

SECULARISM, SPIRITUALITY, AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN JEWRY

Edited by Elliott Abrams and David G. Dalin

Charles S. Liebman
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The moral issues that shape foreign and domestic policy are central to the work of the Ethics and Public Policy Center. The Center is a non-profit institution established in Washington in 1976 to clarify and reinforce the role of the Judeo-Christian moral tradition in the American public-policy debate. Its primary activities are research, writing, publications, and conferences. Current programs include Catholic Studies, Evangelical Studies, Jewish Studies, studies in religion and foreign policy, the Project on the Judiciary, the Program on Medical Science and Society, and the Marriage Law Project. The president is Elliott Abrams.

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Preface

ELLIOTT ABRAMS

During the 1960s, that decade of revolution, I once attended an innovative High Holy Day service where the confession included the sin of attending too many conferences. No such confession should be necessary for the Jewish scholars and community leaders who gathered in New York on September 6, 1997, to discuss, under the auspices of the Ethics and Public Policy Center's Jewish Studies project, "Spiritualism, Secularity, and the American Jewish Future." The spirited debates and wise discussions that took place that day are presented here.

The role of Judaism the religion, and therefore the role of the synagogue, is the central theme. In Jonathan Woocher's thoughtful reassessment of the "civil religion"—a concept he analyzed so brilliantly in his 1986 book *Sacred Survival*—he notes the considerable accomplishments of that "civil" community, in matters such as liberating Soviet Jewry and protecting the State of Israel. Woocher correctly points out that it is too easy now to disparage an approach that built upon, and built, the sense of responsibility to other Jews. But he reminds us very frankly of the shortcomings of a model that, though offered as a substitute for religion, could not meet people's deep-seated need for meaning and spiritual fulfillment. The secular approach, built upon community politics and social action, offered but meager play for what Rabbi David Dalin in his introduction calls "religious observance, prayer, and serious theological reflection," and for serious Jewish learning. In the end it was judged to be inadequate.

Yet there are dangers on the other side of the spiritual/secular divide as well, as Charles Liebman points out in his powerful opening essay. Liebman describes the advent of a "personal and privatized" Judaism

that, to begin with, undercut the sense of “peoplehood, community, and solidarity” that Jewish ethnicity—and the “civil Judaism” that accompanied it—had produced. Moreover, he warns of a “personalist life-style” masquerading as religion, where “episodic and exceptional experiences” substitute for “a fixed position that encourages disciplined regularity or patterned coherence.” When the self rather than obligations transcending the self becomes central to religious experience, Liebman says, and when the goal becomes personal “authenticity” rather than fidelity to traditions and duties, Judaism loses much of its meaning. Liebman thus takes a skeptical view of all the talk about “spirituality” in American culture and religion today, arguing that the concept is marginal in Judaism. “Spirituality is not the answer to the Jewish problem,” he says. Jews are to concern themselves not with spirituality per se but with *kedushah*, holiness.

So: was too little spirituality the problem, or is too much the problem? An old Jewish story tells of some men who asked their rebbe to settle a dispute. After the first man explained his position, the rebbe said, “You know, you’re right.” Then the second man explained his contrary view, and the rebbe said, “I think you’re right.” When a third man asked, “Rebbe, how can the first man be right and the second also be right?” the rebbe replied, “And you’re right, too.”

No doubt the rebbe was right: there was truth in both versions of reality. Certainly there is truth, and illumination, in what both Woocher and Liebman have to tell us about how Jews think and act in late twentieth-century America. And to their wisdom is added that of ten other contributors with varying perspectives. Many of the arguments made here have truly begun to sink in. In mid-1998 I spoke to a secular Jewish organization in what was billed as a debate. When I began by arguing that Judaism must be put back at the center of American Jewish life, in place of the “civil” elements such as fighting anti-Semitism or pushing political agendas, my “opponent” (chief executive of a large federation) replied, “Everyone knows that.” Ten years ago, everyone did not. And of course what everyone today does not know is how to get from here to there. Barry Shrage’s comments about community life and organization, which reflect his own achievements and experiments in Boston, surely suggest a model for other communities.

Given the comments in this book about the state of synagogue life and the educational level and religious commitment of so many American Jews, is a revival of Jewish religious life likely? Is the apparent re-

vival in some parts of the community cause for celebration, or is it, as Charles Liebman suggests, a product of American culture more than a return to Judaism? Can the “coalescence” that Sylvia Fishman urges, in a “constant dialogue with historical Judaism,” be achieved?

The discussion here is rich. On behalf of the Ethics and Public Policy Center I would like to thank the participants whose contributions appear in this publication—Sylvia Barack Fishman of Brandeis University; Neil Gillman of the Jewish Theological Seminary; Rabbi Peter Knobel of Beth Emet The Free Synagogue of Evanston, IL; Rabbi Clifford Librach of Temple Sinai, Sharon, MA; Charles Liebman of Bar-Ilan University; Rabbi Adam Mintz of Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York; Dennis Prager, writer of the newsletter *The Prager Perspective*; Robert M. Seltzer of Hunter College; Barry Shrage, president of Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston; David Singer of the American Jewish Committee; Jack Wertheimer, provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary; and Jonathan Woocher of the Jewish Education Service of North America. We are grateful as well for the time and shared wisdom of the other conference participants; a complete listing appears on page 61.

Jews are not, according to our calendar, nearing a new millennium; it is now the late 5700s. Still, it is a transitional time. We face very serious choices about how the community’s energies and resources are to be focused in the coming years, and each of us faces personal decisions about the meaning of our Judaism in America today. The many ideas that follow in these pages can help us consider these matters wisely.

Introduction

DAVID G. DALIN

Writing in 1964, Jacob R. Marcus, the dean of American Jewish historians, viewed the future of the American Jewish community with boundless optimism. “Barring a ‘historical accident,’” he predicted, “the birth of ‘another Golden Age in Jewish life’” was “inevitable” on American soil.¹ While some Jews have shared Marcus’s optimism, over the years many have found it less and less applicable to the contemporary situation of American Jewry.

For close to a decade, in the aftermath of the much analyzed National Jewish Population Survey produced in 1990 by the Council of Jewish Federations, most Jewish communal leaders and intellectuals have been growing increasingly pessimistic about the future of Jewish life in America. Several recent studies have persuasively made the case that we should no longer take its survival for granted. As Elliott Abrams has so aptly put it, the results of the 1990 survey “draw the portrait of a community in decline, facing in fact a demographic disaster.”² Inter-marriage has reached an unprecedented 52 per cent nationwide, and only 28 per cent of the children of intermarried couples are being raised as Jews. Jewish fertility rates are very low. Once 3.7 per cent of the U.S. population, Jews have declined to about 2 per cent, and demographers predict a further drop of between one and two million in the next two generations. Synagogue affiliation and attendance are on the decline: only 8 per cent of Conservative Jews and 2.5 per cent of Reform Jews attend synagogue once a month or more. To more and more such Jews, Sabbath observance, Jewish dietary laws, and daily prayer are no longer matters of religious obligation, and concern for Israel and for Jewish survival after the Holocaust has replaced traditional religious belief and

observance as the critical component of their Jewish identity and faith. Without a spiritual revival and a profound reorientation of our communal life, Arthur Hertzberg has warned, “American Jewish history will soon end, and become part of American memory as a whole.”³

This warning and the pessimistic assumptions upon which it is based are reflected in Dennis Prager’s comments in this volume about the “absence of dynamic, content-filled, serious Judaism” in contemporary Jewish life. “American Jewish life may well be in a state of irreversible decline,” Prager laments; he says he can see no reason for optimism. Professor Neil Gillman, on the other hand, rejects Prager’s pessimism as “completely wrong.” Gillman argues, as do other thoughtful observers, that “American Jewry has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades,” a religious and spiritual revival that can and presumably will reverse the process of decline.

Central to this debate over the future of Jewish life in America has been the issue of the civil religion—so well described by Jonathan Woocher in his 1986 book *Sacred Survival*.⁴ For more than a generation, since the Six-Day War of 1967, the civil religion was considered by many Jews to be an authentic version of Judaism. Indeed, it was the type of Judaism adhered to by many if not most Jewish communal leaders, especially those active in the work of the United Jewish Appeal and the Jewish federations throughout the country. Few of these communal leaders were religious in a traditional sense; their involvement in fund-raising and other federation activities had become their substitute religion. This civil Judaism, what Woocher called “the constellation of beliefs and practices, myths and rituals which animates the organized American Jewish community today,” served as the “institutional ideology” of these leaders, sacralizing their work by infusing it with transcendent meaning. The security and survival of Israel was a central tenet, and charitable fund-raising, combating anti-Semitism, and raising political and financial support for Israel were its central activities.

But “sacred survival” is no longer the central tenet of American Jewish communal life. As Barry Shrage, one of the contributors to this volume, has noted elsewhere, the survival paradigm is now crumbling, in part because “sacred survival was never an adequate answer to the very personal question of ‘Why be Jewish?’ and fund-raising . . . was never a purpose that could sustain us as a people.”⁵ Additionally, as Jonathan Woocher himself notes in this volume, there were serious limitations to the civil religion that he described in *Sacred Survival*: it was a religion

without theology or “God-talk,” conspicuously silent on the nature of God and the role of God in Jewish history. As a form of religious faith, he says, it seems “theologically shallow and spiritually circumscribed,” especially for the increasing number of younger Jews in search of intensive Jewish learning and religious expression. Judaism for these younger Jews is a matter of religious observance, prayer, and serious theological reflection, rather than communal politics and social action. The civil Judaism once espoused by Woocher and many others to ensure Jewish religious continuity has failed to do so.

If the challenges to Jewish continuity are to be overcome, the American Jewish community must be revitalized, and a central feature of this revitalization is a new model of federation-synagogue relations. From the 1960s through the 1980s, federation executives and lay leaders constructed a “wall of separation” between federation and synagogue as high and inviolable as the “wall” separating church and state. This wall has been broken down. As Woocher points out in his essay, “Jewish continuity initiatives of the 1990s have been marked by far greater attention to Jewish religious and educational life,” and “federations have taken on explicit responsibilities to support synagogues” as never before. Federations throughout the country have begun to encourage and finance innovative synagogue programs that would have previously been considered outside their purview. In several cities, as the *American Jewish Year Book* has reported, federations and synagogues “began cooperative programs to bind young Jews to the community.”⁶ In San Diego, for example, the federation paid the salary of a community youth-activities coordinator “whose job description included supervising synagogue youth groups.” In Boston, the federation has helped synagogues increase their programming for young families “at key periods when they were likely to look to a synagogue for support, such as the birth of a child or bar/bat mitzvah training.”⁷

Several commentators in this volume agree on the need for new partnerships between synagogues and federations. Barry Shrage, a religiously observant Jew who is one of the most respected and innovative federation executives in the country, argues that “federations need to be greatly supportive of synagogues in their efforts to become communities of Torah, communities of learning.” Federations can do this, he believes, by providing far greater funding for synagogue-centered adult Jewish learning. This belief is shared by innovative congregational rabbis such as Peter Knobel, who says here that “the synagogue has to be

the vehicle for serious adult Jewish education.” He would certainly second Shrage’s argument that federations and synagogues should work together to establish universal adult Jewish literacy as a communal norm of the highest priority. As Shrage has pointed out elsewhere, “the continuity of Jewish life requires knowledgeable adults . . . as comfortable with Jewish texts and knowledge as they are with those of the broader world within which they live. . . . We must, in essence, create a Jewish world that places the same value on understanding the basic works of Maimonides as on understanding the basic works of Shakespeare.”⁸ So, too, Sylvia Barack Fishman emphasizes in her comments in this volume that synagogue involvement and widespread adult Jewish literacy—“an ongoing involvement with Jewish religious texts” and, in particular, bringing “Jewish texts into the lives of Jewish women”—must be a communal priority if the goal of religious continuity is to be achieved.

Civil Judaism, as Woocher described it in 1986, legitimated “a way of being Jewish and a program of Jewish activity within which the role of the synagogue and the rabbinate—the life of study, prayer and ritual observance—is no longer primary.” Most federation leaders, if they belonged to a synagogue at all, were members in name only. This is no longer the case. Although synagogue membership and influence have declined in recent decades while Jewish community federations and community centers have grown significantly, the synagogue continues to be the preeminent institution in American Jewish life. Today there is a growing recognition of its centrality, and of the importance of providing greater communal support for synagogue-based religious programs.

The revitalization of American Jewish life envisioned by the contributors to this volume will require changes in the internal structure of synagogues, a structure that, as Jack Wertheimer says, “is intertwined with questions of financing.” Hebrew schools and programs of religious education for adults entail built-in deficits for synagogues. Most congregations find it difficult to raise the funds to support such activities—as Paul Wilkes’s account of a New England synagogue in *And They Shall Be My People* poignantly illustrates—and are tempted to place an unrealistic burden on the rabbi, who generally has far less expertise in fund-raising than the local federation executive. Some congregational rabbis, such as Elliot Gertel of Chicago, have argued that to meet such deficits, synagogues should press federations to assist them “by encouraging donors to endow synagogue programs” and by lending synagogues “their prestige and fund-raising skills.”⁹

The issue of synagogue financing raises other interesting policy questions not addressed in this volume. For example, the rising cost of synagogue dues and related expenses places membership beyond the means of many, especially those middle-class parents already paying for day-school education for their children. The National Jewish Population Survey of 1990 reported that synagogue affiliation had dropped from 46 to 38 per cent since 1970, a drop that is at least partially attributable to the escalating costs of membership. It is no longer unusual for the combined costs of family membership, religious school fees, High Holy Day tickets, and mandatory building-fund contributions to total between \$1,200 and \$2,000 a year. Many young, middle-class Jewish families are unable, or in any event unwilling, to pay this much. Federation leaders need to consider new ways of making synagogue membership and involvement affordable to all, not just the well-to-do.

