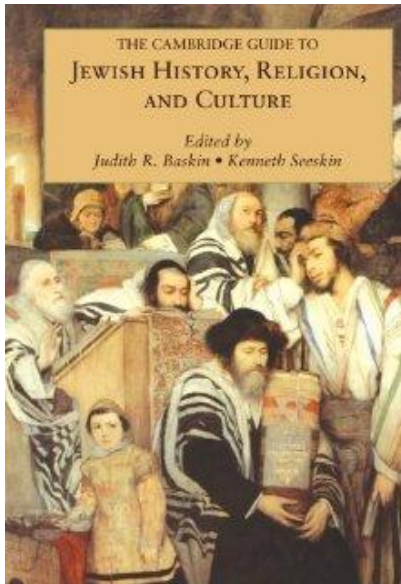




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Contemporary Forms of Judaism

by Dana Evan Kaplan



Jewish religious practice in the twenty-first century exists in many different forms. The following essay describes the eighteenth and nineteenth century origins of this diversity and discusses the evolution and contemporary manifestations of Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox Judaisms, as well as other less prominent Jewish groups, in North America. Contemporary forms of Jewish life in Israel are also discussed.

Origins of Contemporary Judaisms

Modern Judaism developed out of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) and political emancipation, twin processes which deeply affected the Jews of Western and Central Europe and eventually Eastern Europe as well. As a result of diverse factors that developed in the early modern period, a

relatively monolithic Judaism began to fragment in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During these years, increasing numbers of Western and Central European Jews became more involved in European economic, social, and cultural life. In some locations, Jews received political rights that emancipated their communities from centuries of political and economic restrictions.

While some Jews continued to believe in and observe their religion in a traditional manner, others, who were becoming more acculturated to the larger society, began to discard ritual practices. Some families continued to share a Sabbath meal or perhaps attend synagogue occasionally, particularly on the Days of Awe and the three pilgrimage festivals. Others dropped all Jewish observances, believing that they conflicted with life in modern European society. Many Jews also converted to Christianity, frequently for pragmatic rather than theological reasons, as the promise of complete political emancipation lagged. Conversion to Christianity was the most effective way of evading the many social prejudices directed at Jews and taking advantage of new economic and professional opportunities.¹

Traditional European Jewish society had been controlled by community rabbis, who followed the halakhic system of Jewish law which dictated behavior not only in the ritual realm but in every facet of life. Although the community rabbi did not exert civil legal control over the local Jews, he had a great deal of religious authority and was able to enforce strict standards. After political emancipation, the authority of rabbinic leadership diminished and then dissipated. The Jewish community was no longer held together by internal solidarity and external hostility, but rather developed into a voluntary association with which individual Jews could choose to affiliate.

The model for integrating European culture with traditional Judaism was Moses Mendelssohn (1729 –1786), an intellectual who believed that natural religion gave Jews and Christians a basis for mutual respect.² Convinced that Jews could combine adherence to halakhah and also participate in the larger culture, Mendelssohn is generally seen as the founder of Haskalah. He provided his followers (maskilim) with a model for maintaining traditional piety while engaging the modern world intellectually and creatively. Mendelssohn translated the Torah into German, partially as a means of helping Jews to learn the language of secular discourse. This built further momentum towards acculturation and assimilation, a process which was most advanced in the larger cities of German-speaking Europe. The first modern Jewish religious movement that consciously developed a strategy for building a Jewish theology and practice for acculturated Jews in a post-emancipatory society was Reform Judaism.

Reform Judaism in Central Europe and its Impact

Israel Jacobson (1768 1828), a wealthy philanthropist, is generally regarded as the founder of the Reform movement. In Seesen, in 1810, he built the first Reform synagogue, a structure which included architectural features usually found in churches. The bimah (the reader's platform) was placed in front of the ark rather than in the center of the sanctuary. Although this location later became one of the characteristics of a Reform temple, at the time it was unique. The inscriptions on the building were in Latin as well as Hebrew, another obvious deviation from tradition. Perhaps most important, the Seesen synagogue had an organ, and services included not only instrumental music, but prayers and sermons in the vernacular. Men

and women remained separated, as in the traditional synagogue, with women sitting in the balcony along three of the walls behind a physical barrier. This separation of men and women during worship remained a feature of German Reform Judaism. In contrast, mixed or family seating became characteristic of the American Reform movement. Jacobson later brought many of these reforms to Berlin where he opened a synagogue in his own home.³

The early Reform movement was primarily a lay response to the social need of those German Jews who were desperately looking for a way to remain connected to Judaism while becoming more acculturated into German society. By the 1840s, however, there were a substantial number of rabbinic leaders who identified themselves with Reform views on the religious issues of the day. Abraham Geiger (1810-1874) became the best known leader of the moderate reformers and Samuel Holdheim (1806-1860) became the leader of the more extreme faction. Each of these ideological positions carried over into the nineteenth century North American Jewish community, where Isaac Mayer Wise (1819-1900) became the leader of the moderates, and David Einhorn (1809-1879) became the inspiration for more radical thinkers. The Reform movement emphasized Judaism's ethical teachings as monotheism's most important contribution to western society. They stressed the universalistic nature of their religious creed and deemphasized its national character.

