevalent among the younger age cohort. I am concerned, because, while secular Jewishness was a vibrant expression of identity for Jews in Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and while Jewishness as a secular identity can and does flourish in Israel, in the current American setting, the aforementioned trend (“Jews of no religion”) does not bode well for the long term participation and involvement in Jewish life of the individuals so labelled or of their children.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have an Orthodox Jewish population that may number 10%, perhaps a little more, of American Jewry. Although there is some attrition or dropping out, a high birth rate and a high rate of retention of the young who have been educated in day schools and *yeshivot* will keep that percentage stable and even boost it some. And as more marginal Jews fall away from the community, the Orthodox will play a more dominant role within Jewish communal affairs.

With a stable, perhaps even growing, Orthodox branch and an increasing number of Jews of no religion, the middle is being squeezed. I surf websites of congregations in larger cities, and some seem to be doing quite well, with events and activities that appear to be well-attended and would appeal to me, if I lived in proximity. On the other hand, I know about decreasing membership rolls in once flourishing congregations and mergers within and even across denominational lines. And living in Springfield, my view is skewed by our dwindling numbers and aging Jewish population and by the tendency of our young people to leave town for college and find employment and career opportunities in a larger metropolitan area.

My intention is not to disparage Orthodoxy. While there are features of that branch that I dislike – the intolerance, self-righteousness, closed-mindedness, and insistence on rigid conformity that one too often finds– I admire the high level of Jewish knowledge and observance, the degree of commitment and sacrifice that are involved, the sanctification of every aspect of daily life, and the passion and the joy that adherents of Orthodoxy derive from Jewish living. I know, moreover, that Orthodox Judaism has staying power; it will without a doubt survive and continue into the future. And as a

Jewish pluralist, who welcomes a variety of avenues for expressing our Jewishness and for interpreting Jewish faith and practice, I am happy about that.

On the other hand, I believe Orthodoxy's appeal does have limits. Not everyone who is ripe for increased involvement in Jewish learning, Jewish living, and Jewish community will see Orthodoxy as an attractive option. I personally would find it regrettable, if the only choices for Jews in the next generation were Orthodoxy or assimilation. We need viable alternatives, and we need a vibrant, healthy and compelling middle of the road Judaism, one that affirms both tradition and modernity, that rejects fundamentalism and embraces critical-historical scholarship, that practices gender equality and is tolerant of those struggling with doubt and with finding their appropriate level of observance.

I recently read an article about Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kuk, the Ashkenazic chief rabbi in the land of Israel during the British Mandate of the 1920's and 1930's. Uncompromisingly Orthodox in his viewpoint, he was, unlike many of his rabbinic colleagues, a Zionist. A profound mystic with the sensibility of a poet, he had the capacity to see and appreciate the paradoxes that underlay surface appearances. He detected in the dedication of the secular *chalutzim*, who worked for the establishment of a Jewish homeland but shunned religious observance, a passion that was deeply spiritual. And in the refusal of secularists to accept traditional beliefs about God, he saw a much needed step toward the cleansing and purification of religious faith, that too easily falls into the trap of believing that its creeds and dogmas have adequately grasped the mystery of Divinity.

The article recounted a story about Rabbi Kuk and some colleagues, who, decked out in their rabbinic garb, paid a visit to a secular kibbutz. They were warmly welcomed, but Rabbi Kuk was bluntly addressed by a kibbutz member, "Don't think that you're going to be able to influence us in any way." "And what makes you think," Rabbi Kuk replied, "that I've come here to influence you. Quite the opposite! I'm here for you to influence me."

Honesty certainly compels me to admit that Rav Kuk would not approve of my path within Judaism. I suspect he had more tolerance for secularists than for non-

Orthodox expressions of Jewish religiosity. But his openness to influences from beyond his personal comfort zone is something I can admire. This for me is what defines the middle path – seeking to exert our own influence, being firm in our principles, but also being ready and willing to be influenced by what is worthy and valuable in the thinking and practice of others to either side of us on the ideological spectrum.

On Rosh Hashanah I spoke of the task for non-Orthodox Jewish thinkers – to articulate a cogent and persuasive non-fundamentalist theology of Torah, Covenant and Divine Will. For those of us who labor in the field of congregation and community, the task is equally challenging – to fashion a Judaism that is compelling, a Judaism that (despite being middle of the road) is not lukewarm but joyous and passionate, a Judaism that acknowledges that all of us pick and choose but that inspires us to choose more – more *mitzvot*, more learning, more deeds of kindness and righteousness. The challenge is particularly daunting with regard to our young people, who live in a world quite different from the one we grew up in, a world that is less fostering of and less friendly to the ideals of community and long-term commitment, that are the foundation of Jewish life. But it is a challenge that we cannot shirk.

On Yom Kippur, we are keenly aware of our mortality. We know we must die, but we are imbued with an instinct for self-preservation. And so (except under circumstances of intractable pain or lingering disability) we pray for more life, especially at this season on the Jewish calendar. We are also conscious of the challenges to the survival and continuity of Jewish communal life, and so it is proper that we pray not only for ourselves but for our Jewish people and for our treasured heritage that it, in all its variety and diversity, might survive long into the future.