The obvious threat to Jewish continuity apparent in the disheartening results of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey has led many Jewish scholars and communal leaders, including several of the contributors to this volume, to question the capacity of the community for survival. And yet, as Jonathan D. Sarna has recently noted, in times of communal challenge and crisis, the most effective way to ensure Jewish continuity in America has often been to predict that the American Jewish community will not survive.¹⁰ If our fears lead federations and synagogues to work together to implement innovative strategies to promote adult Jewish literacy, to make synagogue membership, day-school education, and the other costly variables that foster Jewish religious identity more accessible to all income groups, and to place religious activities at the center of Jewish communal life, then the profoundly unsettling feelings of communal crisis shared by so many American Jews can become an opportunity for the Jewish community to emerge stronger than ever as we enter the twenty-first century.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Jonathan D. Sarna, "Dreaming the Future of the American Jewish Community," in *At the Crossroads: Shaping Our Jewish Future* (Boston: Combined Jewish Philanthropies and Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies, 1995), 81.

2. Elliott Abrams. *Faith or Fear: How Jews Can Survive in a Christian America* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 1.

3. Quoted in Sarna, "Dreaming the Future," 81.

4. Jonathan S. Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986).

5. Barry Shrage, "Building a Community of Torah and Tzedek: A New Paradigm for the Jewish Community of the 21st Century," in *At the Crossroads*, 90-91.

6. David Singer and Ruth Zeldin, eds., *American Jewish Year Book, 1995* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1995), 162.

7. *Ibid.*, 163.

8. Shrage, "Building a Community," 92.

9. Elliot Gertel, "The Synagogue Revitalized: Challenges and Prescriptions," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Summer 1997, 296.

10. Jonathan D. Sarna. "Postscript: Structural Challenges to Jewish Continuity," in David M. Gordis and Dorit P. Gary, eds., *American Jewry: Portrait and Prognosis* (Boston: Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies, 1997), 404.

CHAPTER ONE

Post-War American Jewry:
From Ethnic to
Privatized Judaism

Charles S. Liebman

Religions in America, Catholicism less so, Protestantism and Judaism more so, are what sociologist Peter Berger has termed marketplace or consumer-oriented religions. Compared to churches and synagogues in Europe or Israel, religious congregations in the United States are far more responsive to the religious market. They tend to accept and accommodate prevailing cultural norms rather than rejecting and seeking to restructure those norms. They take it for granted that their function is to provide a service of some kind to their members and to attract as many new members as they can by satisfying them more than does some neighboring institution.

Marketplace religion is, in the first place, the result of the structure of religious denominations in the United States. The local church or synagogue is fairly autonomous in terms of choosing its clerical leader, formulating its policies, governing its finances, even in determining what is or is not religiously legitimate. It is entirely dependent upon its own

Charles S. Liebman is the Yehuda Avner Professor of Politics and Religion at Bar-Ilan University in Israel. His forthcoming book *Choosing Survival: Strategies for a Jewish Future* will be published by Oxford University Press.

resources in raising money and attracting members. As a consequence it does not aggressively declare “Here I stand” but asks instead, “Where would you like me to stand?” It tends to be far more sensitive to its need for survival and growth than to any vision of what it should be like or how its members and potential members should behave. This is less true of some denominations, more true of others, but characteristic of all of them, including American Orthodoxy in comparison to Israeli Orthodoxy.

Structural and economic factors may explain the presence of a marketplace mentality within American religious denominations, but we should also recall that the normative implications of the religious marketplace have been internalized. Responding to the religious consumer—indeed, judging one’s success by the satisfaction of that consumer—has become desirable quite independently of the fact that it is probably necessary for survival. This is attributable in part to our democratic ethos and our peculiar notion of pluralism, the notion that it means the right of every individual to interpret religion in any manner he sees fit and the obligation of the religious establishment to accept each person’s interpretation as equally valid with all others. We assume unthinkingly that it is legitimate for a synagogue to respond to the needs of its members and to want to attract more members. More and more synagogues are conducting self-surveys that ask members what they want their synagogue to be doing. Nobody seems to find this remarkable. I am not saying it is bad; I am only calling attention to the mindset that produces this kind of survey.

Assessing the Marketplace Mentality

An analogy might help us reflect on this marketplace mentality that we all take for granted. No activity is more marketplace-oriented than a political campaign in a democratic society. In the 1988 Israeli elections, Degel Hatorah—the “Torah party,” led by Rav Schach—ran an active campaign for the Knesset. At a Degel rally I attended, the main speaker began by saying, “You may well ask why I bother to tell you why you should vote for Degel. After all, Rav Schach has told us all that we are obliged to vote for this party. So is it not belittling our respect for Rav Schach [which everyone in the audience understood to mean belittling one’s respect for Torah] even to offer you reasons for voting for Degel?” Nevertheless, the speaker did offer reasons why his listeners should

vote for Degel rather than for Shas or Agudah, the only alternatives that a proper Israeli Jew would consider. My point is not the evidence of marketplace politics penetrating the most reactionary of religious circles; it is that at least in some circles, marketplace orientations are not taken for granted, even in a political campaign.

To return to our American case, were we to free ourselves of all presuppositions, how would we assess the desirability of the marketplace mentality, the assumption that the synagogue must accommodate itself to the wishes of its constituents? Most of us would say, I think, that regardless of our perspective, whether it is that of the rabbi, the lay member, the lay leader, the theologian, or some disinterested observer, this condition has both advantages and disadvantages.

All of us have already internalized the advantages of the marketplace mentality. What we need to consider is its disadvantages. If we take Judaism seriously, it has to have some essence, and this has to mean that not everything that contributes to synagogue growth and member satisfaction is necessarily good. True, we cannot allow our own ideology and commitment to excuse our organizational failures, but we must also admit the likelihood that remaining faithful to what we believe will limit our capacity to attract large numbers of American Jews. Our function may be—and this has been my message to Conservative Judaism in Israel—to remain faithful to our ideals and wait for new social conditions and a new cultural environment. In many respects, this is precisely what Orthodoxy has done in the United States, and, notwithstanding contrary figures amassed by the National Jewish Population Survey, the post-war history of American Orthodoxy is one of dramatic success.

Some twenty years ago I engaged in one of those heart-to-heart talks that leave lasting impressions. It was a late-night conversation at a conference center outside New York City with a former rabbi of mine, a Conservative rabbi who had been dearly loved in the two major American congregations he had served. He had retired from the pulpit, and I asked him his recipe for success. He answered, “When I came to my last congregation [a major Conservative congregation in a major city], I found one *balabos* who put on *tefillin* daily. When I left after fifteen years I had nine such *balebatim*. Is that success? You tell me.” This extraordinary man had established his own set of goals, goals that stemmed from what he knew Judaism meant and not what others thought it meant. He had surely been far less successful than he had hoped he would be. But

I think that what his people recognized was his authenticity. Even if they did not fulfill his hopes for them, I suspect that they arrived at a greater appreciation of what Judaism means, or at least of what it meant to someone they cherished.

THE DECLINE OF ETHNICITY

The ethnic nature of American Judaism has been described in detail by Marshall Sklare.¹ Conservative Judaism, the largest Jewish denomination from the 1940s until recently, grew as it did mainly because of its ability to cloak the essentially ethnic identity and commitments of its members in a religious aura that accommodated itself to American religious expectations. This ethnic identity and commitment that spoke to first-, second-, and even third-generation American Jews was reinforced by the existence of Jewish neighborhoods. Such neighborhoods rendered the ethnic patterns of life natural.

In 1970 the *American Jewish Year Book* published my study of the Reconstructionist movement, *Reconstruction in American Jewish Life*. In my role as observer I attended a meeting for new and potential members of the movement's Society for the Advancement of Judaism, conducted by its then controversial rabbi Allan Miller. I recall his describing the principles of Reconstructionism to his audience and then explaining that atheists could feel comfortable in the SAJ. I wondered about that because, having been raised in a major Conservative synagogue in Brooklyn in the heyday of Conservative synagogue expansion, I found it odd that the issue of belief in God was raised at all. I imagine that in the synagogue settings of the 1940s, a Reform rabbi might have suggested that atheists would be uncomfortable in his synagogue, but no Conservative rabbi would have done so. If the Jew was a serious atheist he might not attend sabbath services, in which case he wouldn't be eligible for election to the synagogue presidency, since that office required one to sit on the *bimah* each shabbat.

I attributed Miller's peculiar suggestion to his British and very Orthodox background. Among the American Orthodox, however, the whole point of Judaism was that you performed the prescribed practices regardless of what you believed. I recall a prominent rabbi in Agudath Israel telling me that for a number of years he was unable to pray. Of course he didn't mean, God forbid, that he stopped putting on *tefillin* or going through the prayer service. This was what a proper Jew did.

A Privatized Religion

An alternative expression of the ethno-religious nature of Judaism is my friend Steve Cohen's explanation of his religious observance. "Religion," he says "is the way I celebrate my Jewish ethnicity." But most of the Steve Cohens have disappeared from American Jewish life. It is no coincidence that Steve Cohen chose to emigrate to Israel, for American Jews no longer cherish their ethnic ties. Developments in the last two decades are characterized by the emergence of personal and privatized Judaism at the expense of ethnic Judaism. The rhetoric of ethnicity concentrates on themes such as peoplehood, community, and solidarity. Its message centers on slogans such as "We Are One" and "Keep the Promise." Its surpassing moments are fund-raising Super Sundays, collective mobilizations for Israel, and well-orchestrated political campaigns for or against some specific public policy.

Ethnic Judaism, however, has given way to a form of privatized religion. This religion speaks in softer terms of individual meaning, journeys of discovery, spirituality, and the search for fulfillment. Its emphases are interpersonal rather than collective. It values authenticity and sincerity over achievement or efficiency. Typically it is non-judgmental, consoling, intuitive, and non-obligating.

There are distinct signs that privatized Jewishness is having a substantial impact, especially on younger Jews. Contributions to the federations of Jewish philanthropy—which are a major form of public Jewish expression—are stagnating if not actually declining. Mobilization for political causes of all kinds is more and more difficult to justify and sustain. Jewish organizations are increasingly composed of and supported by an aging membership. Organizational work, once a common Jewish avocation, is now seen by many as excessively impersonal, power-centered, and perfunctory. Perhaps most significant of all is the decision of United Jewish Appeal to abandon its classic slogan, "We Are One," which epitomizes the public-ethnic dimension of Judaism, for a personalist, privatized one: "For Ourselves, for Our Children, for Israel."

In place of the declining public face of Jewishness, a burgeoning private sphere offers a new understanding of the Jewish tradition. Affluence and security are implicit in all its pronouncements. It is the voice of a distinctively American cohort whose initial inspiration can be traced back to the counterculture of the 1960s. Since then, while it has lost many of its rebellious qualities, it still presents a picture of creative diversity and moral enthusiasm. Variety dominates. Weekend retreats, in

which Jewishness is celebrated communally through prayer, learning, and ceremony, are a staple. It might be said that they are an attempt to synthesize the religious fervor and intimacy of a Hasidic *shtiebl* with the intellectual openness and experimental freshness of the most progressive elements in the Jewish world. Some are organized by individuals with a specific religious agenda; others are created almost bureaucratically by synagogues seeking to introduce a degree of informal interaction into the facelessness of a large congregation.

An elaborate folder advertises a retreat called “The Living Waters Weekend.” The weekend is directed by Rabbis Philip and Shoni Labowitz, co-rabbis of Temple Adath Or in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, who advertise themselves as “creators of healing rituals in Jewish Renewal.” Here is the Saturday program:

Optional Sunrise Walk and Meditation. Musical Worship Service at the Ocean. Guided Conscious Eating at Breakfast. Water Exercises for Body Toning. Yoga with Kabbalah. Relaxation Time. Luncheon Recalling Our Heroes. Outdoor Games, Informal Talk, Time for Massage. Sacred Gathering for Men and Women. Poetry Reading and Pre-dinner Music. Sunset Barbecue with Folk Dancing. Havdalah Ritual on the Beach. Kabbalistic Meditation.

And for Sunday:

Sunrise Co-ed Mikvah Ritual in the Ocean. Breakfast Celebration with new Affirmation. Sacred Sharing and Closing Ceremony.

Although this program is extreme, it is hardly unique.

The Personalist Life-style

The personalist “life-style” is indeed a “style,” that is, a form of life given to sharp fluctuations and not a stable, continuous structure. It tends to be made up of episodic and exceptional experiences that light up the workaday world rather than growing out of a fixed position that encourages disciplined regularity or patterned coherence. Traditional Judaism sanctified the mundane, the everyday, the banal. Personalism detaches individuals from the larger social collectives of which they are a part, releases them from the binding duties these collectives impose, and leads them toward self-directed lives that pursue rare moments of meaning and growth.

This emphasis on the self and its realization—oddly interpreted as a “religious” quest—rather than on obligations transcending the individual person entails a turning away from commonplace commitments that lack the cachet of personal “authenticity” or inner growth. Responsibilities toward abstract collectivities such as the Jewish people, therefore, decline in significance. From the personalist perspective, true love, the ultimate personal experience, far outweighs collective experience. Indeed, to the degree that love needs to overcome obstacles (ethnic or religious) in order to be realized, it is considered the more authentic and marvelous. Understood in terms of personal meaning, Jewishness becomes—even for Jews—an acquired taste, a take-it-or-leave-it affair. Moreover, experience-based religiosity has no intrinsic justification for exclusion or boundaries; it necessarily includes all who are partner to the inspirational moment.