As a consequence of this universal focus and a desire to indicate political allegiance with the countries in which they lived, Reform leaders rejected beliefs and practices which they saw as particularistic, including dietary laws and traditional modes of Sabbath observance. Nor did they look forward to the day when Solomon's Temple would be rebuilt in Jerusalem and the messiah would arrive to bring all Jews back

to the land of Israel. The very name of their synagogues – temples – indicated that their permanent houses of worship were to be in Germany, the United States, or wherever else they could live in peace and brotherhood.⁴

During the 1840s, German Jewish reformers held three rabbinic conferences to discuss various issues of importance. These conferences also led to what became Conservative Judaism. This break with Reform was initiated by Zacharias Frankel (1801-1875) who walked out of the Frankfurt Rabbinical Conference of 1845 after the group endorsed a position stating that the use of Hebrew was no longer necessary in worship. Frankel envisioned a new type of Judaism that would embrace a historical approach to the evolution of Jewish tradition but retain most of the traditional forms of practice.⁵ Frankel and like-minded colleagues founded the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau in 1854 and began to teach what they termed Positive-Historical Judaism – positive in that it sought to preserve halakhah and historical because it tried to understand Judaism in a historical context. The proponents of this school accepted the idea of change, but only if those changes could be justified halakhically and fit in with the continued development of Judaism.

During the same time period, traditional Jews in German-speaking Europe began to formulate counter-arguments to Reform and the Positive-Historical school. Led by Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), they became known as the Neo-Orthodox, a designation which indicated that they were making a renewed commitment to traditional Judaism. In 1836, Hirsch wrote “Nineteen Letters on Judaism”, a series of essays defending traditional conceptions of the Jewish religion. Hirsch reiterated that Judaism required Jews to believe that God had given the Torah to Moses at Mt. Sinai and that the Torah included both written and oral

instructions. All of the commandments were equally important and no one had the right to differentiate between ethical and ceremonial laws. Hirsch did not believe that secular knowledge should or could be utterly rejected, rather he stressed “Torah im derekh erez” (Torah with the larger world), an integration of traditional Judaism with secular studies in a framework within which Torah remained dominant. He encouraged the construction of handsome synagogue buildings and Jewish schools to indicate both the dignity of traditional Judaism and the fact that Jews could conform to external aspects of the larger culture.⁶

Reformers argued that, like Christianity, Judaism had a theology and that theology needed to be studied and understood as part of religious practice. The Neo-Orthodox objected to this emphasis, arguing that the basis of Judaism was the divinely revealed halakhah, and that Judaism without halakhah was warped and degenerate. The Positive-Historical school tried to emphasize both faith and halakhic practice, but insisted that each had to be mediated through Wissenschaft des Judentums, the academic study of Judaism as an historical phenomenon. Halakhah needed to be binding but sufficiently flexible in order to allow Jewish religious life to adapt to changing societal circumstances. Such changes could only be determined through the collective will of the Jewish people.

The Development of Reform Judaism in North America

Despite the fact that the three major contemporary Jewish religious denominations trace their origins to German-speaking Europe, the various movements, particularly Reform and Conservative, achieved their greatest success in North America. Although the earliest synagogues in

colonial America were Sephardic Orthodox, the Reform movement began to develop in the 1820s and 1830s with a growing immigration of Jews from Central Europe.

The first attempt at building a Reform temple in the United States began in Charleston, South Carolina in 1824, when 47 members of Congregation Beth Elohim signed a petition to the board of directors requesting that they consider a number of minor ritual reforms, including the introduction of a small number of prayers in English. In the period between 1836 and 1881, the American Reform movement gathered momentum with the emigration of about 250,000 Jews from Central Europe. On the eve of the large-scale immigration of Eastern European Jewry that began in the 1880s, the Reform movement dominated American Judaism. It appealed to people who wanted to maintain a Jewish identity and various Jewish practices without a system of compulsory ritual adherence. No longer obligated to observe all the laws and customs of Orthodox Judaism, members of Reform synagogues could maintain forms of practice that remained distinctive and meaningful in a modern Christian-dominated society.⁷

The first leader of American Reform Judaism was Isaac Mayer Wise. He was the main influence behind the establishment of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) in 1873, the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1875 (the first seminary for rabbinic training in North America), and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) in 1889. He was regarded as the leader of the moderate wing of the Reform movement, which battled with the radical Reformers, most of whom lived along the East coast. Led by Rabbi David Einhorn, the radical Reformers eventually succeeded in creating a de-ritualized form of liberal Judaism, which became known as Classical Reform. Classical

Reform was defined by the 1885 Declaration of Principles, which became known as the Pittsburgh Platform. It minimized ritual and emphasized ethical behavior in a universalistic context as the central message of the biblical prophets.⁸

Reform Jews did not interpret the Bible in a literal manner and therefore they saw no conflict between religion and science. Most believed that God created the world in some form or manner, and continues to be involved as part of an ongoing process of progressive revelation. Late nineteenth century and early twentieth century reformers stressed the importance of ethical monotheism. They believed that the ethical message of Judaism derived from one beneficent creator God who exists as the source and goal of all humanity. Without the existence of God, any attempt to aspire to high ethical standards of behavior would be useless. The mission of Israel was to spread the concept of ethical monotheism, serving as God's messengers in an age without prophets.⁹

By the late 1940s, the American religious environment had changed and the Reform movement adjusted accordingly. Much of the credit for the successful adaptation of Reform Judaism to the post-World War II environment that saw a shift in Jewish life to the suburbs of large cities, goes to Maurice Eisendrath (1902-1973), who became executive director of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (renamed the Union for Reform Judaism in 2003) in 1943 and its president in 1946. Eisendrath increased the profile of the movement by moving the national headquarters from Cincinnati to New York City in 1948. The "House of Living Judaism" was built on Fifth Avenue and 65th Street in Manhattan, beside the major Reform synagogue in New York, Temple Emanu-El. In 1950, a second Reform rabbinical seminary was established in New York City with the merger of the Jewish

Institute of Religion and Hebrew Union College. In the early twenty-first century, Hebrew Union College has additional campuses in Los Angeles and Jerusalem.

