

## Dana Evans Kaplan on Reform Judaism Today

*Debra Kaufman*  
Northeastern University  
*d.kaufman@neu.edu*

During a recent dinner party a rabbi of a large conservative congregation and a noted scholar agreed that they were both discouraged by the superficial focus among their respective congregants and colleagues on *tikkun olam*. Both worried about its widespread use as a shorthand for the more substantive if not philosophical text and talk we call Judaic. For them, “*tikkun olam*” reduced to a superficial catch phrase the meaning and measure of what each saw as the more complex theological and communal history of the Jews. It had become a universal message without a distinctly Jewish perspective. The rabbi lamented the loss of focus on the traditional measures of a strong Jewish identity, such as practices, rituals, belief and belonging. The scholar wanted more of a focus on the philosophical and intellectual history that distinguished Judaism from other religious traditions. To repair the world stood as a most worthy idea and practice, they argued, but it should be pursued from a distinctly Jewish orientation. It represented for them a kind of “secularization” of Judaism and a move away from the rich theological and philosophical basis from which Jewish beliefs and practices come.

Dana Kaplan,<sup>1</sup> too, worries about the movement away from substantive philosophical tenets, specifically within the Reform movement. He is concerned about maintaining a Jewish set of beliefs in the face of an increasingly secularly oriented U.S. Jewry, particularly among its young.<sup>2</sup> While documenting the history and theological pathways that mark Reform Judaism’s journey to its current place as the largest Jewish denomination, Dana Kaplan also chronicles the important dilemmas facing the Reform movement. He argues that Reform Judaism is once again at the crossroads of important decision making if it is

1 Dana Evans Kaplan, *The New Reform Judaism: Challenges and Reflections: Challenges and Reflections* (JPS, 2013).

2 Unless otherwise noted all data will be taken from the Pew Research Center’s Religion and Jewish Life October 2013 survey report entitled “Portrait of Jewish Americans”.

to maintain its place in American Judaism, indeed, if institutional religious Judaism is to survive at all.<sup>3</sup> He looks to a unified theology, Ethical Monotheism (among a common core of committed rabbis), as a way to solidify and grow the Reform movement and as a way of closing the widening gap between an institutional Judaism and its adherents. In the very last pages of his book, Rabbi Kaplan summarizes the central challenges he has posed: Can we simultaneously make our faith both emotionally intense and intellectually honest (316)? That challenge, he argues, is inherent in any theology that stresses individual autonomy and critical thought. In this essay I would like to reflect on Kaplan's provocative theological thesis from a slightly different angle of vision, that of a sociologist.

### Sociology and the Data

Survey data reveal that there has been an overall decline in conventional measures of what we call Jewish *religious* identity among non-Orthodox Jews; I have termed this in other writings the decline in the traditional three B's: behavior, belonging, and believing. These trends have been with us for several decades. Some refer to this as the secularization thesis, others as assimilation theory, and still others as the rise of a symbolic religiosity and symbolic ethnicity. In the main, each theory refers to the shifting emphasis among non-orthodox Jews from religion per se to the cultural/ethnic/secular context for their definition of what it means to be a contemporary Jew. Trends toward

<sup>3</sup> The PEW survey reports that while institutional affiliation among contemporary Jews may be on the decline, the reform movement still remains the denomination of choice. Within all three denominational movements, most of the switching is in the direction of less-traditional Judaism. The PEW survey finds that approximately one-quarter of people who were raised Orthodox have since become Conservative or Reform Jews, while 30% of those raised Conservative have become Reform Jews, and 28% of those raised Reform have left the ranks of Jews by religion entirely. Much less switching is reported in the opposite direction. For example, just 7% of Jews raised in the Reform movement have become Conservative or Orthodox, and just 4% of those raised in Conservative Judaism have become Orthodox. On the other hand, the Reform Movement houses the smallest number of those who say that religion is very important in their lives. About eight-in-ten Orthodox Jews say religion is very important to them. Among Conservative Jews, 43% say religion is very important to them. Fewer than one-in-five Reform Jews (16%) and fewer than one-in-ten Jews with no denominational affiliation (8%) say religion is very important in their lives (PEW report, chapter one, online).

individual choice have increased the number and ways in which one can self-define as Jewish, or, as some have put it, the many ways of “doing” Jewish.