A significant number of respondents who identified themselves as Jewish in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey denied such an identity when resurveyed in 1993. In this, the Jews are not exceptional. Research on other ethnic groups, especially those with heavy rates of intermarriage, demonstrates that group identity in the United States is fluid and situational. Ethnic identity may peak and plummet depending on the needs of the moment, the social context, even according to the rhythms of the calendar and the holiday seasons.

One could, as I have suggested, be strongly ethnic without being religious. This was characteristic of the second generation of American Jews. However, ethnicity, in addition to its intrinsic importance in Judaism, rendered religion credible. To borrow a formulation of Durkheim, ethnic Judaism posed an ineffable and transcendent presence, that of the collective Jewish people, that imposed itself on the lives of individuals. In this manner it made the core notion of the religion, the notion of a transcendent God, meaningful and real. The traditionally religious Jew is, by definition, an ethnic Jew as well. While one need not be religious in order to be an ethnic Jew, the move from strong ethnic to strong religious commitments is a natural one. Moving from the privatized religion I have just described to ethnicity is less natural and less likely. The more likely move is from privatized Judaism to Christianity or some form of New Age religion, seen as forms of spirituality that uplift the individual and enhance self-realization and personal growth.

SPIRITUALITY VERSUS HOLINESS

It is no surprise that many American Jews are proponents of what they call greater spirituality. This is characteristic of what Ronald Inglehart has termed the “postmaterialist” generation. In his study *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*, based on survey data from twenty-five industrial societies, Inglehart argues that economic, technological, and sociopolitical changes have transformed the cultures of these societies in profoundly important ways.² Following Maslow’s theory of “higher” and “lower” needs, Inglehart maintains that once individuals have satisfied their basic material needs and guaranteed their physical safety, they will look to the satisfaction of more remote needs in the spiritual, aesthetic, and interpersonal realms. They will think in terms of self-fulfillment and personal autonomy rather than identifying themselves with their families, localities, ethnic groups, or even nations. Those of an earlier generation were socialized in a period where their immediate material and physical needs were unmet, and they therefore forged societies structured to meet these needs. But those who have come of age in the last few decades are searching for the satisfaction of the more remote needs.

There is also a shift from what Inglehart terms central authority to individual autonomy and from what I would call collective to individual concerns. Hillel Halkin put the matter in terms closer to our concerns:

When it comes to Jewish spirituality, one can start with Midrash or Kabbalah, but before long one is back to feminism and gay rights. There is a kind of syllogism at work here: the spiritual is the timeless; the timeless is always contemporary; hence, the contemporary is the spiritual.³

Those who have followed the trajectory of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi will immediately sense the accuracy of Halkin’s description.

Spirituality is not the *answer* to the Jewish problem. As understood by Inglehart and Halkin, spirituality *is* the problem. There is a term in the tradition for spirituality, *ruchnius*—especially popular in certain Hasidic circles. But the more common virtue in the tradition is not *ruchnius* but *kedushah*, holiness. We are commanded to be a “holy,” not a “spiritual,” people, and the *musar* literature is concerned with holiness, not spirituality. Holiness is achieved in a *minyán*, as part of a public observance. Spirituality points to individuality, transcendence,

other-worldliness, while holiness points to the virtuous life. *Kedushah* evokes an outside source to which we submit; spirituality entails a process of self-realization.

Three Modern Tendencies

The elevation of spirituality rather than holiness among American Jews, synagogue-goers in particular, explains many recent tendencies, of which I would single out three: informality, egalitarianism, and ethicism.

Informality is a style, but it is also a mode of consciousness. It includes the manner in which Jews enter the synagogue, seat themselves, approach the Torah and the ark, and even address the rabbi. Its most obvious reflection is in the casual way in which increasing numbers of Jews dress for synagogue services. This constitutes, I believe, a statement about the nature of the service—a statement I interpret to mean that the Jew has come to the synagogue not to stand before God the King but to engage in a leisure-time activity that includes chatting with God.

This is reinforced by another observation of mine. It seems to me that more and more Jews in Conservative synagogues enfold themselves in a *tallit* when they first put it on. The reinstitution of this authentic Jewish custom in Conservative synagogues is to be applauded, but it stands in sharp contrast to the indifference that the same Jews show to the *halakhic* injunction of standing at attention during the recitation of the *Kedushah*. Enfolding oneself—and even better, one's child as well—in the *tallit* stresses the spiritual, man within himself, perhaps man and God. But indifference to the recitation of the *Kedushah* signals rejection of the notion that there is an authority before whom one is enjoined to stand at attention.

The second tendency associated with spirituality among modern American Jews is egalitarianism. The term seems to refer to more than the equality of the sexes; it suggests, really, the interchangeability of the sexes. Not only are differences between men and women to be ignored for purposes of observing or celebrating the folkways of Judaism, but differences between young and old, married and unmarried, knowledgeable and ignorant, pious and impious, observant and non-observant are also ignored. All these are categories to which the Jewish tradition ascribes significance but which modern American Jews ignore. They pretend that these distinctions are of no significance to them. All that

counts, so they claim, is the individual, or at most the individual and God (i.e., the individual and his or her own benign self). To rephrase what I mean, differences between, say, an ignoramus and a learned Jew are important only if we think of the two as embedded in some community of people. Spirituality suggests that all that counts is the relationship between the individual and God. The fact that God has come to mean a reification of selected attributes of the individual himself only sharpens the tragedy.

This relates to the third tendency, ethicism, which is the opposite of ritualism. In this perspective, it matters not whether the folkways of Judaism are observed in the proper manner: what counts is the proper intention. It doesn't matter if the individual who is called upon to lead the congregation in prayer, or deliver a homily, or read from the Torah knows how to do it properly. All that counts is that the person, male or female, young or old, married or unmarried—indeed, at its most extreme, Jew or Gentile—wants to share the spiritual experience.

Granted, we can find echoes of each of these three tendencies associated with spirituality in traditional texts. The Israeli Talmudic scholar and poet Admiel Kosman illustrates this in his analysis of the Talmudic story of Mar Ookva. Although Ookva spends each morning in the Bet Midrash engaged in study, and in addition donates money each day to a poor man, taking extraordinary care lest the poor man be able to identify his benefactor, in accordance with the letter of the law, God judges him less worthy than his wife, who is not a learned person, who spends her day at home, and who gives charity to the poor from her own kitchen so that the poor are aware of their benefactor. As Kosman points out, God is judging the intention of the actor rather than adherence to the letter of the law.⁴

I would argue that within a system of order and ritual, the anarchy that is introduced by ethicism and egalitarianism provides an important balance. Israeli Orthodoxy, for example, is in desperate need of such balance. But in the absence of a system of order and ritual, these three aspects of spirituality—individually, but especially when they are combined—undermine central pillars of the Jewish religion, most especially the notion of an awesome and authoritative God whom Jews are obliged to obey. They substitute a Judaism focused upon the legitimation of self and the kinds of lives American Jews have chosen to lead. In this respect, they are a recipe for disaster. It is holiness, not spirituality, that I

would urge upon synagogues, though I suspect this is not what most American Jews are seeking.

NOTES

1. Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America and Center for Jewish Studies, 1985).
2. Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1989.
3. Hillel Halkin, "After Zionism," *Commentary* 103 (June 1997), 28.
4. Admiel Kosman, "A Talmudic Detective Story," *Ha'Aretz*, August 1, 1997.

CHAPTER TWO

Spirituality and the Civil Religion

1. Jonathan Woocher

At the heart of my own concern for the Jewish future in America is my belief that enduring and transmissible forms of Jewish self-definition and self-expression must today encompass what I would call a dimension of ultimacy. That is to say, they have to provide an answer or answers to the questions, why does this identity matter, and how does it give shape and direction to my life?

The alternative to a religious formulation of Jewish identity in practice—if not in principle—is not likely today to be a serious and consequential *secular* Jewish identity but rather the familiar residual ethno-cultural identity, one in which whatever Jewish beliefs and behaviors are present rarely are life-shaping or community-defined. I say this knowing full well that a substantial majority of American Jews are highly secularized, even if they are not secularists. This presents an enormous challenge to Jewish education, institutions, and religious lead-

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ership. The challenge is to formulate strategies for helping these secularized Jews to discover links to transcendence in their own lives and to develop the sense of committedness—or from a Jewish standpoint, commandedness—that I take to be a hallmark of religiosity. This is largely what the Jewish continuity endeavor ought to be about. Now, I acknowledge that my own definition of religion is probably broader than the conventional one. Beliefs and behaviors I would label religious might be deemed merely cultural or ethnic by others. However, I don't think we should spend a great amount of time on semantics, though I will note that this is probably what led many to disagree with the contention in my book *Sacred Survival* that Jewish civil religion is in fact religion and not simply a species of Jewish secularism.

I am not saying that social and cultural non-religious expressions of Jewishness do not merit our support. At the very least, these non-religious expressions may inform, enrich, and inspire other forms of Jewish self-expression that are explicitly religious. The recent revival in Jewish arts and culture, for example, is very important for this reason. And the people who are making great contributions in this area may prove me wrong by providing engaging and enduring alternative models of vibrant Jewish identity and community in twenty-first-century America, models that are not religious. I do not think that will happen, but I do think we are wise to hedge our bets—a lesson I learned from Jonathan Sarna and some of his writings about American Jewish history.

What Kind of Religiosity?

With this brief summary of where I stand on the big issue—that of secularism, spirituality, and religiosity—I want to turn to a different question: What kind of religiosity will and should mark American Judaism in the twenty-first century? Will it be a privatized spirituality, one that focuses on personal meaning and fulfillment, in line with much of American religious life today? Or will it be a religiosity that places community at the core of its vision of a redeemed world?

I know I have drawn the dichotomy too sharply. I know that there are many gradations and nuances of religious search and affirmation, and that a healthy American Judaism will embrace many varieties of spirituality, from neo-mystical to humanist, from highly personalized and idiosyncratic to vigorously ethno-national and political. Nevertheless, what has happened in Jewish and American religious life in the past decade or so can help us appreciate both the serious limitations of

the Jewish civil religion I described in *Sacred Survival* and its positive significance, precisely as a form of Jewish religious commitment, not as a quasi-secular substitute for religion.

The limitations of civil Judaism, which is my quick way of saying Jewish civil religion, have become obvious. Tied as it is to historical events on the world stage and to an institutional system that focuses on the collective public tasks of the Jewish people, civil Judaism inevitably loses some of its meaning-giving power as these events and tasks become less urgent, less clear in their importance. Many factors have helped to undermine civil Judaism over the past decade, from developments in Israel and the Middle East, to a disenchantment with politics in America, to the maturation of a new generation of Jews who are less ethnic, inclined to be suspicious of institutions, unfearful about their Jewishness, and, perhaps, more open to spiritual language and experiences. We are clearly not the community we were in the early 1980s, when I wrote about civil religion. Although it has not vanished, the Jewish civil religion is certainly no longer the dynamic force it was a decade and a half after the Six-Day War.

Good News and Bad News

But what does this mean? Is it good or bad for the Jews? My answer is that it means several things, and it is both good and bad.

First, the diminishing power of civil Judaism means that some Jews are asking more of their Jewishness than civil religion alone can provide. They want to practice a Judaism that speaks to more of their lives, that works in their homes, not just in the public square. They are also ready to encounter Judaism in its language more deeply and authentically, to study Jewish texts and perform Jewish rituals. This is good. For some portion of this number, civil Judaism clearly leads to a greater appreciation of how Judaism can add richness and meaning to their lives day by day, week by week.

Second, though, the diminishing power of civil Judaism also reflects the privatization of religion in America that scholars have documented. Civil religion may be theologically shallow and spiritually circumscribed, but it is also resolutely communal in its ethos. I do not believe that this communal ethos is merely the product of a particular set of historical events or reflective of a stage in the evolution of American Jewish life that we can simply set behind us. The civil Jewish message of solidarity and mutual responsibility, its insistence that we have obligations to one

another, to the Jewish community, and to society as a whole—this expresses a Jewish religious conviction that is as authentic as the commandment to observe shabbat. Any muting of this message is not to be welcomed. What I fear unites today's indifferent Jews with many who are seeking (or claim to have found) a renewed Jewish spiritual commitment is precisely the assumption that religion is a “personal thing,” highly individualized and valuable only to the extent that it contributes to one's sense of personal growth and fulfillment. Judaism does this, to be sure, but that is not the basis of its claim on our lives. A Judaism that is indifferent to civil Judaism's beliefs, values, and rituals seems to me to be no more authentic than one that is attached to these alone.

Of course, civil Judaism is hardly alone in making the claim that Judaism is about community and mutual responsibility as much as it is about God-talk and prayer. That's just the point. Jewish spirituality is both personal and collective, inward and outward, meditative and activist. It engages in creative searching while framed by traditional forms. At least that is how I understand it. So I would conclude that all “authentic” versions of Judaism have this element of a holistic spirituality, though which particular elements of it are emphasized varies.