One of the central issues facing the Reform movement was how to provide its members with guidance on ceremonial observance without creating another legal structure. Any obligatory system of religious laws would have been anathema to most Reform Jews. Nevertheless, many religious leaders felt that Reform Judaism allowed for too much freedom and that most lay people interpreted this as meaning that they did not have to observe any ritual whatsoever. Reform “covenant” theologians believed that one of the solutions to this problem was to reemphasize the centrality of the brit, the covenant between God and the children of Israel. This was presented as an organic historical relationship that was reciprocal and continued from generation to generation. Emphasis on this covenant provided a liberal framework for helping people to understand that incorporating religious practices into their lives could be an expression of commitment to this relationship with the divine.¹⁰

The Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) began ordaining women in 1972, and female rabbis have brought an energy and dynamism that have enlivened Reform worship and education in recent decades. Similar efforts have been made since the mid-1970s to update Reform liturgy. The Union Prayer Book had been a ubiquitous presence since the closing years of the 1800s, and many younger people found its ponderous language excessively formal and its theological conceptions outdated. There was, however, no consensus on what a new prayer book might look like. The CCAR Liturgy Committee decided to create a volume reflecting worship preferences of

different theological approaches. When the Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayer Book was published in 1975, it included no fewer than ten different Sabbath evening and six different Sabbath morning services. The services all followed a similar prayer structure, but they differed in their wording, their theological focus, and the inclusion of additional Hebrew text and other traditional elements. A gender sensitive version of was published in 1994, and an entirely new prayer book, Mishkan T'filah, incorporating many traditional elements that had been excised from the original Union Prayer Book, appeared in 2007.

In December 1978 UAHC President Alexander Schindler called for a sustained effort to reach out to the unaffiliated and particularly the growing number of Jews who had intermarried. Arguing against the norms of the times, Schindler said that intermarriage did not necessarily mean that a couple was lost to the Jewish community. This led to an extensive outreach effort designed to welcome interfaith couples as well as potential converts, who were referred to as “Jews-by-choice”.¹¹ The Reform movement also moved toward the full acceptance of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered individuals. In 1990, the Hebrew Union College began admitting openly gay and lesbian students to their rabbinic program. In 1996, the CCAR passed a resolution supporting the rights of homosexual couples to a civil marriage, and in 2002 supported the rights of rabbis to officiate at same-sex commitment ceremonies.

A new theological platform for Reform Judaism was approved in 1999 at the CCAR annual conference in Pittsburgh, where the original platform had been endorsed in 1885. The new platform reintroduced many traditional religious concepts and rituals. Although these were presented as options that could be evaluated rather than as

commandments that had to be observed, their inclusion is a clear indication of the Reform movement's increasing return to many traditional Jewish practices. On the other hand, the Reform movement has also accepted new definitions of Jewish identity and religious fidelity. The movement is, as a number of observers have pointed out, moving in two directions at the same time.

The American Conservative Movement

The Conservative movement has its roots in the Positive-Historical school founded by Zacharias Frankel in mid-nineteenth century Germany. American Conservative Judaism emerged as a distinct movement only at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1902, wealthy American community leaders brought Solomon Schechter (1847-1915) from Cambridge University in England to lead the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City and to promote Conservative Judaism in North America. Schechter argued that the community was the religious authority for determining change. Thus, Judaism had to be studied using modern methods of scholarship that could help Conservative scholars understand how Judaism developed and changed over the course of centuries. The Torah itself had been interpreted and reinterpreted by Jews throughout the ages, and how the Torah was understood at any particular moment in time was the determining factor in setting communal religious standards. Schechter used the term "Catholic Israel" to refer to the group of serious Jews who wanted to understand and live their Judaism in a maximalistic manner.¹²

Whereas the Reform movement was controlled primarily by its congregational organization, the UAHC, the Conservative movement was dominated by its rabbinical

school and theological seminary, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The lay organization, the United Synagogue of America, took its cues from the rabbinic scholars at JTS rather than from their own lay leaders. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) became the center of decision-making for the movement. Members of the CJLS were appointed by each of the three major wings of the Conservative movement: JTS, The Rabbinical Assembly (RA), and the United Synagogue. Voting members were expected to be scholars of Talmudic literature capable of studying the primary sources and formulating practical halakhic guidelines for the Conservative movement. The committee could accept more than one opinion as legitimate, thus allowing for "halakhic pluralism."

