

Throughout late antiquity and the Middle Ages, Jews dispersed around the world were (despite our well-deserved reputation for contentiousness) united by a shared faith and practice. There were to be sure rifts and schisms (between those who welcomed the philosophic writings of Maimonides and those who condemned them, for example, or between the Chasidim and their opponents, the Mitnagdim), but for the most part Jews worldwide accepted the authority of the Talmud and of the rabbinic scholars who were the arbiters of the Jewish legal tradition. Today, by contrast, as Israeli journalist Amotz Asa-El has observed, faith and ritual practice, far from being a unifier, are what divides Jews from one another. Other than the modern and ultra-Orthodox groups within the Jewish community, most Jews no longer maintain a rigorous, consistent and disciplined observance of *halachah*, Jewish law.

We, the Jews of modernity, are the heirs of a history that goes back to Spinoza (sometimes referred to as the first secular Jew) in the 17th century and to the Enlightenment and Emancipation of the late 18th and early 19th century which gave birth to Reform Judaism and to the entire structure of Jewish denominations. Reform, Conservative and modern Orthodox Judaism, different as they are from each other, were all adaptations of the Jewish tradition in response to the challenges of modernity and of the opportunity to participate in the broader society and its culture. *Charedi* or ultra-Orthodox Judaism is no less a product of the 19th century, not the unself-conscious traditionalism of pre-Emancipation times but rather a conscious circling of the wagons, a counter-reaction to reforms in Jewish faith and practice.

The starkest instance of division between Jews on questions of faith and practice is between *charedim* and adherents of the other streams and denominations within Judaism. This is particularly true in Israel, where the *charedim* have taken over the rabbinical establishment, have set up stringent barriers to the process of converting to Judaism and, to the chagrin of non-Orthodox Jews in the Diaspora, have resisted and blocked the provision of an appropriate space for egalitarian prayer at the Kotel. Some ultra-Orthodox Jews do reach across the divide for the purpose of *kiruv*, bringing those estranged from or unfamiliar with Jewish observance nearer to Judaism and providing them with Jewish experiences, although full-fledged *ba'alei teshuva*, returnees to traditional observance are few and far between.

A survey of the various denominations within contemporary Judaism is instructive. Modern Orthodoxy is flourishing but is being pulled in opposite directions - toward open

Orthodoxy, on the one hand, characterized by greater sensitivity to feminist concerns and openness to academic study of Scripture, and toward the *charedi* approach to Jewish observance and learning, on the other. Of those raised in the Reform movement, a full one-quarter no longer identify as Jews by religion. We in the Conservative movement have seen our numbers plummet from 40% of religiously affiliated Jews to 20%. 30 % of those raised in our movement are now affiliated with Reform congregations, and some ninety-five Conservative synagogues have closed their doors in the past decade. The conclusion of Allan Arkush, whose review article in the *Jewish Review of Books* is the source for this overview of American Jewish denominations, is that, despite the growing legitimacy of being a hyphenated American and having a dual identity, there is strong pressure on and inclination among American Jews to assimilate.

This October will mark the fifth anniversary of the Pew Research study of American Jewry, from which the statistics that I've cited are derived. Its most startling finding relates not to the denominational groups within American Judaism, but to the large number within the community who identify as "Jews of no religion." Some 20% of those surveyed by Pew identify as such; they may be proud of their Jewishness but think of themselves as cultural, ethnic or secular rather than religious Jews. When one considers as a separate population the young adults who participated in the survey, that number rises to 32%, an indication of the direction toward which we are trending. This does not necessarily imply a hostility to spirituality but rather an avoidance or rejection of organized religion and its institutions. We Jews are not unique; 22% of Americans are members of the group referred to as the "nones", individuals with no formal religious identification. Mainline churches – Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian et al. – have an aging demographic, and have seen a steep decline in membership. Young people today have a different view regarding organizations, regarding the concept of membership, and regarding religious affiliation than do their elders. If the Jewish religious community is fractured and divided along denominational lines, think of this as yet another division, an even more significant one, between those who are religiously-affiliated and those who aren't.

Rabbis, Jewish professionals and sociologists have been pondering the implications of these findings ever since they were released five years ago, and the consensus is that they do not bode well for the future of the Jewish community. Jews "of no religion" are less likely than those who affiliate with a congregation to raise their children as Jews, to donate to Jewish charities, to

join other Jewish organizations or to care as deeply about Israel and about Jewish communities around the world. Secular Jewishness is not a new phenomenon; it existed within the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe (where Jews were a nationality as well as a religious group, often legally recognized as a national minority) and also among recently arrived Jewish immigrants in America ninety or one hundred years ago. One could be indifferent or even hostile to religious observance and belief and yet promote the study of Yiddish or Hebrew, both steeped in religious associations, converse as well as read literary works in those languages, devote oneself to the establishment of a Jewish homeland, and socialize largely with fellow Jews. Today, however, I believe that (outside of Israel) secular or ethnic Judaism is no longer plausible as the vehicle of Jewish identity it once was; our contemporary Jews “of no religion” in the Diaspora lack the necessary Jewish cultural literacy and are too disconnected from the Jewish community to sustain such an identity in a meaningful way.

Paralleling our concerns regarding the Jews “of no religion”, surveys of the general America community have indicated that those who affiliate with a church or religious institution tend to be better citizens, and to join civic groups, volunteer within their communities, donate to philanthropic causes, and cast their vote at election time in greater numbers than their non-affiliated counterparts.