How the root terms of Judaism's incredibly rich vocabulary are interpreted will, of course, differ. The key tenets of Jewish civil religion—concern for Jewish survival, the belief in collective action on the behalf of both Jewish interests and Jewish values, a devotion to Israel as a unique expression of Judaism's understanding of the meaning of and route toward redemption, and an acceptance of the community's right to make certain demands on us—do not lie outside the circumference of Judaism's core religious affirmations. They are certainly not the totality of Judaism, nor are they owned exclusively or uniquely by the civil religion. But to the extent that civil Judaism vigorously promoted these values, to the extent that it convinced Jews who otherwise found little to connect with in traditional Judaism to make these values part of their personal belief and action systems, the civil religion performed a valuable, even vital service to Judaism as a whole, and not just to the institutions—most notably, of course, the federation system that championed the civil religion.

Has Civil Judaism Finished Its Task?

The question then becomes whether this service is now honorably completed. Have the beliefs, values, and behaviors that civil Judaism

promoted and legitimated either (a) become sufficiently unimportant in American Judaism's current renewal or (b) been sufficiently taken up in the overall religious revitalization now being attempted that we can give Jewish civil religion a decent burial? I have already indicated that I resist the first claim. The content of Jewish civil religion, far from being incompatible with or a rival to authentic Judaism, is in fact central to it. For this reason, any ostensible revitalization of Judaism in America that deprecated these values would trouble me greatly.

The second possibility, that the Jewish civil religion is no longer needed *qua* civil religion, that is to say, as a distinctive meaning system in the American Jewish polity, deserves more serious consideration. The civil Judaism of today is clearly not the civil Judaism of the 1970s or 1980s. Both the rhetoric and the activity of the federation system have evolved. Jewish continuity initiatives in the 1990s have been marked by far greater attention to Jewish religious and educational life. Federations have taken on explicit responsibilities to support synagogues and their efforts to strengthen themselves. Community-wide initiatives built around shabbat have now become among the fastest-spreading new continuity programs, with federations providing the organizing impetus. Even talk of God and spirituality no longer makes federation leaders uncomfortable. Perhaps most important of all, Jewish learning occupies a far more central place in federation life than it did even ten years ago.

The civil Jewish activists have changed, moving further along the path toward a more holistic Jewish commitment. I will admit that there is certainly room for skepticism about the rationale for and the seriousness of some of these changes. Some synagogue leaders have adopted a new triumphalism toward the federation system that is not warranted. But it is true that the changes are far from uniform, and that dramatic shifts have not yet taken place in some sets of priorities and organizational structures. Like all other institutions, federations are loathe to give up what has worked so well for them in the past, even as they recognize its present inadequacies. Still, it is easy to underestimate how much has indeed changed, how much more attention is being paid to the challenges of keeping Jews Jewish. This has led to a new focus on the question "Why be Jewish?" and to a new openness and realism regarding what can constitute plausible answers to this question for Jews today.

Historical advocates of the civil religion know that the old slogans won't work anymore. Maybe that's why the United Jewish Appeal has

given up on “We Are One”—it just doesn’t have the same power it had fifteen years ago. The Judaic content of Jewish civil religion is becoming broader, less one-sided, and even somewhat richer and deeper. Ironically, this may have the effect of making the civil religion less accessible to Jews who may be looking for a non-religious point of attachment to Jewish life. But there are probably fewer such Jews out there, and the gain in having a more content-ful civil religion is, on balance, worth the price.

The Continuing Importance of Civil Judaism

Still, some might argue that if the civil religion is evolving inexorably toward becoming simply a poor echo of a more conventionally and fully religious Judaism, why not pack it up altogether? The importance of the civil religion historically is bound up with its three major functions: integration, legitimation, and mobilization. If its power along all three of these dimensions is declining—and there is good reason to believe this is so—then why struggle to keep it alive? My answer to this has two parts.

First, I think there is a real loss in the American Jewish community if these functions are not being performed effectively. I do not believe we can flourish as a community without a sense of ourselves as a religiously *and* ethnically based polity, one that is much more than a set of religious denominations, as these are conventionally understood in America. This sense needs to find expression in institutions and activities that can command wide support across American Jewish theological and ideological boundaries.

The reasons that brought civil Judaism into being the first place are still operative, even if the specific challenge facing the collectivity has changed from survival to renewal. I do not believe synagogues alone can carry this responsibility, and I think they know this. Thus, if we no longer need *the* civil religion of the 1970s and 1980s, I think we still need *a* civil religion for American Jews.

Second, I come back to my concern with how the struggle between what Robert Bellah called our first language as Americans—the language of individualism, personal choice, and self-realization—and a potential second language—that of community, memory, and responsibility—is playing itself out in contemporary Judaism. We do not have a future if we cannot articulate Judaism’s meaning in terms of the first language. We have to be prepared to discuss how Judaism can answer

the questions of the psychological Jew. That language is not evil, it is not inherently selfish. Judaism is a pathway to self-fulfillment, and it does urge us to choose it affirmatively. But we should also note that in today's spiritual climate what needs to be defended is not freedom of choice or self-realization; it is precisely the claims of community, memory, and responsibility. All the movements in Judaism recognize this today, even those that accept freedom of choice as axiomatic. A Jewish civil religion that reinforces this message and does so in a way that is clearly transdenominational, that points affirmatively to the commonalities among our religious movements, that proclaims the inescapability of community, however defined and enumerated, and of a sense of covenantal responsibility for what Barry Shrage calls a Jewish life worth living—such a civil religion is not superfluous or obsolete.

So I do not regard Jewish civil religion as a historical error or as the rival of traditional or authentic Judaism. It represents, on balance, a significant positive force that has helped to reconnect secularized Jews to a powerful if poorly articulated religious sensibility. If the age of civil Judaism is over or at least partly over, the reason in some measure is precisely that the civil religion was successful in launching thousands of Jews and hundreds of Jewish institutions on a quest to rediscover why the survival of Jews and Judaism mattered to them so much. The challenge we now face is one that Judaism has faced numerous times before: to remember where we have come from without being crippled by the past.

There is no reason either to mourn or to celebrate as we look to the Jewish future. There is also no reason to point the finger of blame or to indulge the temptation to say, "I told you so." What we have ahead is a lot of work of many sorts: work with learning, with caring, with praying; work transforming the world; work that will require that we respect every sincere effort to articulate what kind of people we want to be, and what kind of *a* people we were meant to be and were prepared to become.

2. *Sylvia Barack Fishman*

As an Orthodox woman, I am committed to traditional values, family, and the community. I am appalled at the culture of individualism and the way it has impoverished the civil discourse in America as well as in American Jewish life. But I also believe that modernity has enriched our lives and that it can influence our Judaism in very positive ways.

My friend and colleague Charles Liebman has presented a bleak scenario in which the “bad guys” are democracy, egalitarianism, and feminism. It is true that there is a competition between the traditional, historical values of Judaism—and especially Halakhah, Jewish law, as a sacred principle—and egalitarianism, a sacred principle to many Jews in the United States. If we picture Halakhah and egalitarianism on a continuum, we see people on the radical right who think only Halakhah is a compelling principle, and people on the radical left who think only egalitarianism is a compelling principle. On the radical right, I see people who are ready to rebuild the temple and put women into a more effective cage than they were in previously, as a way of displaying disdain for modernity. On the radical left, I see people who want to rebuild Judaism from the ground up and create a totally new religious system, one that in no way answers to Halakhah or any of its categories.

But most American Jews in the mainstream denominations of American Judaism—mainstream Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist—are involved in a constant negotiation between the values of Halakhah and modern values such as egalitarianism. They are always struggling between these two very different ways of approaching the world. I would argue that rather than being something negative, this struggle, this negotiation, is a sign of fertility.

Charles Liebman criticized surveys that ask people what they want their synagogue to do. It is possible for rabbinical leaders to be overly concerned about what the common people want, to pander to the masses, so to speak. However, rabbinical leaders on the right may pander to other rabbinical leaders. They may be overly interested in maintaining

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their own status and asserting their own power. This is not a better form of Judaism than paying attention to what the people want. In fact, paying attention to what the people want serves as a kind of corrective, a balancer of power—it makes leaders pay attention to the real needs of real people. This does not mean that religious decisions ought to be made on that basis. On the other hand, however, we do not make people more Jewish by rejecting egalitarianism and feminism. We make people more Jewish by infusing their lives with Jewishness.

American Jews live in a world in which Americanism is constantly threatening to dilute, erode, and replace traditional Judaism. I have written recently about what I call a process of *coalescence*, through which American Jews come to think of American values as Judaic values. American Jews often do not realize that the “free choice” revered by Americans is not the same as the choice the Torah requires—the choice between good and evil, between life and death.

In this situation of coalescence, one conservationist reaction is to reseal the boundaries, to try to prevent Americanism from entering into American Jewish life. This is what right-wing Jews have done. They have tried to desecularize education, devalue Western knowledge, and encourage young Orthodox Jews who go to secular universities to have nothing to do with non-Orthodox Jews. Such resealing is not a reasonable alternative for most modern Jews.

The situation is complicated by yet another recent phenomenon. We have been discussing the process by which Americanism replaces historical Judaism. But at the same time a rather strange Judaization of American culture is taking place. Many ethnic aspects of Jewish culture have become the common property of America. If you watch television today, you see in non-Jewish settings phenomena that Jews used to use to identify one another. Yiddishisms abound, and the verbal clues by which a Jew used to be able to identify another Jew have now become common property. In this coalesced Judaism, Americanism has replaced Judaism on the inside and Judaism has been diffused to the outside, so that there are few boundaries, little to distinguish Jew from non-Jew.

A Reinfusion of Judaism

Instead of attempting to reseal boundaries, instead of retreating from modernity, there is another way of combating this diffusion of American Jewish life. It is to reinfuse Judaism into Jewish life through Jewish education on every level, so that there is a constant dialogue with his-

torical Judaism. While it requires energy, commitment, and planning, this is a much better response than retreating or resealing boundaries, and it is something that can work together with civil Judaism.

Civil Judaism is a kind of nice-guy Judaism, in which the primary values are: to help make the world a better place; to be proud of being a Jew, because self-esteem is a very important American value (though not so much a Jewish value); to know something about Jewishness, but not too much, lest it interfere with one's being a real American; to participate in synagogues and Jewish organizations as an expression of communal values; to help Jews around the world who are in trouble; and to support Israel. This kind of Judaism is not transmittable because, however exemplary it may be in human terms, it does not offer spiritual sustenance.

We have discovered that people really do need spiritual sustenance. They yearn for a framework of *kedushah*—of holiness—for their lives. This does not mean that the concept of civil Judaism should be discarded. However, secular Jewish leaders initially suggested this concept as a replacement for the dialogue with historical Judaism. They felt that a Jew did not *need* religious Judaism. The history of hostility between the federation world—the whole alphabet-soup organizational structure of secular Jewish life—and the synagogue world was based on the presentation of this secular mode of being a Jew as something that could replace religious ritual and synagogue involvement. But we have discovered that sacred survival is not enough, that American Jews also need an ongoing involvement with Jewish religious texts. We all continually struggle with our own existential questions, and studying can help us find Jewish answers to those questions.

Also, American Jews need to talk about religious ritual and its role in historical Judaism, and to keep re-evaluating their own ritual practice. I encourage everyone to take a look at the levels of ritual observance reported in the 1990 Jewish Population Survey. The figures are shocking. Jewish homes do not include Jewish experiences. The home used to be an enculturating place, a place of *kedushah*. It is no longer that in America. We need to confront this fact honestly.

And we need to encourage people to seek out primarily Jewish milieus. Though not a very politically acceptable idea, this is critical. We live in a world in which even expressing a wish to marry within the faith is considered racist. We need to talk and teach seriously about the importance of creating Jewish families and communities.

The Positive Effects of Feminism

With that understood, we need nonetheless to recognize the positive impact of modernity, and here I return to the theme of feminism. One of the few encouraging developments in American Jewish life today is the way in which the educational initiatives of American Jewish feminism have been able to bring Jewish texts into the lives of Jewish women. Feminism, a modern movement, has brought women in large groups—perhaps for the first time in Jewish history—into direct contact with the literature that has shaped Jewish culture and civilization, and to a re-evaluation of their relationship to ritual. It has brought women historically into the remembered Jewish community. When we talk about mentioning women’s names as we sit in the *sukkah*, when we talk about adding women’s names to the *ushpizin*, we are doing something that, rather than diminishing Judaism, enriches it in a very traditional way.

Jewish feminism has also done something that is positive for men: it encourages men to participate in aspects of family and community that they may have previously neglected. Rabbinic law places the responsibility for deeds of love and kindness equally upon men and women. Both men and women are obligated to be hospitable to newcomers, to visit the sick, to comfort the mourning, to equip and celebrate with the bride, to treat the elderly with empathy and respect, to see that the dead are appropriately prepared and buried, and to perform a host of other homely and compassionate tasks for others and their community.

These are examples of how modernity and traditional Halakhic Judaism can interact in a positive way. An aphorism from Proverbs says, “A wise woman builds up her house; a foolish one tears it down with both of her hands.” I encourage all of us to emulate the wise woman and to build up our houses with both hands, using both modernity and Halakhic Judaism.

3. *Clifford Librach*

When I was in law school we did not have classes on Friday, so I used to spend a lot of time going to court to watch trials. I became a familiar face in court, and at one point a New York state su-

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preme court judge said to me, "It's great that you're doing this, young man, because you need to know what goes on out there." Now, as a congregational rabbi, I want to share with you some of "what goes on out there" in the American Jewish community.

An incident that happened to me recently illuminates the terrible problem of ignorance: first of all, ignorance about fundamental Jewish texts, and second, an ignorant belief that anti-Semitism is the main threat to the survival of the American Jewish community. A woman from a neighboring community confronted me in my parking lot, serious and agitated. "Rabbi, we're having all kinds of problems in Mansfield," she said. "We're dealing with terrible anti-Semitism." I asked her to tell me about it. "Well, remember last spring when we talked about what my son could take to school for lunch during Passover? The kids made fun of his matzoh." I wasn't sure where the story was going, so I didn't say anything. She continued, "I want you to know that the situation is getting worse. We just started school, and my son told me that he was called a 'dyke'"(!). I was struck by the fact that we have reached the point where, even with the bogus issue of anti-Semitism, we do not know it when we hear it.

There is in the very nature of the American enterprise an idea that may challenge Jewish continuity in North America. It is an idea that others in the world really do not understand, and it hinders Americans from understanding many of the conflicts in other parts of the world, such as Bosnia. Philosophically, the American enterprise puts the *individual human being* first, before all other identities. That is a brilliant idea, a unique idea, and it is manifest in America's law, behavior, and values.

After the crash that took the life of Princess Diana, there was talk of charging some of the *paparazzi* with violating the French legal standard of the duty to assist. First-year law students are shocked when they learn that there is no such duty in American law. An Olympic swimmer can stand beside a swimming pool and watch a child drown without violating any American legal standard; the law does not require him to attempt to save that life. This is not the case under Jewish law, or under French law. It shows the extent to which individualism is embedded in the American legal tradition.

A large part of the culture of divorce has to do with the celebration of individualism, the demand for individual satisfaction; the sacrifice of individual satisfaction at some level is a price many are unwilling to pay

for the family or their community. The therapeutic culture generally is centered on the proposition that we are first and foremost individuals and that our first loyalty is to our individual initiative, our individual orientation, our individual satisfaction. This of course runs directly counter to the concepts of Jewish continuity and Jewish community.

In my congregation a couple whose own background is Orthodox has two sons, one of whom is very active in our congregation. The mother called me regarding the other son, who was about to marry a non-Jew. She said she and her husband realized that I could not officiate at this wedding; nonetheless, they certainly wanted an *aufruf*, a traditional synagogue celebration for a groom or a couple on the sabbath just before the wedding, for their son. This would not be part of the wedding ceremony itself, she assured me. I said I understood, but that we were talking about a series of wedding rituals, and that if I could not take part in one, I could not take part in any. What I heard back was the language of American civics-book rights. The woman replied that her son “was bar-mitzvahed in our synagogue, was confirmed here, and had a *right* to this blessing.” The trump that the parents thought they could play was that what was being pressed was a political, individual right. It had nothing to do with Judaism as such; it had to do with access to the rabbi, to his performance, his officiation, his supervision and authentication—whatever the rabbi represents. Remember that these people grew up in an Orthodox community. That is the depth to which we have descended: the language of American civics is being used to manipulate the exercise of Jewish tradition.

Regarding the history of American Reform Judaism, I want to point out that an earlier phase, the so-called classical phase, did not continue because it did not have religious “Velcro.” The children of classical Reform Jews did not find in it enough that they could stick to. I think that is one of the main reasons why the civil religion that Jonathan Woocher described also has declined: it too did not have enough religious Velcro. The Holocaust served as a strong basis for the civil religion up to the 1970s and 1980s. Today it is just another college course.

What was missing from classical Reform Judaism was not the religious component. Classical Reform Judaism was truly fascinated and obsessed with God. Its rhetoric, self-definition, and sermons were all invested heavily with the challenge and burden of the Jewish responsibility in the face of Almighty God. But a lot of the ethnic characteristics of the American Jewish community were sanitized out of that classical

Reform tradition. Those characteristics, that Jewishness, does in fact form part of the religious Velcro that permits Judaism to continue. By the 1980s, religion without ethnicity had stumbled, in many instances, into a liberal trap, a kind of Christianity without Jesus. It is that trap that non-Orthodox Judaism still has to dig its way out of.

Today there is some evidence that God is coming back into American non-Orthodox Judaism. For example, prayer is coming back; some very interesting prayer themes are being pursued in Reform synagogues and temples. But I still think individual psychological stimulation is the chief demand; we are struggling to meet it and are doing so at our peril. Charles Liebman's point about the difference between spirituality and holiness is cogent. Perhaps the hardest lesson for American Jews to learn is that it is not the purpose of Judaism to make us *feel* good or even *be* good. The purpose, rather, is to cause us to see in each moment a challenge to move from the routine to the purposeful, from the mundane to the sublime, as part of a historic community, covenanted with Almighty God. That is the message that all of us, non-Orthodox and Orthodox, need to hear.

CHAPTER THREE

Sustaining Jewish Belief in a Secular or Christian America

1. *Dennis Prager*

The phrase “secular or Christian America” should really read just “secular America.” We do not live in a Christian America. I wish we did—for both Jewish and American reasons. It would be good for Jews because the more Christian America was, the more Jewish Jews would be. Jews mimic their society as every minority does, and in a God-based society, Jews would have a more God-based orientation. And it would be good for America because America needs its Judeo-Christian values to sustain its greatness.

I would like to pose a challenge to all three of the major denominations. My thesis is that Judaism is in bad shape. Not the Jewish people: I never worry about Jewish survival. If we ever colonize Jupiter, there will be Jews and mitzvah-mobiles there. What concerns me is the absence of dynamic, content-filled, serious Judaism, missing to a greater or lesser extent throughout Jewry—by definition, among secular Jews, but also among Reform and Conservative Jews, and even Orthodox.

First example: On my talk show in Los Angeles, I am very open

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about being a religious Jew, and it is therefore well known that I do not broadcast on Friday night, shabbat day, or Jewish holidays. Most Los Angeles Jews who do not read my work or listen to me carefully are therefore certain that I am Orthodox. Now, I am not Orthodox, and have not been since my bar mitzvah. But nearly all Jews assume that one who will not work on shabbat and Jewish holidays must be Orthodox. That to me summarizes the essence of the Conservative and Reform failure—that a Jew who observes the Fourth Commandment is assumed by nearly all other Jews to be Orthodox.

Second example of the moribund condition of Judaism: the state of *kasbrut*, the dietary laws. Professor Jacob Milgrom—the biblical scholar and modern Jewish man of wisdom whose work is responsible for bringing me back to *kasbrut* after I had abandoned it—convincingly made the point that ethics is at the center of *kasbrut*. Judaism cares deeply about killing animals. You have to slaughter the animal painlessly. You cannot kill and eat everything that lives. And you can eat the flesh but not the blood—you give the blood back to God. Clearly there is in Judaism a very deep concern about killing animals to eat.

Even the Orthodox do not now take seriously the meaning of *kasbrut*. It has become habit, often meaningless habit, as when broccoli or laundry detergent is certified as kosher. And how can the Orthodox accept the notion of “kosher veal”? Kosher veal should be an oxymoron, for the way veal is produced usually involves a lifetime of suffering for the animal. True, the slaughter is painless, but the life is one of suffering. To accept this as “kosher” is not serious Judaism.

Meanwhile among the non-Orthodox generally there is little or no seriousness about the killing of animals. “We can eat anything, we are Reform,” declare almost all Reform Jews. This prompts me to tell my Reform congregation that perhaps the movement is misnamed—Reform Judaism does not reform Jewish law, it drops it. Perhaps it should be called Dropped Judaism. I am all for reforming Jewish law; that is why I am not Orthodox. So, too, I am for reforming *kasbrut*, not dropping it. If someone showed me a truly painless way to kill animals in a Jewish manner, I would eat that meat. I am not an animal-rights activist, but as a religious Jew one must care about animals because Judaism cares about animals. *Kasbrut* is profoundly ethical.

Third example: What is religious about non-Orthodox movements when they simply run in sync with the secular values of the day? When I ask liberal Jews, “How do liberalism and Judaism differ?” they do not

have a response. Why? Because the truth is that they do not differ. But if liberalism and Judaism are essentially identical, why be Jewish?

Thus, by voice vote the rabbinate of the Reform movement called on the United States to perform same-sex marriage. This overturning of ancient social norms can be done by a voice vote? The great Jewish contribution of channeling polymorphous human sexuality into monogamous heterosexual marriage can be overthrown by a voice vote in Philadelphia? This is an example of non-serious Judaism. Nothing in Judaism allows for same-sex marriage. From the creation of the world, when God declares that “it is not good for man to be alone” and creates woman, to God’s other declaration in Genesis, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and they shall be as one flesh,” through later Judaism, the religion has always taught the primacy of male-female sexual relations.

This march to the beat of secular drummers is also infecting the Conservative movement. The provost of the Conservative rabbinical school where I teach is in favor of same-sex marriage and the ordaining of practicing bisexuals. Now, I understand and vigorously support compassion for gays on the ground that they do not have a choice. But bisexuals do have a choice. How could the provost of the University of Judaism be in favor of ordaining practicing bisexuals? Surely you can say to a bisexual: you have a choice—choose a woman if you are a man, choose a man if you are a woman. A lot of things about the gay-rights movement are decent and proper, but not the inclusion of bisexuality. The voice vote in Philadelphia and the deterioration of Conservative theology on this matter are two more examples of Judaism’s tenuous hold on Jews.

Fourth example: Recall the incident in 1997 when five Orthodox students at Yale said they could not live in a co-ed dorm and remain Orthodox. This is a classic example of the tendency in Orthodoxy toward isolation and insularity and wimpiness—“We cannot live where others are sinning, don’t make us live there.” Mormons can handle co-ed dorms, fundamentalist Christians can handle them, but Orthodox Jews cannot. What a statement.

When I raised this on my radio show, Orthodox Jews called in to defend the students: “The dorms are filled with impurity.” Really? Then how can an Orthodox Jew be a lawyer, since there is more impurity at most law firms than even at Yale dorms. This was a classic example of religious Jews’ inability to confront the world. If being in a Yale dorm is

a threat to your Judaism, then you must leave the world as we know it.

These and many other examples leave me little reason for optimism about the state of Judaism in America right now, and the state of Judaism in Israel is even worse. Nevertheless, given the soul's eternal yearning for God and given the freedom of religion in America, it is by no means too late to turn the situation around.

2. Robert M. Seltzer

As a historian, I am expected to take a long-range perspective; given the topic "Sustaining Jewish Belief in a Secular or Christian America," this would involve looking for parallels when Jewish belief was sustained in a milieu similar to ours. There were several historic Jewries in which a considerable part of the Jewish community had adopted the vernacular language and culture of its environment: Alexandrian Jewry at the turn of the Common Era, Andalusian Jewry in the twelfth century, German Jewry at the end of the nineteenth. In these situations, Jewish intellectuals committed to maintaining Judaism were challenged by the sophisticated thinking of their time, exemplified by such philosophical giants as Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. Philo of Alexandria was only one remarkable figure in a cluster of Hellenistic-Jewish writers preserved in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha; Maimonides was the most important in a series of medieval Jewish philosophers that included Abraham ibn Daud, Judah ha-Levy, and subsequent philosophical interpreters of Judaism; Hermann Cohen was at his prime in a period marked by the early works of Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Leo Baeck. All these Jewish intellectuals sought to resolve the religious perplexities of Jews who were affected by a worldly secular culture, and to bring that culture into a coherent relationship with the Jewish religion.

In America, a boom in Jewish publishing has given us a sizable library of popular books on Jewish sociology (including intermarriage), spirituality (including pop Kabbalah), and practice (especially life-cycle ceremonies). These works are based on certain assumptions about what is central and relevant about Judaism, assumptions that need to be clari-

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fied and defended if we are to have a Judaism that is more than just what a fickle public wants this year. The best popularizations are the result of the trickling down of ideas from the major Jewish thinkers of yesterday. Although few have mastered Hermann Cohen's *The Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, or Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, or Yehezkel Kaufmann's *History of the Religion of Israel*, the impact of these works has nonetheless been profound. America has lived off the fruits of pre-war European Jewish theological writing for decades. Cohen and Rosenzweig, Buber and Heschel provided most of the intellectual underpinning for the turn to traditionalism that has been taking place since the fifties.

The comparable American Jewish model is Mordecai Kaplan. Even though some of what he advocated is now dated, the fact remains that Kaplan sought coherent, logical, realistic answers to the Jewish issues of his time, rather than being content with rhetoric and homiletics (though he taught homiletics). I find the breadth of Kaplan's agenda impressive, not only for what he said (it is almost always suggestive), but also for the seriousness and thoroughness with which he set out to delineate a future for Judaism and Jewish life based upon modern knowledge, rigorous thinking, and broad-ranging experience.

There are those who say that Jewish religious thought is a discourse apart from Christian theology, that it has its own vocabulary, its own priorities, its own structure. Good, let that be demonstrated systematically. We are told that Judaism is not a theologically based religion but a religious praxis, a "way of life." Practice implies theory. A theory implies a philosophy that sustains the theory. Philo, Maimonides, and Hermann Cohen held that there are themes common to the monotheistic religions, perhaps to all living religions, as well as issues distinctively Jewish. Underlying a blueprint for the holy life is a complex of symbols and practices that serve to further spiritual fulfillment and communal solidarity. We are warned that those who seek guidance in conceptions of reason external to Judaism run the danger of being inauthentic. On the contrary, the most indisputably Jewish forms of thought, such as Talmudic argumentation and Kabbalah, were heavily influenced by forms of rationality from ancient Greece. "I believe because it is absurd" was never a Jewish doctrine. If religion is solely a matter of faith, we are in danger of being carried along by the changing stream of fashion and subjective choices.