In the middle decades of the twentieth century Conservative Judaism proved very successful at attracting many children of immigrants from Eastern Europe who were seeking a middle path that respected traditional modes of Jewish practice but also responded to the challenges of the modern world. However, from the beginning some intellectuals were troubled by the movement's apparent contradictions. It soon became apparent that the vast majority of those joining Conservative synagogues in the post World War II period were neither serious advocates nor punctilious practitioners of Conservative Judaism. While many synagogues were supported by active and involved congregants, there tended to be a significant gulf between the expressed religious goals of the Conservative synagogue, including adherence to Jewish rituals, and the actual reality of most members' Jewish lives.¹³

Even so, the atmosphere in these congregations was more traditional than the typical Reform temple. Hebrew was used more extensively and ritual items such as the

yarmulke (head covering) and the tallit (prayer shawl) were displayed more prominently. Conservative rabbis used various strategies to educate their congregants and increase the level of ritual observance in their congregations, generally with little success. Dissidents on the left wing felt that the movement paid lip service to an outmoded theology and pattern of practice. Many of the theological radicals were followers of Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, a popular JTS professor who saw Judaism as a civilization in its broadest sense and rejected “supernaturalism.” They formed a sub-group and eventually broke away to create the Reconstructionist movement, ultimately building their own rabbinical school and congregational union, a topic discussed in more detail below.

The appeal of the Conservative Synagogue was in large part based on continuity with the past and the avoidance of any radical rejection of tradition. Not surprisingly, most Conservative synagogues wanted their services to look and sound traditional. They were looking for a prayer book that could be used in such a service, but would be appropriately up to date and easy to use by a largely unlearned congregation. In 1946, Rabbi Morris Silverman edited the Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book, which contained most of the traditional liturgy with an English translation on the facing page, and this was adopted by most Conservative congregations. The most important distinguishing feature between the Conservative and Orthodox synagogue in this era was mixed seating. The Conservative movement also allowed congregants to drive to and from synagogue on the Sabbath.

By the 1970s, however, many Conservative congregations were beginning to resemble their Reform counterparts, including in some cases the use of mixed choirs and instrumental music during worship. In 1977, JTS Chancellor Gershom D.

Cohen and Rabbinical Assembly Executive Vice-President Rabbi Wolfe Kelman called for the formation of an interdisciplinary commission to study the possibility of allowing women to take on greater leadership in the movement. This eventually led to the acceptance of ordination for women in 1983, and the ordination of the first woman in 1985. Opposition to the ordination of women prompted the formation of a small group called the Union for Traditional Conservative Judaism (later renamed the Union for Traditional Judaism), which felt that the Conservative movement was drifting away from its halakhic moorings. In general, however, Conservative Judaism has accepted female rabbis with equanimity. In 1985, the Conservative movement introduced a new prayer book, Sim Shalom, which attempted to articulate the movement’s distinctive liturgical and theological approach. A revised edition of Sim Shalom that appeared in 1998 included the names of the matriarchs whenever the patriarchs of the Jewish people are invoked and referred to God in gender neutral terms such as “Sovereign” and “Guardian,” rather than “Lord” or “King.”

Many in the Conservative movement believed that the theology that Solomon Schechter had developed was no longer sufficient and the movement created its first theological platform, Emet Ve-Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism, in 1988. Facing the same social and intellectual pressures as the Reform and Reconstructionist movements, Conservative Judaism has slowly but steadily moved to liberalize religious policies. This has included not only an emphasis on equal roles in worship for women and men, including the ordination of women, but also the acceptance of gay and lesbian rabbinical students. Conservative rabbis may also officiate at same-sex commitment ceremonies. These innovations have led

some to question the need for a Conservative movement at all, since its policies are becoming almost identical to those of Reform.¹⁴

Reconstructionist Judaism

Reconstructionist Judaism is the only one of the four major American denominations that developed entirely in the United States. Reconstructionism was inspired by a single person, Mordecai M. Kaplan (1881-1983), and developed into a movement through the efforts of a small group of his disciples. Kaplan espoused a rationalistic approach that encompassed all aspects of Jewish civilization rather than a narrow definition of Judaism as a religion. In 1909, Kaplan became a professor of homiletics and principal of the Teachers' Institute at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He also led the Jewish Center, an Orthodox congregation on West 86 Street in Manhattan. In 1922, Kaplan left the Jewish Center to found the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, the first Reconstructionist congregation in the country. That same year, he conducted the first American bat mitzvah ceremony for his daughter, Judith.¹⁵

In 1920, Kaplan published "a program for the Reconstruction of Judaism" in which he wrote that a modern Judaism should dispense with supernatural ideas about God and emphasize instead the moral genius of the Jewish people. Religious ideas and practices would need to prove their effectiveness in terms of binding the Jewish people together and keeping them interested and involved. In May 1934, Kaplan published his masterpiece, *Judaism As A Civilization*. Shortly thereafter, he founded *The Reconstructionist*, a biweekly magazine. In 1940, Kaplan started the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, a society to

help promote Reconstructionism within all of the existing organizations and denominations.

Influenced by the educational philosopher John Dewey, as well as the liberal Protestant theologians Henry Nelson Wieman and Harry Emerson Fosdick, Kaplan looked at religion through a naturalistic lens. He taught that Judaism was an evolving religious civilization rather than just a faith. Kaplan personally rejected most of what he termed "supernaturalism". He particularly objected to the doctrine of the chosen people because it seemed exclusionary and he also rejected messianism and traditional eschatology. Despite his theological radicalism, Kaplan was hesitant to found a new denomination. This may have been because Kaplan was deeply committed to klal Israel, the ideal of Jewish unity, and he did not want to introduce further divisiveness into an already fragmented American Jewish community. He originally had hoped that Reconstructionism could "provide a rationale and a program for that conception of Jewish unity which might enable Jews to transcend the differences that divide them, assuming, of course, that they are aware of having at least one thing in common, the desire to remain Jews."¹⁶

Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, Kaplan's son-in-law, formally created the Reconstructionist movement as the fourth American Jewish religious denomination when he founded the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) in Philadelphia in 1968. Many of the early graduates took pulpits in Conservative congregations, while others took positions with Jewish organizations or educational institutions. There were initially few Reconstructionist synagogues that could afford to hire full-time rabbis, but this has changed as the Reconstructionist movement has grown significantly in recent years. In recent years, Reconstructionist practice and liturgy has become more attuned to

spirituality and encourages ungendered divine language in which God is invoked by such as “Source of Life.” The movement has published new prayer books in recent years, including various versions of Kol Haneshemah (Sabbath and Holidays, 1996; Daily Prayer, 1996; and High Holiday, 2000), edited by Rabbi David A. Teutsch, with gender-neutral English translations. The editors have tried to balance the desire for greater spirituality with the need to remain faithful to Kaplan's original vision, although this has not always been possible. The movement prides itself on being on the “cutting edge” of Jewish life and therefore accepts a certain degree of inconsistency, as new ideas germinate and make their way from conception to implementation.¹⁷

Orthodoxy In All Its Forms

The term Orthodox Judaism refers to a wide variety of religious groups. What they share in common is a commitment to the observance of the halakhah, based upon a belief that the Torah was given by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai. God made an exclusive covenant with the children of Israel, and that covenant was detailed in the laws of Moses. Orthodox Jews believe that there was an Oral Torah given to Moses along with the Written Torah, in which God explained verbally those laws which needed elucidation. These laws were discussed and debated by the sages, and were eventually written down in the form of the Talmud. The laws of the Talmud were later codified and these legal codes became authoritative for Jewish observance in every aspect of life. Since the halakhah is seen as a direct expression of God's will, Orthodox Jews believe that it cannot be abrogated or altered for historical or sociological reasons.

Contemporary Orthodox Jews divide into two groups: the modern Orthodox and the ultra-Orthodox, although neither of these groups uses these terms today. The modern Orthodox tend to prefer the designation

“centrist Orthodox”, an appellation coined by Yeshiva University President Norman Lamm; the students of Rabbi Avi Weiss frequently use his term “open Orthodoxy”. The modern Orthodox are those who want to synthesize the best of traditional Judaism with the best of contemporary secular culture. While adherents of Orthodox Judaism range widely in both belief and levels of halakhic observance, the ultra-Orthodox (or strictly Orthodox) are to the right of the modern Orthodox. Although they generally prefer the designation “haredim”, which means “those in awe of God, they also refer to themselves by a number of other designations. In the State of Israel, the term haredim is used to distinguish the ultra-Orthodox from the dati'im, who are usually the religious Zionists (see below). The ultra-Orthodox include both Hasidim, who are themselves broken into numerous sects, and the so-called yeshiva Orthodox, who stress the intense study of the Talmud. While Hasidic groups and the yeshiva Orthodox have similar religious viewpoints, there are significant differences among these communities based in both history and practice.¹⁸

Unlike Reform, Conservative, or Reconstructionist Judaism's Orthodoxy has never had one set of denominational institutions. The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, also known as the Orthodox Union (OU), represent the modern or centrist wing of Orthodoxy. This organization comes the closest to replicating the organizations created by the other denominations. The various ultra-Orthodox groups have numerous formal and informal hierarchies and organizational structures. The Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada (Agudas HaRabbonim) is a relatively small haredi rabbinical organization founded in 1902, which was once influential but has now become known primarily for its periodic polemical attacks against the non-

Orthodox. The main umbrella group for the ultra-Orthodox is Agudath Israel of America. Agudath Israel was founded in 1912 in Kattowitz, which was then in Germany and is now part of Poland, and the American branch was established in 1939. Agudath Israel has numerous departments that provide educational, legal, or religious programs to its members and other interested parties.¹⁹

Orthodoxy was in decline for most of the past 200 years. It is only since 1967 that it has begun making a dramatic and very unexpected recovery in the United States and Israel. The baal teshuvah (plural: baalei teshuvah) movement began attracting notice in the late 1960s and early 1970s when growing numbers of young Jews who had been raised in non-Orthodox homes began showing interest in adopting more traditional patterns of Jewish life and worship. Much of the enthusiasm was a result of the startling victory of the State of Israel in the Six Day War, fought in June 1967. In the weeks leading up to the outbreak of hostilities, many assimilated American Jews felt a visceral connection with the Jewish state for the first time. Orthodox believers saw Israel's victory as the beginning of the messianic redemption from galut (exile). They held that one of the necessary prerequisites for the coming of the messiah was strict ritual observance, and they were determined to help those non-observant Jews who expressed an interest in learning more about traditional Judaism.²⁰

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Orthodoxy has moved to the right in both the United States and Israel.²¹ Practices that were virtually unheard of a generation ago, such as married women covering their hair and abstention from mixed dancing, have now become the norm in many communities. Some have argued that modern Orthodoxy is a movement under siege. The implications of this debate are

enormous. Modern Orthodoxy insists that an appreciation of the positive aspects of western culture is compatible with a fully traditional way of life. It is this spirit which characterizes Yeshiva University in New York City. First founded in 1888, Yeshiva, whose motto is "Torah Umadah" (Torah together with secular studies), is a research university with graduate schools in business, education, social work, medicine, and law among other areas. Students combine Jewish studies with the arts and sciences and men may also pursue study for rabbinic ordination at the affiliated Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, sometimes while also pursuing advanced degrees in secular subjects. The haredim, on the other hand, want to isolate themselves intellectually as well as culturally from secular influences. If the modern Orthodox decline in numbers and influence, Orthodoxy will become steadily more extreme in both belief and practice. This will certainly contribute to a worsening of relations between a growing ultra-Orthodox community and the other denominations.