One consequence of this turn toward personalism has led us to question what constitutes Jewish authenticity. Historian Regina Morantz-Sanchez (2000) reflects on such changes when comparing her conscious choices about her Jewishness to her “Zaide’s” unconscious or taken-for-granted ones. Her Jewishness, she claims, is as authentic as his, since both are true to a particular time and place. But can a common set of symbols rather than a distinctive common core of beliefs and practices maintain Jewish identity from one generation to the next? And, if so, which ones? Whose life, whose rituals, and whose experiences normatively make up the “legitimate” core of Jewish tradition and knowledge in a post modern culture and context? Whose authority authenticates a tradition or a shared “religious culture”?

From its beginning Reform Judaism has been defined by its flexibility and accommodation to modernity. Combined with its non-authoritarian structure these strengths, argues Kaplan, may now present some of its weaknesses. There is a deepening concern among scholars, communal leaders, and rabbis about the dissolution of the boundaries that define the Reform community and the loosening of some of its most important philosophical tenets. While I cannot speak with any expertise about the loss of philosophical tenets and the theology that is critical to Reform Judaism, I can speak to the social science data that have given rise to these worries and ultimately to Dana Kaplan’s book and his timely concerns.

To some extent Kaplan’s narrative of loss seems quite real. The data suggest a growing disenchantment with religion among non-Orthodox U.S. Jews. According to the PEW Research Center’s report of October 1, 2013 entitled “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” the percentage of U.S. adults who say they are Jewish when asked about their religion has declined by about half since the late 1950s and currently is a little less than 2% of the population. However, the number of self-identified Jews who claim they are Jews by ancestry or upbringing but who also describe themselves as atheists, agnostics, or having no particular religion is on the rise and is now about .05% of the U.S. adult population.<sup>4</sup> Depending on how one counts the data, or put another way, who decides who “counts” as Jewish when estimating our population statistics, we come up with different narratives about the future of Judaism. Some see the rise of “Jewish Not Religion” (JNR) as a sign of resilience and growth;

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4 JNRs (Jews Not Religion) constitute 20 percent of American Jewry and nearly a third of those born after 1980. Sources for PEW data (2013): <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/#fn-17239-5>.

others see it as a sign of erosion and decline. Data do not speak for themselves. The narrative frameworks and language that surround issues of continuity (erosion/renewal) are all contested: who is a Jew; to the Israeli-distancing-debates, which move linguistically from narratives about “distancing” to “alienation” to “erosion” to the secularization-theory-debates, which suggest a straight or sometimes bumpy road, but nevertheless, a *linear* one to assimilation and to clear distinctions between the sacred and the secular.<sup>5</sup> The interpretation of demographic trends in population size and composition, for either an erosion- or a resilience-debate emerge from tensions about the development and maintenance of consensus on who represent core Jews and who are relegated to the periphery.

In a recent review I did of the edited volume *Jewish Inter-marriage around the World*,<sup>6</sup> I was particularly cognizant of the presumably unconscious assumptions researchers make when presenting their findings. In their discussion of South African Jews, Sally Frankental and Stuart Rothgiesser complicate the “erosion” argument by suggesting that even endogamy, two Jews marrying one another, does not guarantee the “Jewishness” of the next generation. Endogamous couples, they argue, may transmit an “empty ethnic consciousness” to the next generation. Their observation brings into focus a thematic subtext within the erosion argument that is rarely made explicit: What is a “full” ethnic and/or religious identity? Whose experiences, whose lives, whose “Judaism” serve as the yardstick from which we measure decline, intensity, strength of identity or an “empty” ethnic consciousness? Is a decline or rise in religiosity or ethnicity as much about who defines what is Judaic/Jewish as the findings themselves? Feminist and postmodern critiques argue that there isn’t one “essential” Jewish tradition but rather many “traditions” that fit into multiple identity narratives and histories.<sup>7</sup> To understand the state of contemporary Judaism we need to take into account the socio-historic and political context in which the data are gathered.<sup>8</sup> Tradition never remains static. Subject to time and place it is continually invented and reinvented.

<sup>5</sup> See a critique of each (Kaufman 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Shulamit Reinharz and Sergio DellaPergola, eds. (Transaction Publishers, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> If we include the JNR in our estimates, the face and voice of contemporary U.S. Jewry is fast becoming a multicultural one as intermarriage across race and religion has risen dramatically over the past decade. The Pew data report that from 2000–2013 those who affiliate and/or identify with the Reform Movement have the highest rates of intermarriage (e.g., 39% among Conservative and 82% among Reform, see PEW Report, Chapter 2).