New approaches are often expressed in difficult terms long before

they can be simplified. Perhaps contemporary theology can be to religion what avant-garde music is to more accessible music. The twentieth century has produced a remarkable list of seemingly difficult composers, ranging from Bartok and Schönberg to Leon Kirchner and Milton Babbitt. However much you love the classics, to appreciate the music of these twentieth-century figures you must open your ears to new musical languages. To *hear* you have to understand; only then can you know whether the performances you listen to are by musicians who comprehend what they are doing and do it well. Trickle-down occurs here as well: innovations from daring musical experimenters may eventually reach a larger public and be absorbed into popular music. American Judaism should encourage a theological avant-garde as a laboratory that may provide it with an intellectual structure and coherence lacking at present. Just as we need responsible Jewish history and not subjectively contrived history, we need responsible and not arbitrary accounts of Jewish theology.

There are resources that Jewish theology has only begun to tap. One example is process theology, a metaphysics of an open and unfolding universe in which values and experience are conserved and deepened over time. Just as Maimonides showed the usefulness and limitations of Aristotelian science with the aim of making this early scientific world view compatible with Jewish faith, so Whiteheadian process theology might help underpin the truthfulness of Judaism as a view of the world that resonates with certain prophetic themes. And there are also other modes, old and new, to probe and appropriate.

Little serious theology is heard in the synagogues and not enough in rabbinical schools. Some valuable work is being done in the universities, though it is often viewed with suspicion there. In the rabbinical school where I occasionally taught, it seemed to me that much effort was expended by the students on relatively easy, immediately accessible ways of expressing Jewishness at the expense of rigorous inquiry and hard thinking. Judaism is a bridge to the transcendent significance of ethical choices, the central place of value in the cosmos, the actualization of holiness. Old questions may require new methodologies; old truths, new language. American Jewry needs to cultivate a generation of possibly difficult religious thinkers so that, besides responding to the issues posed by today's *New York Times* or CNN, it can demonstrate what Judaism has to offer in coping with the challenges and opportunities of advanced science, new technology, and the best historiography.

There is an audience today for presentations that articulate a reasonable hierarchy of Jewish values we can affirm, what they imply about the universe and human existence, and how these values dovetail with traditional Jewish teachings. We need a Jewish religious critique of secular modernity, where so many of our best minds still live, and a Jewish theology of Christianity and Islam and Buddhism that confronts these traditions at their best while remaining true to itself. A significant number of American Jews are well educated, culturally savvy, and well informed about one or another area of contemporary knowledge. To present the continuing significance of Judaism to them we must do so in ways that will respond adequately to their critical objections and offer a deeper grasp of Jewish faith: what we believe, why it is reasonable to hold these beliefs, and how these beliefs can be made operational in our daily lives. To be sure, congregants want friendly rabbis to be role models for their children and to offer pastoral guidance in time of crisis. But many of them also expect from their spiritual leaders insight into Judaism on the same level of competence they expect from professional colleagues in their various fields.

I second what Charles Liebman has said about the superficiality of what passes for “spirituality” in American culture, but I have a different take on it. “Spirituality” has come to complement “ethnicity” (another problematic term) as a portal to Jews who cannot think of themselves as religious because they think of “religion” as overly formalistic and restrictive. To be sure, Judaism is a social affirmation and an inheritance, but it is more: a mode of understanding human life that, moving through time, has encountered great systems of thought that have spurred its own unfolding. Judaism is one of history’s paradigmatic attempts to comprehend the human in the context of the whole. The goal of sustaining Jewish belief in Christian or secular America requires presenting it as such.

3. David Singer

The invitation to make these comments drew a distinction between the situation of Orthodoxy and that of the various non-Orthodox versions of Judaism. To be sure, it did so indirectly. The letter said

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little about the actual state of Orthodox Judaism; rather, it detailed the weaknesses of Conservative and Reform Judaism in virtually all areas of religious life. The implication was clearly that Orthodox Judaism is in much better shape—indeed, that it provides the yardstick by which the achievements and failures of Conservative and Reform Judaism ought to be measured.

I do not wish to challenge this assumption about Orthodox Judaism. The Orthodoxy that is doing relatively well today, of course, is very different from the Orthodoxy I encountered as an undergraduate at Yeshiva College in the 1960s. That “modern” Orthodoxy of my youth is very much in retreat, having been replaced by a “centrist” Orthodoxy that is strongly traditionalist, even fundamentalist. Still, Orthodox Judaism’s record of achievement in America is very impressive. In what is certainly the biggest sociological surprise in American Jewish history, Orthodoxy today is not only growing in numbers but also attracting “converts” from the ranks of non-Orthodox Jews. Orthodox communal life is a beehive of activity, while Orthodox education at all levels puts the efforts of the other branches of Judaism to shame. One cannot visit an Ivy League campus today without being struck by the significant presence of Orthodox students. And Orthodox Jews are visible in the professions, in suburbia, and in Jewish public life.

If, then, Conservative Judaism and Reform Judaism are failing to produce a significant religious life for their adherents, would it not make sense to urge the masses of Conservative and Reform Jews to seriously consider Orthodox Judaism? Personally, I see nothing insulting or condescending in such a suggestion. Jews, after all, are responsible for one another. If it happens that one branch of Judaism has a recipe for Jewish vibrancy, shouldn’t that recipe be shared with others?

The kicker, of course, is that the Orthodox recipe includes a heavy mixture of faith, faith that is simply beyond the reach of the vast majority of American Jews. Here one sees the corrosive effects of secularization, which has wrought havoc with Jewish commitment and belief. Secularism is a harsh, demanding taskmaster. Not only does it force Jews to abandon particular aspects of Jewish tradition; much worse, a prolonged exposure to secularism leads to a radical transformation of consciousness, in which secular assumptions and values assume full control. Just this secularization of consciousness is strikingly evident among Conservative and Reform Jews today. At times, non-Orthodox Jews may seem to envy Orthodox faith; but in moments of candor many

will tell you that what the Orthodox believe is a hodge-podge of myths and fairy tales.

Are we, then, at a dead end? Can it really be that a vibrant Orthodoxy ultimately has nothing to say to non-Orthodox Jews? Perhaps, but I would like to think otherwise. Let me suggest that the focus of attention shift from Orthodoxy as a system of belief and practice to Orthodoxy as a lived religious experience. Perhaps from that vantage point Orthodoxy can still prove relevant to the spiritual needs of Conservative and Reform Jews.

Let me pose a straightforward question: What does it mean to be Orthodox? I am referring not to formal structures—to the Code of Jewish Law and the Thirteen Principles of Faith—but to something very different. My concern is with Orthodox religious experience, with what Orthodox Jews feel and sense as they go about leading their religious lives. I have already made the point that Jews standing outside the framework of Orthodoxy cannot share in the *faith* of Orthodox Jews. But is it possible that even with lesser faith, or with faith transformed in some fashion, they can still replicate—at least to a degree—the *religious phenomenology* of the Orthodox? This is the issue that is ultimately decisive, since Orthodoxy's vibrancy is a direct product of the lived religious experience of its adherents.

Within the space constraints here, I will limit myself to two elements of Orthodoxy's religious phenomenology, though others might profitably be considered. Element number one, perhaps the most crucial, is the sense of living in a *commanded* mode. Orthodox Jews, even those at the secularized end of the spectrum, know that they are not free agents, that the Word of God is always there to address them. They are constantly dogged by the question, "What does God expect of me in this situation?" Within the man-God relationship the line of authority is clear: God issues the marching orders and man obeys. There is nothing vague about these orders in an Orthodox version, for we are talking about law that encompasses the whole of life and is sharply focused on detail. As for obedience, it entails an urgent feeling of obligation to do the will of God. I ask, then: Is some variant of this possible within a non-Orthodox framework?

Element number two is a separatist dynamic at the psychological level. Most academic writers on Orthodoxy stress the *physical* separation created by Orthodox Judaism's intricate web of behavior and powerful sense of community. In my view, however, it is the *psychological*

separation that is decisive, since it is fully portable, meaning that the Orthodox Jew carries his separatism with him wherever he goes. At every turn, the Orthodox Jew is aware that he is different, that he is governed by a religious outlook and a set of behavioral norms that find little echo in the larger society. This holds true for the Orthodox student on the Ivy League campus no less than for the Hasid in Williamsburg. An Orthodox Jew may be a successful professional living in an affluent suburb and immersed in the pleasures of American life; yet he can never shake his sense of otherness. Is something along these lines possible for Conservative and Reform Jews?

To expect non-Orthodox Jews to become Orthodox is to seek the impossible. To urge non-Orthodox Jews to learn from the Orthodox, where relevant, is plain good advice.

4. Neil Gillman

Of the three commentators who preceded me, I think Dennis Prager is completely wrong, Robert Seltzer is largely right but a little wrong, and David Singer left off where it becomes interesting, i.e., the challenge of how to develop a sense of “commandedness” within a different theological framework.

In my opinion we are way ahead of where we were fifty years ago. In 1952, as a freshman at McGill, I encountered a serious, intellectual Jew for the first time in my life. That was Will Herberg. Will brought me into Judaism, and the first Jewish book I ever read was his *Judaism and Modern Man*. After reading that, I realized there must be other books on Jewish philosophy, and I asked a rabbi for advice. He gave me *The Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel* by Samson Raphael Hirsch, which was originally published in Germany in the 1830s. I did not know enough to be shocked that he could think of nothing more up to date. But in retrospect, what was available in 1952? There was some Kaplan, of course, but we did not know much about Rosenzweig. (Buber was what we read in McGill—but what was Jewish about Buber?) What else could the rabbi have given me?

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Today, if a student came to me and said, “I’m a philosophy major—can you recommend a good book on Jewish philosophy?” I could mention dozens published within the past ten years. Most of this writing comes out of America. In addition, there is hardly a single significant classical Jewish book that is not available in an excellent English translation with notes. More has been published on Genesis within the past five years than in the previous one hundred years. Using the Internet, every Jew can study Torah with almost any other Jew anywhere in the world, at any time.

The Peoplehood Agenda

American Jewry has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades. Go through the sermon topics for any liberal Reform or Conservative rabbi for any decade between 1920 and 1960 and you will find plenty of what I call the “agenda of Jewish peoplehood”: the Holocaust, Soviet Jewry, the security of the state of Israel, anti-Semitism, lots of book reviews, discussions of ethical problems. What you will almost never find is a sermon on God. I think that American Judaism—certainly the Conservative movement, probably also the Reform movement—was overwhelmingly secularized. Rabbis who were forced to preach twice every week had to find something that they could preach about honestly, with integrity. By and large they turned to the agenda of Jewish peoplehood.

My sense is that for about twenty years, and particularly within the past ten, there has been a feeling that this agenda no longer works. It no longer will work to inspire people to be serious, committed Jews. The central event of the agenda, the Holocaust, has been institutionalized. We have seen the end of a Holocaust-centered presentation of Judaism. In another decade or so the surviving generation will be gone, memories will have faded, and the Holocaust will have become another part of Jewish institutional life.

Nor are we going to be able to preach “Be Jewish because of Israel” very much longer. I think American Jewry has begun to distance itself from the Israeli agenda. We are focusing more on our own needs; money, energy, and concern are flowing inward. The liberal Jewish community has had it with the political shenanigans involving the religious community in Israel. That will contribute to the gradual marginalization of the Middle East and Israel in American Jewish life. Already there are Israelis who come to our synagogues and tell us, “We do not need you

as we used to.” And of course Soviet Jewry is no longer on the agenda, thank God.

I think American-style secularism has been exposed as profoundly inadequate, and there is a cross-cultural turn to religion. We are no longer so convinced that secularism provides an answer to our needs. The classic tension—and I always go back to Clifford Geertz on this—is the tension between cosmos and chaos. The world is more and more chaotic; more and more there is a turn to religion as a way of restoring or imposing order and making sense of an absurd human situation. It seems to me that science and religion are closer today than they ever were before. Read the most advanced material in science and math today: it is filled with the language of myth. “Big Bang” is a mythic notion. The more science distances itself from immediate observation, the more it has to rely on the same kinds of thinking that religion uses all the time. We cannot hear the Big Bang, we cannot see God—both are beyond human perception. To talk about them meaningfully we have to revert to the language of myth, and that is what religion has been doing all along.

It seems to me that institutional Jewish life has become bankrupt because of its absolute secularization. But the same has happened within the various denominations. The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) was a profoundly secular institution when I was a student there. It was Harvard, not Slobodka. My teachers were deeply religious Jews, but we saw their religion at home, not in the classroom. The one thing that was never talked about in my classes, with the exception of Kaplan’s, was God. Nobody ever talked to us about prayer. Heschel wrote eloquently about prayer but never said anything in class about what happens when you pray. Nobody ever told me in rabbinical school, “This is the way you make sense of *kasbrut* to a secular, uncommitted American Jewish congregation.” We could not say, “Be kosher because God said to be kosher,” because we were doing biblical criticism in the Bible class beforehand and were learning that the Bible is not the Word of God. Nobody told us why we should keep shabbat. Nobody ever talked to us about death and the afterlife. Nobody talked to us about *mitzvab*—how do you teach that concept to people who have no sense of what it means to be obligated by anything Jewish?

But within the past ten or fifteen years there has been a change. In a class I taught recently at Jewish Theological Seminary we talked about *birchot ha-shabar* and *kriat shma al ha-mitab*—the prayers we say on

going to sleep and waking up, which I understand as prayers about death and resurrection. What does this concept mean, today, to an American Jew who confronts death, who doesn't know what to talk about in terms of the afterlife? We tried to see the extent to which these prayers talk to issues that are very personal. These are *my* issues—*I* am going to die. *I know* what's going to happen to me. I go to sleep at night—that is what dying is all about—and wake up in the morning—that is what resurrection is all about.