Already in 1985, modern Orthodox Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg argued that the American denominations of Judaism were heading towards a schism. Greenberg predicted that by the year 2000 there would be close to a million non-Orthodox Jews, mostly in the United States, whose Jewish status would be contested by the Orthodox. Greenberg emphasized that unless the denominations could agree on a strategy for handling this incipient crisis, differing definitions of Jewish identity would lead to a permanent split within the Jewish people. Part of this stems from different standards required for conversion. Reform Judaism does not require a commitment to observe halakhah nor do all Reform rabbis follow halakhic practices in the conversion ceremony, such as requiring immersion in a ritual bath (mikveh). Conservative rabbis follow the halakhah in the conversion

ceremony, but their converts might not meet halakhic standards of practice. In any case, most Orthodox rabbis reject all non-Orthodox converts on principle. The 1983 decision of the Reform Central Conference of American Rabbis to accept patrilineal descent exacerbated this problem. This decision allowed children of Jewish fathers and gentile mothers to be recognized as Jews, provided they received Jewish educations and demonstrated “appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people.” Prior to this time, it was generally assumed that all Jews followed matrilineal descent whereby Jewish identity was determined by Jewishness of the mother.²²

While the centrist Orthodox community has dealt in different ways with the encroachment of modern ideas, the ultra-Orthodox have tried to shut it out as much as possible. Some follow the guiding principle of Rabbi Moshe Sofer (1762 – 1839, Pressburg, Hungary), known as the Hatam Sofer, who coined the motto of radical right-wing Orthodoxy: “The new is forbidden by the Torah.”²³ Certainly, the rejection of modernity has been a central feature of haredi society. Nevertheless, many ultra-Orthodox families do make substantial use of computer technology while carefully avoiding unnecessary secular influences. Unlike most other types of haredim, the Lubavitch Hasidic sect, also known as Chabad Hasidism, is active in religious outreach to fellow Jews. The Lubavitch movement was and continues to be dominated by the personality of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994). Despite his death in 1994, his presence is still very much felt not only at the Lubavitch headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, New York, but at every Chabad synagogue, center, or house anywhere in the world. Chabad has expanded dramatically because of its policy of sending out schluchim, emissaries, to communities,

including college campuses, around the world. The Lubavitcher Rebbe himself sent out the first schluchim in the 1950s and this program has expanded greatly in subsequent decades.²⁴

After the Rebbe's death, it seemed inevitable that the movement would either diminish or split into warring factions. Adding to the likelihood of decline was the messianism that dominated the movement. Some Lubavitchers were so impressed with their leader's force of personality that they were convinced that he was destined to be the messiah. Even his death was not regarded as an insurmountable obstacle. Despite a bitter public battle between the messianists and the non-messianists, in the first decade of the twenty-first century the Lubavitch movement holds together and continues to thrive.²⁵

The role of women in Orthodox society constitutes one of the most important distinctions among contemporary modern Orthodox and haredi Jews. Modern Orthodox Jews are committed to the halakhah and would not countenance any act or policy that would be a direct violation of Jewish law as understood by the Orthodox rabbinate. Nevertheless, most modern Orthodox women firmly believe that innovations that would enhance their religious knowledge and status are permissible according to the halakhah. A number of institutions have begun teaching advanced Talmud studies to women who are motivated to achieve a high level of competence in the full spectrum of rabbinic texts. Several of these organizations are quietly considering the possibility of providing these women with a graduation diploma which would be equivalent to the rabbinical degree given to men. In the early twenty-first century, halakhically knowledgeable women are serving as rabbinic assistants in some Modern Orthodox congregations in North America and as

recognized expert advocates on legal issues connected with women's status in Israel.

Other Orthodox feminist activists are also looking for ways to alleviate the halakhic disadvantages for women inherent in traditional Judaism's unilateral marriage and divorce laws in which a woman is a passive participant in her marriage and must depend on an estranged husband to grant her a divorce. Of particular concern is the plight of the agunah, "the chained woman." If a woman divorces according to secular law but her husband will not or cannot provide her with a get (a Jewish divorce document), she is still regarded as married and cannot move on with her life. Orthodox feminists in the first decade of the twenty-first century remain concerned that the poskim, the rabbinic legal authorities, have not moved more aggressively to resolve this halakhic problem which is a human tragedy for many women. Although rabbinic representatives often try to find solutions in individual cases, they argue that the halakhic issues are complicated and that they are not able to make the types of wholesale changes being demanded.²⁶

New Age Judaisms

One of the most interesting developments of the past thirty years has been the growth of various approaches to Jewish religious belief and practice which fall under the broad rubric of "New Age Judaisms." As with many other non-Orthodox innovations, much of New Age Judaism has developed and been centered in the United States. This is because the United States has the largest Jewish population in the world outside of Israel and also because of the pluralistic nature of American society where different religious groups can compete in a "religious marketplace." In the post-war era, large numbers of American

Jews moved to the suburbs where growing Jewish communities often built unprecedented numbers of large and impressive synagogue buildings. As the children of the original members became young adults, some came to feel that their parents' Judaism lacked spiritual substance. The counter-cultural revolution of the 1960s provided an ideological context for this inchoate sense of religious searching. Many of the young Jews who became active in secular political and social movements also hoped to bring radical spiritual transformations to Judaism.