If lack of religious affiliation or identification raises concerns for the Jewish community regarding continuity and survival and if it is linked to diminished participation in America civil society, it may also potentially entail significant losses for those individuals of no religion themselves— the loss of a sense of community and a sense of meaning.

The picture that I have painted of a Jewish community divided and disunited religiously and increasingly distancing itself from the religious tradition that was for so long the basis and focal point of our peoplehood is a troubling one. But possibly it is only one side of the story, and I may well be guilty of presenting what may be an excessively pessimistic view.

A Jewish historian of the past century once referred to Jews as “the ever-dying people”; each generation of Jews thought it was fated to be the last, and yet we have over and over again managed to defy the predictions of our demise. Some have observed regarding the contemporary Jewish scene that we are not dying but that we are in the process of transformation. And Judaism, it should be noted, has had a long history of transforming itself to accommodate

changing historical circumstances, the most striking instance being the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism between the first and third centuries of the Common Era to replace the Temple-based Judaism of the Second Jewish Commonwealth. New institutions were created – the synagogue and the rabbinate; new sacred texts were published – the Mishna and Midrashim – to be studied and to function as a guide to religious practice and belief; and new centers of Jewish life sprang up in the Diaspora.

The resources do exist for revitalizing Judaism in contemporary America. We have learned scholars teaching at our rabbinical seminaries and holding chairs in Jewish studies at our major universities. There are gifted writers, musicians and performing artists who use their talents to expound on and give artistic expression to Jewish themes. Jewish Federations as well as philanthropists acting independently through personal or family foundations have been willing to underwrite creative endeavors to strengthen Jewish identity. Every year sees a vast array of Jewish books published, both academic and scholarly. And as many of my colleagues have noted, the textbooks that are available for Hebrew School and Sunday School these days are far more alluring, interesting and pedagogically sound than what was available in our youth, and they are supplemented by the latest in online technology. The Internet has increased the accessibility of Jewish knowledge, provided one exercises some critical discernment about the sites one consults. Among the creative endeavors at the national and international level are Birthright, with which all of us are familiar, and Limmud, which originated in Great Britain as a well-attended weeklong interdenominational festival of Jewish learning and now sponsors events in 40 countries around the world including the U.S. At the local level some of our more visionary rabbinic leaders have established innovative non-denominational congregations (Mishkan in Chicago and Nashuvah in Los Angeles, among others), where one may experience lively and spirited prayer and serious Jewish learning, and have the opportunity to participate in *mitzvah* projects that engage with the wider community.

Sociologist Steven Windmueller, addressing the question of how we might promote the continuity and survival of a vibrant non-Orthodox American Judaism, has observed that doing that which we've always done will no longer work. We must build on and augment the innovative endeavors that I've mentioned and work to educate and support leaders in our community who are not afraid to think creatively and outside the box, to develop a vision for the

future, and to lead others toward the implementation of their vision. Above all, we need to come out of our denominational silos, maximize our resources by pooling them, and establish partnerships that build bridges across the denominational lines that have hitherto defined and confined us. One such interdenominational effort was Synagogue 2000, founded in 1994 by Rabbi Larry Hoffman of Hebrew Union College and Dr. Ron Wolfson of the American Jewish University, which worked with local congregations to transform worship, Torah study, management practices and, indeed, the entire culture of the synagogue; the books and reports produced by Synagogue 2000 are available now through the Synagogue Studies Institute and are an invaluable guide to the changes and transformations necessary to secure the Jewish future.

I am virtually certain that the American synagogue of the future – transformed, renewed and revitalized - will be vastly different from the synagogue of today. Change is always difficult, and I know that, were I to be transported via time travel to the future and were I to seek out a Jewish congregation where I could participate in Shabbat or holiday prayers, I would doubtless be uncomfortable with how different it was from what I'm accustomed to. But it's not about me; it's about preserving a rich culture, whose disappearance would be a great loss to the world, preserving core values – the humane and universalistic ideals of reverence for life, respect for knowledge and for the intellect, abhorrence of oppression and exploitation, stewardship over the earth and its resources, partnership with God in the work of Creation, hope for a future era of peace and justice, and service of the Creator and of humankind fashioned in the Divine image - and preserving as well the heritage that is uniquely ours – the Hebrew language, the sacred times and seasons of the Jewish year, the texts that are the repositories of our tradition, and the manner in which we celebrate and mark the passages of life.

When we pray during the Days of Awe, we don't say "*ten lanu shanah tovah*", "grant us a good year", but rather "*chadesh aleynu*", "renew unto us a good year". This season is a time of renewal and of re-connection, re-connecting with our Creator, with our tradition, and with each other. Among those who acknowledge their Jewishness but profess no religious commitment are, doubtless, some who experience a thirst for purpose, for meaning, for community, for solace and comfort when dealing with pain and with loneliness. Among our Jews of no religion there may be some, who, though skeptical of traditional theology, yearn for connection with a tradition. Can the synagogue and the Jewish community, renewed and re-vitalized, inspire and motivate

these individuals to re-connect and find in our shuls and Temples as well as in our communal activity that which they are seeking? That is the challenge that faces us in the New Year and beyond. To meet that challenge, we are called on, for the sake of a robust and vibrant Jewish future, to pledge our hearts, our minds, and our most fervent efforts.