<sup>8</sup> The Pew survey, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” issued in May 2015 reports that 23 percent of Christians (and 34 percent of young ones) consider themselves to be of no religion, figures almost the same as for Jews (see also Gans 2015 for an analysis of JNRs).

### What Do We Know About Differences between Those Who “Have” Religion and Those Who Don’t?

While the PEW data document the rise of JNRS, they also reveal that although Jews by religion are substantially more observant than Jews of no religion, the correspondence is not perfect. Some Jews by religion are non-believers, while some Jews of no religion are ritually observant. National studies of secularization and secularity prior to the PEW study have picked up on what appear to be anomalies among those who claim they have no religion.<sup>9</sup> For instance, Barry Kosmin (2007) notes that the majority of the U.S.’s self-described identifiers with “not by religion,” the so called “religious nones,” are by no means “hard core Atheists or even Agnostics,” who together constitute less than 1 percent of the population. Sixty seven percent of “religious nones” believe in the existence of God, 56 percent agree that God intervenes personally in their lives to help them; 57 percent believe that God performs miracles” (7). Kosmin concludes that the “majority of secularists are religious” in one sense or another and notes that “even those who do not belong to religious institutions or identify with religious communities have theistic beliefs and concerns” (7).

In contrast to Kosmin’s focus on those who define themselves as secular, Hartman and Hartman (2008:2) investigated people who, “although they may not disavow their religion, in practice and expression give religion little weight in their day-to-day behaviors.” In other words, recent studies on secularity raise questions about the secular/sacred split by looking to what might be religious among those who claim “no religion” and what might be “secular” in the patterns and beliefs of those who claim they “have” religion.

<sup>9</sup> In response to the question: “When it comes to your outlook do you regard yourself as secular, somewhat secular, somewhat religious or religious? The national poll result was 10 percent secular, 6 percent somewhat secular, 38 percent somewhat religious, and 37 percent religious” (Kosmin and Keysar 2007:22). As might be expected, the secular outlook scores were highest among the “No Religion” category with 51 % describing themselves as secular or somewhat secular (22). But, Kosmin and Keysar (2007) also note that scores were high among those who self-identify with religious traditions. For example, secular outlook scores were: 42 percent among self-identified Jews, 37 percent among the New Religious movements; 26 percent among Eastern religions and 15 percent among Muslims (22). It appears, they note, that the data tapped into “attitudes and concerns relating to church state separation and minority group anxiety about what “religious” actually means in practice” (22). They conclude that: “. . . It appears that some who called themselves secular were expressing a civic or political concern that constituted support for a secular state that guarantees freedom of expression and worship to minority faiths” (22).

When looking specifically to the data on Jews, Klaff (2006) notes that “while few unidentified/unaffiliated Jews express any interest in formal (organized) Judaism, over 60% have observed a Jewish mourning ritual, over 50% have either held or attended a Passover dinner (Seder) in the past year, and about 40% have a mezuzah (ceremonial scroll) on their outside door” (427). Additionally, he notes that about 72 percent of the affiliated population and about 60 percent of the unidentified/unaffiliated claim to “pray in their own words” (427). Klaff suggests that “. . . while the connections may be weaker for the ethnic attitudes and behaviors of the non-affiliated/non self-identified, they are nonetheless relatively substantial for attitudes such as ‘being Jewish,’ ‘having a clear sense of what being Jewish means to me’ and . . . other items and behaviors such as involvement with Jewish organizations, Jewish friendship networks, visiting Israel and being culturally connected through Jewish reading materials and Jewish-related travel” (426). He concludes that these connections “translate into far from trivial ethnic attitude and behavior indices” (426). Similarly, Gans (2015) notes that about 45 percent of JNRS in the PEW study say they believe in “a God or a personal spirit”; and about 42 percent held or attended a Seder during their most recent Passover and that about a fifth attend a synagogue at least occasionally, not counting weddings, funerals, or bar mitzvahs (5–6).