I also think the Reform movement has been transformed. I stand in admiration of their ability to have turned on a dime in regard to Zionism. And they study Torah all the time. This is a different Reform movement. I am invited to Reform synagogues now, and I am fascinated by the *minyán*, as it is called. Those who do not want to go the bar or bat mitzvah in the main sanctuary on shabbat morning come downstairs. They are in jeans and sweats, they have coffee and bagels, and they study the Torah. They wear a *kipah* and they wear a *tallit*. It is a different Reform movement.

Orthodoxy too has been transformed. It can never be the same since the conferences of Orthodox Jewish women that took place in 1997 and 1998. You are not going to shut the floodgates now that they have been opened. There are going to be Orthodox women rabbis. They may not be called rabbis, but they will do everything that rabbis do, because in fact women can do 95 per cent of the things that rabbis do. Someday, someone will write a Ph.D. dissertation on these conferences as transformatory events in modern American Jewry.

The Religion Agenda

Many factors have led to the death of the “agenda of Jewish peoplehood” and the beginning of what I call the “agenda of Jewish religion.” What has developed over the past ten years is a gradual realization that the case for Judaism has to be made in religious terms. That means you have to talk God, you have to talk sin, you have to talk repentance, afterlife, prayer. These are the things Jews all around the country want to hear about.

An aggressive, rigorously argued case now holds that fundamentalism and secularism are not the only options. There is a lot of room between those two. And the cornerstones of the new theology are: (1) a kind of systematic agnosticism about the nature of God—no human being knows what God is, no human being knows what God wants for

sure, and (2) a sense that Sinai, as described in Exodus 19-20, did not necessarily happen that way: yes, revelation took place, and yes, there is a God in the world in which revelation took place; but God did not speak actual words to Moses, and so the words of the Torah are a reflection of God's will but not a perfect capturing of God's will. Therefore the authority for Torah is in a human community; and if I can locate the authority for Torah in this human community, then it follows that every other human community has the right to determine what God has demanded of it.

I'll close with quick answers to the questions posed for this volume:

"Do most Conservative and Reform Jews subscribe to any belief system based on Judaism?" Does any Jew? You cannot trash Conservative or Reform for not being ideological. How many great Jewish theologians have there been over the centuries? The question is a trick question, because it assumes ideology has significant backing.

"Why does theology play so small a role in most Conservative and Reform synagogues?" The question is out of date. I can mention twenty Conservative synagogues around the country now where you will hear a shabbat sermon on God.

"What belief system is reflected in the current, and most recently developed, liturgies?" I am inclined to say, None. Certainly this new spirituality is anti-intellectual and non-ideological. It is implicit. Yes, I think an implicit model is much more pietistic—it is Hasidic, it is mystical, it is fixed in the heart, not the head. It deals with gut issues, not cerebral issues.

"In a society that is overwhelmingly secular in its public functions and overwhelmingly Christian in religious affiliation, is it inevitable that anything less than intense involvement with Judaism cannot be sustained over several generations?" Probably. But again the question is out of date. An enormous amount of religious creativity is coming out of feminist circles, but you have to accept its legitimacy for it to have an impact.

If Orthodoxy is bad and liberal Judaism is bad, then where do we go? This is sterility. We end up with a black hole. Jews are much too wise to have done that.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Rabbi, the Synagogue, and the Community

1. Jack Wertheimer

Like my colleague Neil Gillman, I think that Dennis Prager [chapter three] got it wrong, albeit for entirely different reasons. Regarding Orthodox students at Yale, I think *we* are the ones who are the wimps. They are not. In questioning mores that are at least tacitly sanctioned on American college campuses, these students have announced to the world that in matters of sexual morality, they as Jews differ. This seems to me to be something on which all the movements of American Judaism can agree—I think we all oppose promiscuity.

If we want to be less wimpish, we ought to recognize that Jews historically have confronted the larger society. In the past, we have been prepared to compete. And on the matter of sexual morality we have a great deal to say and can be competitive. I wish the synagogue world would be more confrontational on issues like this. I vividly recall an occasion when I gave a presentation in a synagogue on the need for Jews to assert where they differ and the rabbi of the congregation was ready to throttle me. Then a member of the congregation stood up and said, “You know, in the 1960s when I was raising my children and the

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sexual revolution was occurring, I looked to rabbinic leaders for guidance and they offered no guidance whatsoever.” That is a tragic statement, since our tradition has a great deal to say about such matters.

Now, on to the subject of “the rabbi, the synagogue, and the community.” I serve on an interfaith team that meets twice a year to discuss the burgeoning field of American congregational studies. We have been preparing a guidebook that offers diverse perspectives on how to think about a religious congregation, and toward the end of the process, I found to my amazement that young people were virtually absent from the book. It simply had not occurred to my colleagues—mainly sociologists and historians of American religion—to examine the place of youth in congregational life.

To anyone familiar with synagogues, such an omission is inconceivable. American synagogues are obsessed with youth. In all the movements, families with young children constitute the vast majority of synagogue members and attenders. Life-cycle events are primary motivators for synagogue participation. And synagogues predicate much of their budgeting and financing on the presence of families with young children who are on track to prepare for a bar or bat mitzvah. That is how we get many marginal Jews to join. We are all familiar with the pattern (especially evident outside the Orthodox synagogue) of families that drop their membership as soon as the youngest has celebrated his or her bar/bat mitzvah.

The link to synagogue finances is also manifested in the preoccupation of congregations with their nursery schools, which serve as feeders for the supplementary school and, more important, for membership generally. The surest sign that a Conservative synagogue is in decline is that it shuts down its nursery school. The Hebrew schools soon follow, and next goes the whole operation.

I begin with these observations in order to highlight two points. First, the centrality of youth in American synagogue life is based not necessarily upon American models but upon peculiarly Jewish decisions. And second, the structure of synagogue life is intertwined with questions of financing.

If we seriously wish to discuss changes in the roles that synagogues play, we must realistically confront the vested interests of congregations and their rabbis in the prevailing system. Funding for churches is not nearly as dependent on the presence of young people in educational programs, and churches are generally not funded very well. This is the

lament of sociologist Robert Wuthnow in his book *The Crisis in the Churches: Spiritual Malaise, Fiscal Woe*, and in another recent volume entitled *Money Matters: Personal Giving in American Churches*, written by a team of sociologists. Money does matter, and we need to pay attention to it if we are to reconceive the role of the synagogue. The present structure of synagogues reflects our vision and the realities our predecessors perceived. We need to take those realities into account as we envision a future for the synagogue. Here are some things to consider.

First, can we undo the heavy emphasis past generations placed upon building up the shul at the expense of the school? Outside the Orthodox world, schools were seen as a vital building block in synagogue life—perhaps even more important to a congregation than the sanctuary. Most of us will agree that supplementary Jewish education is inferior to full-time Jewish education in day schools, but day schools are beyond the capacities of congregations. There are some inspired teachers in supplementary schools, and there are many well-meaning persons who work for them. But supplementary schools with one, two, or three sessions per week cannot impart the Hebraic and Judaic literacy needed by young Jews today. Given the economic realities I have mentioned, can synagogues survive if the school is taken out of the shul? And, conversely, can we conceive of synagogues attracting more Jews unless they entrust school to professionals in either day schools or community supplementary schools that are well funded and sophisticated?

Second, how do we explain the low level of synagogue attendance as compared to church attendance? For decades, every survey of regular weekly attendance has shown that Jews consistently lag behind their compatriots. True, attendance figures are often exaggerated—people claim to attend far more frequently than they actually do. But Jews consistently claim to attend only half as often as do Christian Americans. Regular attendance for most American Jews is heavily related to particular life-cycle stages. Outside of Orthodoxy, only a small part of a synagogue's membership base—usually between 10 and 20 per cent—attends with any regularity. For most synagogue members, affiliation serves as an insurance policy in case they need a rabbi or a synagogue service of some kind.

I for one do not blame synagogues for these stark realities. We ought not simply to point a finger of blame at the rabbi or the cantor or the youth director and say, "If only he or she or they were more dynamic, everything would be fine."

So what can synagogues do to strengthen themselves in the years ahead? I agree with those who for years have argued that synagogues function most successfully when they nurture a sense of community. We found in a study of Conservative synagogues that members who attend regularly are more likely to claim that most of their close friends are members of the same congregation. But I would add two cautions. One is that the nurturing of community runs against some of the economic interests of synagogues that depend on a mass-membership base to sustain them. The second is against the mistaken notion that creating community necessarily leads to a revolution in the religious outlook of attenders. Judaism has a content and a set of expectations that far transcend a sense of community. Unless we transmit those expectations and find ways to enforce them, we will continue to suffer from low levels of synagogue participation and, worse, from a serious deficiency in the religious lives of synagogue members. We must first educate our people about these expectations and then create the kinds of environments *in* the synagogue that nurture religious behavior *outside* the synagogue, at home and in other spheres of life. In other words, we need to use synagogues to teach Jews that their Jewish lives must include far more than synagogue attendance.

2. Barry Shrage

Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston began its strategic planning process with a question somewhat atypical for federations. Rather than ask what we might do to be the best federation in the world, or to raise the most money, we began by asking what the Jewish community really needs at this moment in time.

When I was in social-work school, I was drawn to Viktor Frankl's idea that human beings need to find meaning in their lives. I am optimistic about the future of American Jewry, which is engaged in a tremendous search for meaning. For synagogues and federations, now is the moment when they must—as Lee Iacocca once said—“lead, follow, or get out of the way.” The need for meaning is felt deeply and broadly enough that lay people have begun to assume leadership in this search.

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The designated leaders of the community—the rabbis, the federations, the professionals at the synagogues—can choose to help it along, in which case more Jews will be involved. Or we can ignore it, which means fewer people will be involved, and history will rebuke us for what we failed to do.

The restructuring of communal life is not that complicated; there are many fine models and creative approaches. The problem is that every group seems to have its own narrow model. So we have futile debates about whether day schools or youth groups or Israel experiences will be the salvation of the American Jewish community. We get into foolish arguments that end up so confusing our lay people about what works and what does not that they basically say, “There is no future for this community; let’s not invest in Jewish education or synagogues.” The truth is that we have a powerful product that can make a significant difference in people’s lives.

In our federation’s strategic planning, we thought first about what we stand for. Is the purpose of this enterprise to survive? Or is the purpose to do God’s work in the world and to create meaningful communities for human beings?

We have relied for years on the survival theme, and it has been a good tool for those of us who care about Jewish education. We told our community that our survival depended upon Jewish education. If they didn’t support it, their grandchildren would not continue in the faith. That got their attention. But it is time to move beyond survival and to think about what meaningful Jewish community and meaningful Jewish lives might actually look like.

In his book *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah writes,

Community is a term used very loosely by Americans today. We use it in a strong sense: a community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision-making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a history, and so it is also a *community of memory*.

While the idea of community, if limited to neighbors and friends, is an inadequate basis for meeting our current needs, we want to affirm community as a cultural theme that calls us to wider and wider circles of loyalty, ultimately embracing that universal community of all beings. . . .

Bellah does not write about communities of *Torah*, Jewish learning, of *Chesed*, kindness, and of *Tzedek*, social justice—the three values that we have made the goals of our federation and its strategic plan—but that is the essence of the community that he describes. A “community of memory” is a community of *Torah*, made up of adults who know the stories of their people well enough that they can teach them to their children. Those stories define what is good and what is bad, what is permissible and what is not, what is tragic failure and what is success. They define the values of the community. But to teach them we have to know them.

A community of caring, *Chesed*, is an “interdependent community” that engages, welcomes, and cares for its members. A community of justice, *Tzedek*, reaches beyond its walls to find meaning as a beacon of hope for humankind. Such communities will attract our loyalty and the loyalty of our children and our children’s children.

Bellah also describes a weaker kind of association he calls a “lifestyle enclave.” Members of an association of this kind express their identities through shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure that differentiate their lifestyle from that of others. They are not interdependent, do not act together politically, do not share a history. If they begin to do so, the “enclave” is on the way to becoming a community. Many so-called communities in America are more accurately described as lifestyle enclaves. This is what most of our synagogues and federations are. It is our failing.

The federation cannot be the “community.” A community cannot serve 200,000 people, the Jewish population of Boston. Yet federations have a primary responsibility not just to serve the weak and the poor and the handicapped, not just to promote Jewish education, but to do so in a way that strengthens face-to-face community. That is the core idea of our strategic plan, and it has led us to three premises:

■ *Federations need to support synagogue efforts to become communities of learning.* In other words, we have to think about delivery systems. In synagogues that do not have great rabbis or other enviable resources, what does it mean to become communities of Torah? How can we help that happen?

Our federation is investing in adult learning. Day schools will grow when adults believe that Jewish learning matters. Family education works well; it is very easy to get parents involved for the sake of their children. But if parents are not also learning for their own sake, we have not

really changed anything. Our goal is that our federation and our synagogues work together for universal adult Jewish literacy.

■ *Communities have to care for people.* The Willow Creek Church, now a thriving mega-church in Illinois, was surprised by the results of market research it commissioned some years ago. Most people thought that when they came to church they were valued only for their money; no one cared about them as human beings. The research prompted a massive restructuring. Now someone driving into the church parking lot won't see signs saying the equivalent of, "Reserved for the President and the Rabbi." Instead, the signs read, "Reserved for Visitors and Newcomers." Volunteers greet visitors and escort them to the building. Being a community of caring matters. We are examining ways in which the federation can provide consultation and support for transforming every congregation into a congregation of caring.

■ *We must invigorate our social-justice efforts.* The imperative to deal justly is fundamental to Judaism. Most synagogues have a social-justice committee, but the sad truth is that few do more than visit a soup kitchen once a year. That is not an experience that can change people's lives and help them see what it means to be a Jew in the world, to find meaning in *Tikkun Olam*, healing the world. Our federation is providing tools, support, and staff to help synagogues make something real out of a vision of social justice and ground their efforts in Torah study and learning.

Together, federations and synagogues can make these things happen. The agenda is not that complicated—we have known for a long time what to do. But the American Jewish community, and the federations in particular, have neglected an important part of an overall strategy. We must first prepare the ground in which strategic ideas can flourish. It is all well and good to say, for instance, that every young person should take a trip to Israel, but that is much more likely to occur among young people who belong to a youth group. What do we need to do to have five or ten times as many teenagers involved in youth groups? We must train youth workers and make a federation investment in synagogue youth work.

A synagogue that engages its members in outreach to those needing support in time of crisis builds a sense of community that translates into vitality and commitment. What do we need to do to help synagogues develop their capacity to use volunteers to become more caring and engaged communities? Federations must invest in helping synagogues

develop the capacity to train and deploy volunteers for outreach and inreach to become caring communities.

Our future depends on our ability to combine resources and work together. I believe that federations and synagogues can draw up an agenda that both lays out a vision and funds specific programs to get us there.

3. Peter S. Knobel

My perspective is that of a congregational rabbi. I serve a growing Reform congregation in suburban Chicago. During the last few years we have grown from five hundred households to more than nine hundred. Of course, I do not necessarily see growth as proof of success. But like Barry Shrage I am an optimist. I believe we are at a moment of transition: an old era has died and a new era is being born.

There is a generational shift in the leadership of the Reform movement. The three professional heads of the Reform rabbinate were all born in the United States after World War II, and so they are leaders who are totally adapted to the North American scene. At the same time, members of the dominant rabbinate in the Reform movement are required to spend their first year of professional study in Israel. The first-year-in-Israel program of Hebrew Union College now includes cantors, Jewish educators, and Jewish communal-service workers. They all come back from Israel with a good Hebrew background, and many of them are able to speak the language. The official language of the 1997 Zionist platform passed by the Central Conference of American Rabbis is Hebrew; English is considered to be a translation. This is a remarkable change within the Reform movement.

The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, in my view, represents a watershed moment. I think we will look back on the publication of that study as the moment when the North American Jewish community decided that its real purpose in life was to serve God, through Torah, through worship, and through deeds of lovingkindness. A significant change has begun in Jewish life that at least in the liberal Jewish community is going to focus on the synagogue. Programs funded by some

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of our largest foundations are working on the transformation of the synagogue; among these programs are the Experiment in Congregational Education, Synagogue 2000, and a project called Lay Involvement in the Development of Liturgy. The synagogue is the key institution in the transformation of Jewish life. It will succeed, however, only if it manages to resacralize the primary institution of Jewish life, which is the home. In other words, the synagogue will be the locus for returning Judaism to the home.

I would like to point out a few problems and challenges regarding the synagogues and also the rabbinate. First of all, the synagogue needs to be a place where Jews feel confident. In almost all professions, we are at the top of the heap. We have the best doctors, lawyers, bankers, social workers, and so on. Yet when these high-performance Jews come to the synagogue they feel incompetent; they feel they lack the particular skills necessary to function in that environment. They often find worship boring, and adult education below the intellectual level they are used to. For example, many of my congregants will spend \$1,000 or \$2,000 to take a course at the University of Chicago but will never step into the synagogue to study Torah. It is not that they think Torah is irrelevant; the problem is that they have not experienced in Torah study the same level of preparation, the same level of seriousness, that they find in university classes.

Every other year, I take about fifty members of my congregation to Jerusalem for a week. They stay in the dormitory of Hebrew Union College, and I get some of the best Jewish scholars in the world to teach them. They have been required to read a serious book on Judaism by a major scholar—they all have read it and have come prepared—and for a week they study with the scholars. We do no touring; when they are not in class they are free in Jerusalem. The success of this program indicates to me that many Jews really want to learn about the faith in a serious way.

The synagogue has to be the vehicle for serious adult Jewish education. Seventy per cent of American Jews are affiliated with a synagogue at some time in their lives. One of the great failures of the North American synagogue is that we pay so much attention to the young people who are preparing for their bar or bat mitzvahs. I have often said, only half in jest, that if I could, I would close every religious school in the country. I would focus only on serious *adult* Jewish studies, and I would give young people great Jewish *experiences*. I would not let them study

Judaism until they were eighteen or twenty years old. That is overstated, of course, but the truth of the matter is that the synagogue misses out on the opportunity to seriously engage the vast majority of Jewish adults. For the bar or bat mitzvah of their children they will do anything. If you say to parents of bar or bat mitzvah students, you have to come to services twice a month, do thirteen *mitzvot*, pay an extra \$500, and stand on your head, they will do so. The very fact that we have them connected in this way means that we have an opportunity to provide the kind of education that will inspire.

I also agree with Barry Shrage on the importance of the caring community. Another good development in synagogues is a re-energizing of the notion of obligation as *mitzvah*, especially in terms of the personal needs of individuals. Actions that show care about what is happening in people's lives have been removed from the sphere of the rabbis' exclusive responsibility. Lay persons are being trained not only how to visit the sick but also how to pray with them. Individual synagogues are also beginning to say that members need to be there for fellow members who have had a death in their family. It is interesting to see that in a liberal community, it is not hard to find a *shomer* or a *shomeret* to sit with the body of the deceased overnight. It is not at all unusual that I do not do a *shivah minyan*. Members of my congregation conduct a *shivah minyan*, and I make a *shivah* call when no visitors are there and I can spend time with the family.

My neighborhood in suburban Chicago is becoming very observant. Five Orthodox synagogues have opened up on the edge of the neighborhood. On shabbat you see Jews going to shul. My synagogue now has three shabbat morning services: the classic private bar or bat mitzvah, a *minyan* that is some twenty-five years old and is entirely lay-led, and a new service called *kahal shabbat* that is partly led by the cantor, sometimes led and taught by the rabbis, but frequently led and taught by lay people. There is separate Torah study available for children, as well as child care. A community is developing of persons who depend upon one another to be there and to celebrate shabbat together.

We need to find a Torah-based language for talking about synagogue governance, about the things we do at our board and committee meetings. We rabbis need to recognize that the lay people in our synagogues must ultimately become our partners. We must help them learn the vocabulary, to translate the language of the corporation into the language of the synagogue. The rabbi should not be seen as a CEO.

Finally, rabbis have to get back to the goal of being holy personalities. We have to try to lead our own lives with a sense of *kedushah*, holiness, and to teach other Jews that they too can have such a sense. We need to be spiritual role models; it should be apparent that we serve God, that we are commanded, and that we are attempting to bring holiness into our own lives.

4. Adam Mintz

At the beginning of the century there was a large immigration of Jews to the United States, specifically to New York City. Many of these were Orthodox Jews who moved to the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The synagogues they built were generally small and informal, the services somewhat lacking in decorum and dignity. It was reported that the men actually took off their *tallitot* before the conclusion of services, which was considered to be completely inappropriate.

In the 1920s and the 1930s, as the Jews became more successful, some of them moved uptown to the Upper East Side and the Upper West Side. Orthodox Jews became more involved in the general culture, and they felt that the synagogues they built should reflect characteristics they valued in society in general—decorum, dignity, and a sense of order such as they found in work, in the opera and theater, and at dinner parties. Therefore they built synagogues where the rabbis wore top hats and morning coats and where the dress of the congregation was regulated—black yarmulkes, no brown shoes. These synagogues, though few in number, became in many ways the defining feature of Orthodoxy for the middle decades of this century. They flourished because they responded to the Orthodox experience in the United States.

Sixty years later we have worked out our position in American society; the challenges facing us today are internal ones. I would like to focus on two particular challenges that confront the modern synagogue as it responds to changes in the Orthodox experience. First, **participation**: How do we create a positive experience for people who are used to participating fully in the professional world and other areas of their lives but who are told in the Orthodox synagogue, “You have to be a

Adam Mintz is the rabbi of Lincoln Square Synagogue (Orthodox) in New York City. He has published extensively in scholarly journals on topics of Jewish law and Jewish history.

spectator; you have to sit and watch as a few other people lead the services”?

One idea is to have multiple services. At my synagogue, Lincoln Square Synagogue, for example, there are three regular shabbat services, at 7:45, 8:45, and 9:45. This gives more people an opportunity to participate. Over the course of the year, most men get at least a few speaking parts. We also have a fourth service, expressly for those with little or no background. In this beginner's service, while there is a leader, there is no *bazzan*. Everybody participates. Everybody sings. Questions are welcome. People deliver *divrei Torah* on a rotating basis. There is truly a sense of participation.

A more difficult aspect of the problem is that while the Orthodox tradition encourages women to play an active role in the community, it does not allow for their full, active participation in the synagogue service. The modern Orthodox community must address this issue.

This year, Lincoln Square's women's service is celebrating its twenty-fifth year. Six or seven times a year, between fifty and a hundred and fifty women come together on shabbat morning. They follow a very specific service; a *bazzanit* leads the women, and they read the Torah. The parts of the service that according to tradition require ten males, a *minyán*, are omitted. This service allows women to participate in a manner that is not possible in the main synagogue. But the fact remains that men cannot be invited to this service, and this separates the community. The women's service is only our first step in attempting to confront the issue of women's participation.

The second big challenge is **education**. Part of the problem for the modern Orthodox community is that while their rabbis espouse modern Orthodoxy, their children are attending schools with a right-wing orientation. This is not to criticize right-wing Orthodoxy or the Torah instruction that children receive in these schools. However, if we are going to create a strong modern Orthodox community in New York City, the United States, Israel, or anywhere else, we need to make sure that we offer modern Orthodox education as well.

The challenge of education also includes adult education, and specifically women's education. A hundred years ago, girls did not go to Jewish school at all. The first girls' schools opened in Cracow in 1917. Over the past eighty years, we have reached the point where girls and women study Jewish texts on exactly the same level as men. The level of male Jewish literacy has risen as well; the number of men who are

actively involved in Torah study on some level has grown significantly.

As we address these communal needs, I think the shabbat morning service is a critical component; we ought to incorporate more educational elements into it. One possibility is to allow both men and women to deliver *divrei Torah*. Some synagogues already allow women scholars to speak. In others, girls are able to celebrate bat mitzvahs as part of the shabbat morning service, and the rabbi addresses the bat mitzvah girl just as he addresses the bar mitzvah boy.

Education is really the great equalizer. Men and women, young and old—everybody is able to study Torah and reach the highest level he or she can achieve. In this respect there is no difference between men and women. If we are somehow able to incorporate the notion of equality of education into the shabbat morning service without disturbing the traditions of that service, we will be continuing the process that was begun a century ago of allowing the Orthodox synagogue to meet the needs of a changing Orthodox community, while at the same time remaining faithful to our tradition.

APPENDIX

Conference Participants

Elliott Abrams, Ethics and Public Policy Center
Arlene Agus, Ezrat Nashim
Steven Bayme, American Jewish Committee
Matthew Berke, *First Things*
Ivan Berkowitz, Steib and Co.
Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald, National Jewish Outreach Program
Rabbi Maurice Corson, Wexner Foundation
Rabbi David Dalin, Catholic University of America
Fred Ehrman, Shufro, Rose, and Ehrman
Sylvia Barack Fishman, Brandeis University
Shlomo Gewirtz, Writer
Neil Gillman, Jewish Theological Seminary
Seth Gitell, *The Forward*
J. J. Goldberg, *Jerusalem Report*
Robert Goldberg, Ethics and Public Policy Center
Lawrence Grossman, American Jewish Committee
Martin Gruss, Gruss and Co.
Mr. and Mrs. Roger Hertog, Sanford C. Bernstein and Co.
Rabbi Alvin Kass, East Midwood Jewish Center, Brooklyn, NY
Francine Klagsbrun, Jewish Theological Seminary
David Klinghoffer, *National Review*
Rabbi Peter S. Knobel, Beth Emet The Free Synagogue, Evanston, IL
Lawrence Kobrin, Cahil, Gordon, and Reindel
Neal Kozodoy, *Commentary*

Ted Lapkin, Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County
Ezra Levin, Kramer, Levin, Naftalis, and Frankel
Rabbi Clifford Librach, Temple Sinai, Sharon, MA
Charles S. Liebman, Bar-Ilan University, Israel
Mr. and Mrs. Marcel Lindenbaum, Lindenbaum College for Girls
Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, Kehillath Jeshurun
Richard Marker, Hillel—The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life
Rabbi Adam Mintz, Lincoln Square Synagogue, New York
Dennis Prager, *The Prager Perspective*
Yossi Prager, Avi Chai Foundation
Rabbi Yael Ridberg, Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, New York
Gary Rosenblatt, *Jewish Week*
Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, Community Synagogue, Port Washington, NY
Jacob J. Schachter, Yeshiva University
Gabriel Schoenfeld, *Commentary*
Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, Society for the Advancement of Judaism
Barry Shrage, Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston
Rabbi Robert M. Seltzer, Hunter College
David Singer, American Jewish Committee
Michael Steinhardt, Steinhardt Foundation
Marc Stern, American Jewish Congress
Jeffrey Stier, Jewish Policy Center
Rabbi Harlan Wechsler, Congregation Or Zarua, New York
Jack Wertheimer, Jewish Theological Seminary of America
Jonathan Woocher, Jewish Education Service of North America

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