The first concrete manifestation of religious change was the development of the havurah movement in the late 1960s. The havurah (pl. havurot) was an experimental fellowship set up by young activists who wanted a place where they could engage in heartfelt prayer and study. Many of the early havurah members had seen how groups of hippies had formed communes, and they wanted to create a Jewish religious alternative. They placed the stress on kavannah, the intention to concentrate during prayer. In addition to regular worship in Hebrew, these groups sang niggunim, wordless Hasidic melodies, with great fervor. They hoped that communal prayer could bind them together, but they differed on what type of communities they wished to form. Some had the idea of creating rural communities, others hoped to create residential urban centers, and still others were inspired by the monastic life of the ancient Dead Sea Scroll sect.²⁷

Some original members spoke of their desire to engage in a deep search for the meaning of life, and expressed the sentiment that the Jewish religion could provide them with a usable framework. However, this required a reinvention of Judaism as a revolutionary religious force that could work towards the liberation of the individual.

Adherents of the havurah movement wanted to create an “authentic Jewish community” that took tradition seriously but was willing to institute necessary changes. These included gender equality and an array of other political and social causes, such as peace activism, social justice, ecology, and for some, vegetarianism. Havurat Shalom Community Seminary was the first such commune, established in Somerville, Massachusetts in 1967. Initially the havurah movement attracted little attention. However, the 1973 publication of The Jewish Catalog brought widespread attention to the movement. Subtitled "A Do-It-Yourself Kit", this anthology was modeled on the contemporaneous counter-culture Whole Earth Catalog. The Jewish Catalog stressed that readers could actually "do" Judaism rather than just watch rabbis and synagogue elders perform liturgy and rituals. It also suggested that individuals could incorporate Jewish ideas and observances into their own lives, transforming both Judaism and themselves in the process.²⁸

A growing number of havurah fellowship groups eventually developed into what became known as the Jewish Renewal movement, a broad coalition of Jews interested in new approaches to spirituality and sometimes liberal political activism. Some advocates of Jewish Renewal are primarily interested in left-wing political activism, which they justify by appealing to the biblical prophets and other Jewish texts which emphasize social justice. Others are involved in meditation and other forms of contemplation originating in religious traditions such as Buddhism. Many continue to see themselves as neo-Hasidic, while some emphasize feminism and the spiritual sources of femininity. This spiritual diversity has been harnessed into a movement with an increasingly sophisticated organizational arm. In the early twenty-first century, Jewish

Renewal is ordaining rabbis and has established a full range of affiliated institutions. Among those central in the development of this form of New Age Judaism were Rabbi Arthur Waskow and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi.²⁹

Forms of Jewish Life in Contemporary Israel

The nineteenth century development of political Zionism and the ultimate establishment of the State of Israel have had a major impact on all forms of contemporary Jewish practice. Reform Judaism, with its emphasis on the religious and universal nature of Judaism, could not support an affirmation of Jewish nationalism and opposed the early Zionist movement. Orthodox Jews were divided by the development of an organized Zionist movement led by the secular journalist Theodore Herzl because they believed that only the messiah could bring the Jews of the Diaspora back to Israel and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Eventually, some traditional Jews developed a Zionist vision that was both Orthodox and nationalistic, while others remained vigorously opposed to Zionism as a secular heresy. In the aftermath of the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Reform Judaism has become an enthusiastic supporter of the Zionist endeavor, as are the Conservative and Reconstructionist movements.³⁰

The State of Israel is based upon Jewish models and Israeli social policy incorporates a great deal of religious content, even in aspects of life that have nothing to do with religion. The national tongue is Hebrew, a modernized version of the language used in the Bible. Since Israel is a Jewish state, the Sabbath and all Jewish holidays are officially observed and Jewish dietary laws are followed in all public cafeterias. However,

Jewish life in Israel does not display the denominational variety that characterizes North American Judaism. Religious attitudes in Israel tend to be narrowly religious or completely secular. Many of the Ashkenazic founders of the state of Israel identified as Jews nationally but did not practice Judaism as a religious tradition. The majority of Ashkenazic Jews in Israel immigrated from Eastern Europe, where their exposure to the Reform, Conservative, and Neo-Orthodox movements that originated in Central and Western Europe and North America denominational form Judaism was minimal at best. Similarly, after the establishment of Israel, the majority of new immigrants came from Sephardic or Middle Eastern communities where there had never been significant efforts to rethink Judaism in modern terms. As a result, many Israelis believe that traditional Judaism should be honored whether or not an individual chooses to practice it in its entirety.³¹

The only officially accepted source of Jewish religious authority in Israel are Orthodox rabbis who are recognized by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. They are the only individuals authorized to perform Jewish weddings and to conduct Jewish funerals in accordance with guidelines set down by the Chief Rabbinate. There is no mechanism for a civil marriage in Israel nor is marriage between individuals from different faith communities possible. Israel has both a Sephardic and an Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, a recognition of the regional and cultural differences that have developed in Judaism over the centuries. While the Reform and Conservative movements have established a small number of congregations and institutions of learning in the country, they and their rabbinic leaders are unable to achieve official recognition and thus have received little state funding.