Exploring what it means to “have” religion or to be religiously identified, British anthropologist Abby Day was puzzled that despite all signs of public Christian religious participation declining over a fifty year period, a 2001 UK decennial census revealed that 72% of all Brits surveyed self-identified as Christian (2009: 87). She engaged in field work designed to explore the question, “What do people believe in nowadays and how do we find out? She concludes that statements of religious affiliation are often expressions of “believing in belonging,” where people associate with religion to reinforce ethnic, familial, or other social identities.

Day is discovering what Jewish Studies scholars have been writing about for several decades, that widespread stated affiliation with religion may mean something quite different from church/synagogue attendance, participation in public rituals and rites, and/or belief or spirituality. It is reminiscent of the ethno/religious or religious/ethno arguments made early on by Jewish identity researchers. For instance, both Herbert Gans (1994) and Jerry Winter (1996) acknowledged the need for different methodological approaches (such as fieldwork, ethnographic studies, and/or intensive interviews) in the study of symbolic ethnicity and religiosity to supplement survey data in order to better distinguish between symbolic ethnicity and religiosity and to discover the motives for institutional affiliation.

Future research, writes Winter, will have to “tease out the religious aspects of Jewish ethnicity as well as the ethnic aspects of Jewish religiosity in order to understand better the ethno religion which this study finds importantly related to integration into the Jewish community in America” (1992: 360). Sharot (1997) argues that our point of reference determines how we understand religiosity. He contends that as ethnicity becomes more a matter of feelings and identity, religious institutions assume importance for the “salience and continuation of those feelings and identity” (39). Arguing that “(t)he subjective feelings of ethnicity appear to determine the objective existence of religious institutions and behavior,” he concludes that among American Jews, “ethnicity and religion are in a relationship of symbiosis or complementarity” (1997: 39). Therefore, he reasons, the tendency of American Jewish sociologists has been to analyze the religiosity of the majority of American Jews as an “epiphenomenon of ethnicity” (39). Kunkelman (1990), coined the term “religion of ethnicity” to express this peculiar phenomenon.

Along with others such as Hartman and Hartman (2008), I have concluded (2005) that current quantitative studies and surveys are not yet adequately able to untangle the interrelationships among ethnic, religious, and secular Jewish identities until more qualitative and/or longitudinal work is done. While the quantitative data point to the paradoxes in a reliable and verifiable way, the meaning of these paradoxical behavioral expressions are best understood through the voices and narratives of the respondents themselves.

### What Does It Mean and How Does It Feel to Have “No Religion”?

In my chapter in Dana Kaplan’s edited volume on contemporary Jewry (2005), I asked a question as relevant today as it was when I first wrote it: What place does Judaism hold in American Jewish identity? Some of the data in that essay were based on a project I am still conducting on post-Holocaust Jewish identities among U.S. and Israeli young adults. The data suggest that these young adults think about and practice their Judaism within an ethical/Judaic framework. They believe in a Judaism that demands in both practice and belief that we engage in social justice. While most of the young adults in this study claim they are “just Jews” or “secular Jews,” almost all feel strong cultural and historical ties to Judaism. Social justice issues and *tikkun olam* were primary factors of the importance of Judaism in their lives. Yes, almost to a person they are exemplary of the dilemma posed by the rabbi and the scholar with whom I began this essay.

So what can we learn about Judaism and Jewish identities from these primarily secular young adults?<sup>10</sup> The young people in my work on post-Holocaust Jewish identities do not necessarily eschew the sacred in their lives but find and enact it in the secular world. They practice their Judaism by working in the ghettos, through world service projects, in the bars by celebrating Jewish holidays, in theaters by attending Jewish film festivals, in secular classrooms by supporting Jewish Studies courses in their colleges and universities and later in courses within their communities, and by praying in the outdoors and/or in communal living rooms with and sometimes without reference to the mothers, fathers, and prophets of ancient Judaism or to a Jewishly identified God. There is the young woman in my study who sees her participation in Holocaust remembrance programs as part of her religious duty and there is the young man in my study who ends every Shabbat by singing *Amazing Grace* with his friends. For this young adult, a Protestant hymn, originally written in remorse by a white man for his involvement in slave trading, has become part of his Jewish identity repertoire. “When I hear *Amazing Grace*,” he says, “I think Shabbos!”

For many of the post-Holocaust generation of 20 to 30 year olds I researched, the Holocaust serves not as a message of Jewish victimhood but rather as a universal imperative to fight injustices wherever they exist. “As long as there is one anti-Semite in the world,” claims one young woman, “I am a Jew!” Many who worked with Oxfam saw this as a way of preventing a different kind of genocide in the world. Many carry with them a nostalgia for a past they have never known but are continually recreating through food, travel, and cultural commitments to those things Jewish.<sup>11</sup>

The data I have collected over the past decade suggest that we may be witnessing more the opportunities that secularity offers than a rejection of the sacred. The respondents in my study seem to have found new settings, often secular, for their religious feelings and sentiments. They believe in an array of possibilities that do not necessarily cohere with the language, settings, and rituals of traditional Jewish belief, belonging, and behavior, but nonetheless resonate as Jewish to them and are recognizably Jewish by others. So just

<sup>10</sup> See Kaufman (2007; 2010) for more on contemporary young adults and post Holocaust Jewish identities.

<sup>11</sup> Rachel Gross (2014) argues in her dissertation that rather than an indicator of minimalist religious practice and identification, nostalgia reflects an active engagement with tradition and community. Her case studies vary widely including Jewish genealogical work, synagogues that have become museums and children's toys and games and food. It is a fine example of religious practice outside of institutional religious life.



what is it this fastest growing population of the non-Orthodox Jewish community is saying? Are they rejecting religion or are they renaming what they feel and believe to be religious? Do their stories move us from a frenzied “dying” trope to a more neutral “changing” or even “vitality” one? The identity stories I collected are fragmented presentations of self-definition that help us think about identity not as some unitary “thing” one “has” but as the shifting processes that people practice and rehearse, sometimes in ambivalent and conflicting ways.

Riv Ellen Prell (2015) sums up the current religious scene accordingly:

Across all American groups and religions, the multicultural ethos has made in-marriage appear parochial, and the post-modern embrace of self-invention and mix-and match identities has undermined traditional forms of authority already long in jeopardy. Younger Jews have rejected the importance of Jewish difference, while demanding the right to their own difference when it comes to their choice of partners, their careers, and their place in history . . . As we learn from recent research, many young non-Orthodox Jews tell themselves that whatever they practice is by definition a legitimate form of Judaism, and whatever they believe constitutes a Jewish belief. In sum, Jewish stories are unlikely ever again to be as coherent as they once were

There is nothing linear about the history of American religion, Jewish or otherwise. Because he has written extensively on the cyclical nature of religious revival in America, historian Jonathan Sarna (2015) is deeply suspect of linear assumptions and estimates. Thus Sarna’s response to the more dire predictions of others is that Judaism’s best years still may be ahead. What I think we may safely assume is that Jewish identity will look radically different in the future. For this reason we need to understand more clearly the fastest growing contingent, those who self-identify as Jews, on their own terms, in their own voices and in the spaces where they practice and perform their Jewishness.

Kaplan’s book raises as many questions as it provides answers. Are we experiencing a kind of “religious renewal” outside the province and provenance of denominational Judaism? What of Kaplan’s belief that a coherent theology will bring and hold reform Jews within its denominational boundaries?<sup>12</sup> Will

<sup>12</sup> Even among the Orthodox where we have seen a vital revival in traditional Judaism, it is not clear that it is a coherent theology alone that maintains and grows commitment. The baalot teshuvah in my book *Rachel’s Daughters* were drawn to Orthodoxy as much for its focus on a commitment to a communal world with clear protections for the female and

the ever changing (as opposed to “ever dying”)<sup>13</sup> majority of non-Orthodox Jews survive in any way that is recognizable as peculiarly Jewish? If multiple narratives and multiple histories make up religious traditions, can any single trope even as overarching and encompassing as ethical monotheism succeed in stemming a movement away from institutional Judaism? Does ethical monotheism provide both the universality that this younger generation of Jews craves and the particularity that communal leaders and rabbis believe is necessary for transference from one generation to the other?

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the feminine (in contrast to a materialistic and individualistic secular culture) as to a theologically coherent Orthodoxy. Survey data also tell us that there are multiple theological narratives within Orthodoxy. For instance, belief in God and God's commandments varies: some hold to the notion that God is ever present and that those laws are derived from God. Others believe that the practice of Halakhah is the fulfillment of a communal commitment which keeps Jews different and apart from others.

13 See Rawidowicz, S. 1986. *The State of Israel, Diaspora and Jewish Continuity: Essays on the Ever Dying People*. Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England.

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