Israelis divide into four groups in terms of degree of Jewish religious practice:

haredim (ultra-Orthodox), dati'im (religious Zionists), masorti'im (traditional, but not Orthodox), and hilonim (secular). The traditionalists are usually Sephardim from Islamic or Mediterranean countries. Most attend an Orthodox synagogue on the Sabbath and sometimes during the week, keep kosher. Many of the men may put on tefillin (phylacteries) during morning prayers. What makes them traditional rather than Orthodox is that most will drive and use electricity on the Sabbath. Many go to pray at an Orthodox synagogue Saturday morning and then attend a soccer game or watch television in the afternoon. Many of the masortiim have supported the Sephardic Torah Guardians political movement (Shas), which has built an educational and social service network that helps poor Sephardim throughout the country.

Shas was founded by young Sephardic haredi rabbis who were mostly trained in Ashkenazi yeshivas but grew dissatisfied with what they perceived to be discrimination. They advocated a fundamentalist world view and an extremely strict level of observance, both of which were foreign to the vast majority of their supporters. Yet because they were seen as religiously authentic, they received a great deal of social and economic support. In recent years, the movement has suffered corruption scandals, and new forms of Sephardic haredi Judaism have appeared. Despite the fact that most masorti Israelis enjoy their flexible lifestyles, the “haredization” of the masorti Sephardim appears to be an ongoing process.³³

Many Israelis identify themselves as secular, but this term includes any Jewish Israeli who is not Orthodox or traditional. Among the secularists, a slight majority say that they believe in God, an obvious indication that the term hiloni needs to be understood cautiously. The majority participate in at least some Jewish ritual, such as the Passover seder. Some Israelis may

practice a considerable amount of Jewish observances, but interpret them in nationalistic rather than religious terms.

Haredi Jews consider their belief system and religious practices to extend back in an unbroken chain to the giving of the Torah from God to Moses on Mt. Sinai. They believe that every aspect of life should be governed by the laws of the Torah and they aspire to live in a completely religious society, removed from all or almost all secular influences. While the early secular Zionist establishment was hostile to the haredi and Orthodox Judaism generally, the religious communities were able to use their numbers to pressure the first Israeli prime minister David Ben Gurion into making religious accommodations for them. The country also agreed to observe central Jewish practices, at least in part. A status quo agreement established certain ground rules: Buses could run on the Sabbath in some areas, but not in others. Essential utilities could run but government offices would close on the Sabbath, and so forth. The haredim were able to claim military exemptions or deferrals, and many haredi couples were eligible for subsidies available for families with large numbers of children.

Israeli Orthodox leaders, including prominent politicians, frequently argue that the Reform and Conservative movements have encouraged assimilation in the Diaspora and proven themselves to be a destructive force. Israeli Orthodox rabbinical leaders have attacked the non-Orthodox movements in the strongest of terms, and have periodically launched campaigns to re-write the Law of Return, the legislation which granted every Jew the right to immigrate to the Jewish state and receive citizenship immediately upon arrival. The definition of a Jew in the Law of Return is a person who was born of a Jewish mother or has converted to Judaism. The Orthodox parties have frequently demanded that the government

amend the law to add that the conversion must be done “according to halakhah.” Thus far, pressure from the Diaspora has convinced Israeli leaders that allowing such a change would severely harm Israeli-Diaspora relations and each time, the proposed amendment has been shelved.³³

The Future of Judaism

Although many Jewish writers over the last two thousand years have predicted the demise of Judaism, it has continued to survive and thrive. Certainly, the future of Judaism depends on many factors which cannot be predicted. First and foremost is the social, political, and religious course of the State of Israel. Despite the ongoing hope that Israel and its neighbors would find a way to live in peace, this is not yet a reality in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The State of Israel faces an ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, but also has to plan for the possibility that more distant enemies might launch a preemptive attack, an act that would be devastating for Jews everywhere.

Barring any such catastrophe, there is still a great deal of uncertainty. The most important consideration is the future of relations between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews. The two groups, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, are rapidly moving apart. Unless there is some development that helps the two parties to reconcile, in the years to come there will be two or more groups of Jews with different basic values, different definitions of who is a member of their religious group, and different normative practices.

In 2004, Rabbi Paul Menitoff, the executive vice-president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), predicted that virtually all American Jews would be either Orthodox or Reform within twenty years. There would be an era of dual

denominationalism, which would replace the tripartite division of American Judaism which developed in the early years of the twentieth century. While it seems likely that each of the existing movements will continue to maintain its own institutions, Menitoff's general thesis may turn out to be true. In Israel, the stark division between the Orthodox and the secular is likely to continue, despite the best efforts of the non-Orthodox denominations and new groups of indigenous advocates of various types of "secular Judaism."³⁴

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Jewish religious life continues to demonstrate significant signs of vitality and creativity, both in the State of Israel and the Diaspora. Jews of all backgrounds are increasingly involved in serious Jewish study at various levels. While many Jews lose interest in Judaism and choose to leave the community, others deepen their involvement and establish modes of community connection and personal practice that provide spiritual meaning and nourishment to their lives.

Notes

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Chabad/Lubavitch - www.chabad.org

Aish HaTorah - www.aish.com

Union for Traditional Judaism - www.utj.org

Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism: Conflicting Visions, and Platforms and Prayer Books: Theological and Liturgical Perspectives on Reform Judaism. He is currently writing a book on the transformation of American Judaism since 1945 for Columbia University Press. Many of his publications can be found on his website www.danakaplan.com.

Dana Evan Kaplan is rabbi of Congregation B'nai Israel in Albany, Georgia. His books include American Reform Judaism, The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism,