

The Wiley-Blackwell History of Jews and Judaism

Edited by Alan T. Levenson

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2012
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Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Wiley-Blackwell history of Jews and Judaism / edited by Alan T. Levenson.

p. cm. – (The Wiley-Blackwell Histories of Religion)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-9637-6 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Jews—History. 2. Judaism—History. I. Levenson, Alan T.

DS118.W62 2010

909'.04924—dc23

2011046001

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 11/13pt Dante by Thomson Digital, Noida, India

Judaism(s) in Contemporary America

Dana Evan Kaplan

American Judaism is distinctive from Judaism as it has been understood and practiced at every other time period throughout history and in every other geographical location. As Jacob Neusner writes, “Judaism in America is different from Judaism as it has ever been known, and as it is practiced everywhere else in the world today.”¹ This is in large part because the United States is a pluralistic society historically based on religious denominationalism. The study of American Judaism is therefore a fascinating topic that must be understood in the context of the impact that American society has had on religion generally. While Judaism is a unique religion, it has followed the institutional patterns set by the American sociological context. After you finish reading this chapter, you should have a better understanding of not only how but also why American Judaism(s) differs from Judaism(s) in other parts of the world.

Since the name of this book is *History of Jews and Judaism*, this chapter will look at how Jews structured and practiced Judaism in America. This volume is concerned with Jewish civilization as a whole and so we will not study “Judaism” the religion to the exclusion of “Jewishness” the ethnic identity. Nevertheless, the focus will be on “Judaism” rather than “Jewishness.” But how does one separate between religious and ethnic elements? Much religious behavior can be understood as expressions of ethnicity and much ethnic identification may mask religious yearnings. While Jews cannot be completely separated from Judaism nor Judaism entirely separated from Jews, we want to focus on those American Jews who are committed to observing Judaism as a religion rather than those who wish to retain an ethnic identity without any religious element. Neusner has called this first group “Judaists” to distinguish them from those who see their Jewish identities as social or cultural rather than religious. This is an arbitrary distinction that some object to, but

it may help us to focus on our topic of “Judaism(s) in Contemporary America” and so therefore may be justifiable.

Until the last couple of decades, the dominant American Jewish identity focused on what has been termed “civil Judaism.” Based on the concept of civil religion developed by sociologists of American religion, pioneered by Robert Bellah, Jonathan S. Woocher has argued that civil Judaism includes the following beliefs or, perhaps more accurately, values: civil Judaism affirms the unity of the Jewish people; their mutual responsibility; the need to work for the survival of the Jewish people in a threatening world; the centrality of the State of Israel; a nostalgic appreciation for the value of Jewish tradition; a stress on doing good deeds and promoting philanthropy; and seeing their Jewishness and Americanness as compatible and indeed complementary forms of overlapping identity.² As a consequence, most American Jews did not draw direct association between their Jewish identity and their actual religious practices. Indeed, there is little explicitly “religious” substance among these values. Instead, these American Jews focused on “feeling Jewish,” a subjective state that became harder and harder to clearly identify as the years progressed. The problem was that an identity based primarily on subjective feeling was too amorphous to be easily passed on from parents to children.

By the 1980s, many felt that this civil Judaism lacked spiritual content precisely because it was so public. Despite their public involvement, many of these Jewish institutional leaders observed little ceremony in their family lives. One rabbi told journalist Charles E. Silberman that “These federation leaders may be Jews in public, but they’re goyim [gentiles] at home.”³ In response to this withering criticism, Jewish leaders began to consider the need to take Judaism seriously as a spiritual practice and not just a public identity. This trend was eventually embraced by the Jewish Federations themselves, which organized seminars and weekend retreats to expose community volunteers to Jewish religious experiences. Whereas once the Federation was regarded as an organization that would maintain strict neutrality, over the past two decades it has emerged as a proponent of voluntaristic ceremonialism. Concern with the future of Judaism has been one of the major reasons why it has abandoned secularism in favor of Jewish spirituality.

While Judaism had popularly been regarded as a religion based on home practice, the synagogue attempted to fill the void left by steadily declining degrees of home-based ritual observance. In the United States, much of the practice of American Judaism took place in the synagogue. Jack Wertheimer argues that “the American synagogue attracts more members and affords greater opportunities for participation than any other voluntary institutions established by Jews in the United States.” Some congregations became known as vibrant and lively places, while others developed reputations as institutions that did many lifecycle events without engaging most participants in a religious experience.

For many younger people, their Jewish practices developed in response to exposure at summer camp or youth group, rather than from what they observed at

home or at their local synagogue. These types of informal Jewish experiences have been very important because they enabled young people to see Judaism being practiced in a vibrant environment, which was frequently in dramatic contrast to what they observed in their local communities. The Jewish practice that they had observed in their local synagogues was frequently uninspiring. It was also based on the mechanical repetition of rituals that people had observed their elders performing in an earlier time when Jewish life was much closer to the immigrant experience. This gave it a degree of authenticity which was seen as lacking by many by the 1980s.

You may have already noted the word “Judaism” in the title of this chapter has an “s” in parenthesis after it, implying that there may be more than one Judaism that we need to look at. In the United States, four major American Jewish denominations (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist) have developed since the middle to late nineteenth century. In addition, there are numerous other groups not regarded as full denominations. In recent decades, there has emerged a chasm separating the Orthodox and non-Orthodox, suggesting that it is possible to divide American Judaism into two groups – those who feel obligated by the entirety of Jewish law and those who only practice selected elements of the Jewish ritual system. The use of the parenthesis also implies a postmodern understanding of the term in which there may not be any single definition acceptable and, indeed, that it may be possible to have multiple, even conflicting, conceptions that can coexist without requiring any resolution.

The intellectual basis for the existence of different denominations is that different belief systems can be derived from the same historical religion. The modern premise that different approaches to religion are possible is in dramatic contrast to the premodern worldview. In the medieval mindset, there was one form of Judaism. For the vast majority of Jews during this time period, there was a broad consensus concerning what constituted acceptable Jewish belief and practice. We call this approach traditional Judaism in contrast with modern forms of Judaism, which may deviate from each other in both theology and practice.

According to traditional Judaism, all of the commandments of the Torah should be practiced in their entirety. The commandments are divinely given and are interpreted by the rabbis, who explain how they are to be observed in specific circumstances. Since the Torah is divinely given, there is no possibility for reinterpretation or adaptation of traditional practices to fit new social circumstances. Those who study societies over extended periods observe that conceptions do change, even in groups that are opposed to the idea itself. However, such a process takes place unconsciously and over a relatively long period. In contrast, the American non-Orthodox movements (and even some of the liberal American Jewish groups that identify as Orthodox) have consciously set out to reinterpret traditional religious concepts and have made deliberate changes in how the Jewish religion is practiced.

The Four Major Denominations and Other American Jewish Religious Groups

By dividing their religious institutions on the basis of denomination, American Jews were following an American pattern. Religious denominations served to reinforce the ideal of religious pluralism which was so important in the construction of American society. Denominationalism also provided an institutional structure for those who sought out religious affiliation, and thus provided American society with valuable civic organizations that could help to perform good works that the government could not or would not involve itself in. In the two or three decades immediately following World War II, they were so central that Andrew M. Greeley described religious life in the United States during this period as “the denominational society.”⁴

American Judaism in the immediate postwar period was divided into three denominations – Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox. By the late 1960s, the Reconstructionist movement was slowly being recognized by many as a fourth denomination, even though it was much smaller numerically than the other three. Those who wanted to join a synagogue – or felt they needed to so they could send their children to religious school – usually chose a synagogue affiliated with one of these denominations.

The era of denominationalism did not last. By the late 1980s, Robert Wuthnow was arguing that the religious environment had shifted dramatically and that “denominational barriers have ceased to function as hermetic categories of religious identification.”⁵ The nature of American society began changing rapidly and the divisions that had formerly seemed so rigid began dissolving. While this opened up tremendous social and economic opportunities for millions of individuals, it threatened the institutional viability of organizations that had been built on the basis of denominational division. While all of the American Jewish denominations still exist, they do not dominate the American Jewish religious landscape the way they once did.

Actually, the denominations did not initially seek to be denominational. Each of the three early Jewish denominations had originally seen itself as representing the vast majority of the American Jewish community and, according to most scholars, had not intended to establish their movements as denominations. The first of the American synagogue organizations to be created was the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), which was established in 1873. This became the umbrella body for all Reform congregations in the United States. Under the influence of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, layman Moritz Loth issued a call to congregations to come together, primarily for the purpose of funding an American rabbinical college. This was seen as an urgent need, since all rabbis up to this time came from Europe and there was no way to ensure that they were trained to function effectively in an American environment.

As indicated by the title of the organization, the UAHC was intended to be a union of all American synagogues. The word “Reform” was not mentioned because the leaders of the organization originally expected to appeal to a broad spectrum of congregations with various ideologies and ritual practices. Similarly, other Reform-oriented institutions including the Hebrew Union College (HUC, established 1875), the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR, established 1889), and the Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR, established 1922) likewise carried nondenominational names befitting their intended broad communal purpose. It was only the social reality which transformed them after the fact into denominational institutions.

The Orthodox was the only one of the original three denominations to give its institutions and organizations distinctively denominational names. The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (OU) was founded in 1898 to protect “Orthodox Judaism whenever occasions arise in civic and social matters.” The leaders wrote that they created the organization “to protest against declarations of Reform rabbis not in accord with the teachings of our Torah.” But most Orthodox leaders saw their denominational identity as temporary, believing that either all American Jews would eventually join them, or would assimilate out of existence.

The United Synagogue of America (USA, established in 1913, later renamed the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, USCJ) was organized under the leadership of Professor Solomon Schechter to encompass most of the non-Reform synagogues in the United States. Schechter modeled the new organization on the United Synagogue of Great Britain, which was officially Orthodox but, like the organization that Schechter was creating, served a broad constituency. The expectation was that the Jewish Theological Seminary of America would produce rabbis for those synagogues not wishing to affiliate with the UAHC. Even though they were to become a liberal-oriented group, they called themselves “Conservative” to contrast their traditional approach against that of the Reform movement. Conservative leaders saw the Reform as a small faction and expected that they would attract the overwhelming majority of American synagogues. This held true for a certain period of time, but the Conservative movement, by the 1970s, was on the way to becoming a shrinking minority.

Reconstructionist Judaism is the only one of the four major denominations that was developed entirely in the United States. The Reform movement was founded in Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Conservative movement traces its roots to the Historical School, which broke away from German Reform in the 1840s, and Orthodoxy likewise coalesced in Germany as a distinct movement in response to the perceived threat of religious reform. All of these movements were the product of many Jews working together over the course of many generations. In contrast, the Reconstructionist movement was inspired by a single person: Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, and developed into a movement through the efforts of a small group of his disciples. Kaplan espoused a rationalistic approach to Judaism that encompassed all aspects of Jewish civilization rather than a narrow definition of Judaism as just a religion.

In recent decades, new Jewish religious groups have begun forming, some of which can be seen as incipient denominations. This includes the Jewish Renewal movement, led by Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, who combines kabbalistic and Hasidic teachings in an egalitarian framework. They describe themselves as a worldwide transdenominational movement grounded in Judaism's prophetic and mystical traditions. Emphasizing ecstatic practices such as meditating, chanting, dancing, and seeking alternative forms of consciousness, Jewish Renewal is designed to reinvigorate traditional Judaism while borrowing from other approaches to spirituality.

Humanist Judaism, in contrast, emphasizes Jewish culture rather than belief in God. While the term can refer to a broad array of phenomenon, the Humanistic movement was founded by Rabbi Sherwin Wine in 1963. Wine developed a liturgy that reflected his belief that there was no personal God but that the holidays and practices of Judaism could be perpetuated without such a belief. In 1969, a group of likeminded congregations created the Society for Humanistic Judaism. The movement has been broadly tolerant, accepting intermarriage, gay unions, and various other social changes.

Another phenomenon which has been getting more attention has been that of the independent minyanim, lay-led worship and study communities that combine a commitment to Jewish law with egalitarianism. Most independent minyanim try to stick closely to the traditional liturgy while emphasizing the Jewish prayer service as a spiritual experience. Drawing their participants mostly from the Conservative movement, the independent minyanim movement is volunteer led with no paid clergy, does not affiliate with any of the existing Jewish denominations, and has been founded in the past decade.

There are many other groups and subgroups that constitute contemporary American Judaism. Each focuses on different aspects of Jewish traditions and interprets this tradition in various ways. What they all share in common is a dialogue with the sacred texts of historic Judaism. Nevertheless, they differ dramatically in terms of religious belief and practice. Let us now look at each of the major denominations.

The Reform Movement

The Reform movement, the largest American Jewish religious denomination since the 1980s, has been simultaneously moving in two seemingly opposite directions: Temples are using more Hebrew and reintroducing traditional rituals, but at the same time accepting radical new definitions of Jewish identity and religious fidelity. The first Reformers – usually identified as “German Jews” but who in fact came from many Central European regions – were seeking a middle course between traditional Judaism, which they wanted to break away from, and conversion

to Christianity, which they wanted to avoid. Looking for a way to remain Jewish while adapting to prevailing social customs, they hoped that by introducing modern aesthetics and strict decorum, they could make Jewish worship services more attractive. Therefore, most of the early reforms focused on minor cosmetic changes. They abbreviated the liturgy and added a sermon in the vernacular, a mixed choir accompanied by an organ, and German as well as Hebrew prayers.

The history of Reform Judaism in the United States differs profoundly from that in Europe. Whereas in Europe the movement developed under the shadow of antisemitism and the threat of conversion to Christianity, in the United States a freer and more pluralistic atmosphere prevailed. The first attempt at Reform in the United States occurred in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1824, when 47 members of Congregation Beth Elohim signed a petition requesting that their congregational leadership institute certain ritual reforms, including the introduction of prayers in English. The congregational board rejected the request, and a small group of intellectuals decided to form a new congregation, to be based on enlightened liberal values. On November 21, 1824, the Reformed Society of Israelites came into being, and the group published the first American Reform prayer book, *The Sabbath Service and Miscellaneous Prayers Adopted by the Reformed Society of Israelites*.⁶ Although the original group disbanded in 1833, due in part to the relocation and subsequent death of one of its more dynamic leaders, an interesting Sephardic intellectual named Isaac Harby, Mother Congregation Beth Elohim soon began to move toward Reform under the leadership of its *hazzan*, Gustavus Poznanski.⁷

Far more important for the development of the Reform movement in the United States was the arrival of large numbers of central European Jews beginning in the 1830s. The Jewish population of the United States jumped from approximately three thousand in 1820 to 15 thousand in 1840 and 150 thousand in 1860.⁸ Although many scholars have assumed that these immigrants brought Reform Judaism with them from Germany, Leon Jick has argued that American Reform was not “imported” but rather developed in the United States.⁹ While Jick overstates his argument, his book is a much needed corrective to the earlier historical consensus.

Jewish immigrants settled throughout the United States. As they established businesses and built homes, local Jews began to put more effort into building a Jewish community. They consecrated cemeteries and held High Holy Day services, usually in a private home or a hotel meeting room. Eventually, they erected synagogue buildings and, if the community was large enough, engaged a religious leader with training in religious matters in the old country who could read the Hebrew prayers and perform the required rituals. For congregations in Albany, Georgia, Fort Wayne, Indiana, or Lexington, Kentucky, this was sufficient.

As the immigrants gradually acculturated, they wanted their synagogue practice to reflect American norms. They wanted to use English as well as Hebrew in the services and to create an atmosphere to which they could bring Christian neighbors, who would come away impressed with the propriety and nobility of the ritual. Thus they moved their congregations toward Reform, not out of an intellectually

based theological commitment, but as a practical response to daily life in the United States. Most of the functionaries went along with that trend. They were not theologically motivated but rather saw the practical benefits of adapting religious practices to the American patterns of living.

But ideologically motivated reformers also existed. One group of liberal religious intellectuals in Baltimore formed a *Verein* in 1842, a small religious group that met to discuss theology and conduct services based on that theology, the Har Sinai Verein. In 1845 a similar group founded Emanu-El in New York City, which developed into the largest and most prestigious Reform congregation in the country. These groups, dedicated to Reform Judaism in ideological terms, differed from the vast majority of congregations in the United States, whose members were more concerned with the realities of everyday life in America than with the intricacies of Judaic theological debate.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reformers stressed the importance of ethical monotheism. They believed that the unique ethical and moral message of Judaism derived directly from one all-good God who was responsible for creating everything in the world. Ethics thus derived organically from monotheism. Reform Jews prided themselves on their commitment to rational thought and therefore concluded that science explained how the universe was born. There was no conflict between the two and religion could adapt to new scientific discoveries. The acceptance of scientific theory and religious cosmology was not seen as conflicting, since the laws of science carried out God's will. Nevertheless, most Reform Jews believed that God created the world in some way and continued to be involved in an ongoing process of creation. The biblical account of creation was not a scientific theory of the world's origins, but rather a religious myth of great spiritual value. The Torah was a holy text because it reflected the religious perceptions of the ancient Israelites. Much, but not all, of what the ancient Israelites thought and wrote continued to be relevant and significant. The movement stressed universalism. Judaism was a religion that spoke to the human condition, and to all humans.

The Reform movement changed its direction as a consequence of the increasingly brutal nature of the twentieth century. World War I jump-started the process of reexamining the liberal sense that had propelled Reform religious thought until that time. The movement's optimistic view of human progress in collaboration with God underwent further change after the rise of the Nazi movement in Germany and the subsequent murder of six million Jews. In the aftermath of that tragedy, the Reform movement veered away from its universalistic triumphalism toward a more ethnically based cultural identity.

Even though the 1885 *Declaration of Principles* had argued that Jews should remain together solely as a religious group to fulfill their mission of bringing ethical monotheism to the world, the rise in antisemitism threatened Jewish physical survival, a concern that far outweighed theology or ideology. Policies that had seemed levelheaded just a few decades earlier now appeared naive and foolhardy.

As a result, the CCAR adopted the Columbus Platform in 1937, officially named *The Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism*. This new platform embraced Jewish peoplehood and leaned toward support of political Zionism. The culmination of a revolutionary shift in the ideology of the American Reform movement, it encouraged a greater diversity of opinion and a multiplicity of approaches.¹⁰

By 1945 the Reform movement was generally supportive of Zionism and the soon-to-be-created state of Israel. The interwar period saw the rise of two strongly pro-Zionist Reform rabbis, Stephen S. Wise and Abba Hillel Silver. Wise established the Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR) in New York City in 1922 to provide a Zionist alternative to Hebrew Union College. Wise believed in both the importance of social justice and the centrality of Jewish peoplehood. With Wise, Silver formed the American Zionist Emergency Council, which lobbied the US Congress on behalf of the Zionist movement. Silver was the leader who announced to the United Nations that Israel had declared itself an independent state. Both men were Classical Reformers devoted to Jewish nationalism, a synthesis that would have been incongruous just a few decades earlier.

Maurice N. Eisendrath, who became UAHC executive director in 1943 and president in 1946, moved the national headquarters from Cincinnati to New York, where he constructed an entire building for the organization on Fifth Avenue across the street from Central Park and next to Congregation Emanu-El.¹¹ He called the new headquarters the “House of Living Judaism,” and it remained the operating center of the Reform movement until it was sold in 1998. Nelson Glueck, a world-famous archaeologist who had appeared on the cover of *Time*, became president of HUC in 1947. While many viewed him as more interested in his archaeological pursuits than in his administrative responsibilities, his fame brought a great deal of attention to the movement. He oversaw the 1950 merger of HUC with JIR, and under his leadership HUC-JIR established a third US branch in Los Angeles in 1954 and a fourth campus in Jerusalem in 1963.¹² Although this growth may have owed more to the burgeoning of the American Jewish community than to Glueck, the perception grew that the Reform movement had competent and visionary leadership.

The leaders could project this image of a strong, unified movement partly because of the number of pressing causes that could galvanize members of Reform congregations. In the 1960s many Reform Jews became involved in the US civil rights struggle as well as in the movement opposing the war in Vietnam. The Six Day War of 1967 dramatically increased American Jews’ emotional connection and commitment to the state of Israel. As they worried about its ability to survive in the face of Arab promises to destroy the country during the tense three weeks preceding the war, many came to realize how important the state of Israel had become to them. This fear resurfaced in 1973 when Israel’s physical survival was in doubt during the early stages of the Yom Kippur War. The cumulative effect was to increase dramatically the Zionist fervor of most American Jews, a sea change felt throughout the movement.

Alexander M. Schindler, who became president of the UAHC in 1973, gained renown for his assertive support of the social action agenda of the Reform movement of the 1970s and 1980s, including civil rights, world peace, nuclear disarmament, a “Marshall Plan” for the poor, feminism, and gay rights, as well as his opposition to the death penalty. Although this advocacy landed Schindler frequently in the pages of the *New York Times*, he got along with traditional Jews and Israeli leaders better than had any of his predecessors. Despite a disinterest in administrative issues, Schindler and his German accent became synonymous with Reform Judaism. His leadership inspired not only individuals, but also entire temples, to join the movement. During his presidency, the UAHC grew from four hundred congregations in 1973 to about 875 in 1995. Of course, the continuing move to suburbia made much of this growth possible, but Schindler’s inspirational leadership on issues meaningful to American Jews disconnected from traditional belief or practice played an important role.

Schindler is perhaps best remembered for two issues, his outreach to intermarried couples and his advocacy of patrilineal descent. Intermarriage had long been a taboo in the Jewish community, and many parents ostracized children who “married out.” Some would even sit shiva for children about to intermarry, as if the child had died. Schindler, who felt strongly that this taboo was counterproductive as well as inappropriate, came to believe that a bold gesture was in order. At a meeting of the UAHC’s Board of Trustees in Houston in December 1978, he issued a public call to the Reform movement to reach out to the non-Jewish spouses in interfaith marriages. Even more surprising, he urged making the Jewish religion available to unchurched Gentiles. This controversial call to proselytize those with no connections of blood or marriage to the Jewish community appeared to be a dramatic departure from two thousand years of Jewish religious policy against proselytization. His critics argued that such a move would encourage certain Christian groups to launch opposing campaigns against the Jewish community, using Schindler’s call as an excuse for proselytizing unaffiliated Jews. Despite the attention that this suggestion created, little proselytizing of unchurched Gentiles has occurred in the succeeding years, whereas many outreach programs to interfaith couples have been developed.

During the Schindler years the Reform movement adopted the patrilineal descent resolution, which stated that the child of one Jewish partner is “under the presumption of Jewish descent.”¹³ While the document’s vague wording led to some difficulties, the patrilineal descent policy insured that if one’s father was Jewish and one’s mother was not, one would still be regarded as Jewish, provided that one was raised as a Jew. This would supplement rather than replace the traditional matrilineal descent policy, which established that the children of a Jewish mother would be Jewish regardless of their father’s faith.

Also during Schindler’s presidency, the Reform movement allowed women to assume a more central role in the synagogue, a direct consequence of the feminist movement that influenced every aspect of American life. As American women in

the 1960s and 1970s took on a far greater role in religious life, the Reform movement responded actively to the changing gender-role expectations. Increasing numbers of congregations allowed women to assume responsibility for all aspects of religious and communal life, even the rabbinate. In 1972, Sally J. Priesand became the first woman ordained a Reform rabbi at HUC-JIR, a revolutionary breakthrough. Even though Reform Judaism had been committed to egalitarianism from its origins in the early nineteenth century, it had maintained a male-only policy in the rabbinate. Priesand's ordination moved congregations to look at the role of women in new ways. Since 1972, hundreds of women have enrolled in HUC. As the changes in the Reform movement paralleled social changes, its character as an American religious denomination made it popular with an increasingly Americanized Jewish community.

Reform practice today, especially in the synagogue itself, is characterized by the partial restoration of a number of formerly abrogated rites and rituals. Ritual items eliminated by the Classical Reformers, such as the yarmulke, tallith, and even tefillin, have been brought back. But because of the concept of religious autonomy, individual congregations cannot and do not require congregants to wear any of these traditional prayer items. Rather, they are offered to those who find them religiously meaningful or who prefer to wear them as an expression of traditionalist nostalgia. This generates some incongruous and perhaps amusing situations. For example, it is not uncommon to find congregations where many of the women wear yarmulkes and tallitot, while most of the men sit bareheaded and bare shouldered. This is the converse of the norm in traditional synagogues, where all men wear yarmulkes, tallitot, and tefillin, and women rarely do.

Another dramatic trend has been the move away from a formal style of worship and music toward more jubilant and enthusiastic prayer. Certain particularly progressive congregations, such as the independent Congregation B'nai Jeshurun on the Upper West Side of New York, have served as models for most congregations that have been slowly evolving toward this more informal, exuberant style. The formalized Classical Reform service, which could uncharitably be called sterile, no longer impresses many with its dignity and majesty. Younger people have grown up with a different aesthetic. New types of music incorporate simple Israeli, Hasidic, and folk styles, a style of worship developed at the UAHC summer camps under the rubric of the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) programs.

Eric H. Yoffie, president of the UAHC from 1996 to 2012, inherited a movement that had grown substantially in numbers yet was perceived as having fundamental problems. Yoffie moved quickly and boldly to address these challenges, taking advantage of the new enthusiasm for spirituality and launching a systematic campaign to rebuild the entire Reform movement. Yet, financial problems and a sudden loss in membership made it difficult to maintain momentum. The next president of the URJ will need to move quickly to stabilize the movement numerically and create a mechanism to address difficult problems that threaten

to undermine the Reform movement precisely as similar issues had done so much damage to the Conservative movement just a decade or so earlier.

The Conservative Movement and Its Reconstructionist Offshoot

According to Rabbi Robert Gordis, Conservative Judaism is “dedicated to the conservation and development of traditional Judaism in the modern spirit.”¹⁴ Conservative religious leaders differed from their Reform counterparts in that they believed that Halakah, the Hebrew term for Jewish law, remained the most important form of Jewish religious expression. Reform had rejected Halakah in its entirety, and this dispute had led to the creation of the Conservative movement at the end of the nineteenth century. Even the name of the movement derived directly from this conflict. The Conservative movement was more conservative than the Reform in matters relating to Halakah, and that was the reason that they chose that particular name.

The beginnings of the Conservative movement can be traced to Rabbi Sabato Morais of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, who gathered a group of supporters together at Congregation Shearith Israel in New York to plan for a new American Jewish rabbinical seminary that would be more traditional than Hebrew Union College. Some wanted to call it the Orthodox Seminary, but the majority decided to call it the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTSA), taking the name from the Breslau school upon which it was modeled. The JTSA opened in 1887 and ordained its first rabbi in 1893, but when Morais died in 1897, the school floundered. By 1901, it seemed certain that JTS would close, but a group of Reform philanthropists came to believe that the seminary was essential for the training of American Jewish religious leaders who would be suitable for the masses of Eastern European Jews then arriving on the shores of the United States. They recruited Solomon Schechter in 1902 to become president of the reorganized school. Schechter is credited with developing a vision for what became the Conservative movement, speaking eloquently about the need to balance tradition with change.

Schechter argued that the community becomes the religious authority for determining change. Judaism needs to be studied using modern methods of scholarship, and modern methodology can help Conservative scholars to understand how postbiblical Judaism developed over the course of centuries. The Torah had been interpreted and reinterpreted by Jews throughout the ages, and how the Torah was understood was the determining factor in setting communal religious standards. “Catholic Israel” developed certain patterns of belief and behavior based on their instinctive response to both Jewish tradition and the external social environment. The Conservative movement can and should make changes based upon how Klal Israel, the Jewish community, developed their understanding and

practice of traditional Judaism. As early as 1901, a rabbinical organization was founded to support the Conservative movement, but it was only in 1919 that it took the name The Rabbinical Assembly of America, which was later shortened to drop the “of America.” The United Synagogue of America was established in 1913 with 22 founding congregations. These congregations were traditional in their practices, but did not necessarily have a clear theological understanding of what made them different from Orthodox congregations in terms of religious belief. They did understand that congregational members of the United Synagogue rejected radical reform, and congregations that worshipped without head coverings on the men, or used the *Union Prayer Book*, or instituted other radical deviations from traditional practices, were banned from membership. It was easier for the Conservative movement to define itself in terms of what it rejected rather than what it believed.

The movement was ideologically vague, which in part was a deliberate institutional strategy appropriate for an “umbrella organization.” This flexible approach proved successful at attracting individuals as well as congregations who were seeking a middle path. Yet, there were serious internal contradictions within the Conservative movement. Neil Gillman, a JTS professor, admits that the writings of the founders were “riddled” with inner tensions. He cites examples of contradictory beliefs, such as that Torah is the eternally binding word of God, but also that the teachings of the Torah are responsive to changing times, and that the people decide what practices to change and what to retain, but the scholars have to inspire the people so that they may know what to change. While such inconsistency can be found in any nonfundamentalist modern religious movement, the Conservative movement appeared to be overwhelmed by doubt and uncertainty.

The new JTS chancellor, Arnold Eisen (surprisingly not an ordained rabbi), acknowledged the terrible problems the movement was facing in a speech to the Rabbinical Assembly (RA). The movement “largely dropped the ball” by allowing halakhic pluralism to become its core message. “Let’s be mature about this,” Eisen was reported as having said. “Agreeing to disagree is not enough to keep a movement going.” The Conservative movement must find a way to build the same sort of intense communities that has made Orthodox life so attractive. “If we can’t win on that count, we can’t win.”¹⁵ Since becoming the leader of the movement, Eisen has attempted to restructure the movement so that its resources are allocated towards the fulfillment of its mission. This has meant scaling down the scholarship which made JTS such a prestigious institution but did little to advance the cause of Conservative Judaism in the United States. The movement will need to focus on its core mission and coalesce around its strongest affiliates, while debating and clarifying its beliefs and values.

The Reconstructionist movement was an offshoot of the Conservative movement. Mordecai Kaplan taught for many decades at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the bastion of Conservative Judaism. Kaplan did not intend to found a new denomination, but rather to influence the many rabbinical students that he taught and spread his ideas throughout the entire Jewish community. This puzzled

many of his followers, and frustrated others, because they believed that the logic of his own arguments made it clear that Reconstructionism should become a full denomination. Some believe that his movement would have been much more successful if it had been founded in the 1930s or 1940s rather than the 1960s.

A number of scholars concluded that “it appears that Kaplan was radical in thought but cautious in deed.”¹⁶ Perhaps part of the explanation was that 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.”¹⁷

The pressure on Kaplan to allow his followers to create a new denomination had been building for many years, but Kaplan worried that focusing too much energy on individual congregations could dissipate much of the enthusiasm necessary for revitalizing national Jewish cultural life. By 1963, Kaplan had retired from JTS, making it easier for him to go along with plans that were being formed to make Reconstructionism a separate denomination. At a meeting in Buffalo, New York that same year, a group of Reconstructionist activists persuaded Kaplan, then aged 83, to agree to the creation of a Reconstructionist rabbinical school. No longer working directly for the Conservative movement, Kaplan felt free to participate in the founding of a new movement.

This required a shift in organizational strategy. The Reconstructionist Federation of Congregations had, ever since its creation in 1955, required that affiliated congregations be members of one of the major American Jewish religious denominations because Reconstructionism was seen as a supplementary philosophy. Now, the organization was renamed the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations, and it became a denominational organization in its own right.

The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) set up a joint program with the Department of Religion at Temple University in Philadelphia. Originally, rabbinical students were required to enroll as doctoral students and study for both degrees simultaneously, but this requirement was modified and then later dropped. RRC’s curriculum was influenced by Kaplan’s idea of Judaism as an evolving religious civilization. Students focused on a different period of Jewish history and culture each year; biblical, rabbinic, medieval, modern, contemporary. Many of the early graduates took pulpits in Conservative congregations, while others took positions with Jewish organizations or educational institutions because there were very few Reconstructionist synagogues that could afford to hire full-time rabbis.

Already in 1968, the Reconstructionist movement accepted patrilineal descent. The annual convention of the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot (FRCH, now the JRF) that year adopted a resolution that stated that the parents of children born of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother should be informed that the Reconstructionist movement and its affiliated institutions will

consider these children Jews if the parents commit themselves to rear their children as Jews “by providing circumcision for boys, Jewish education for boys and girls, and if the children fulfill the requirements of bar and bat mitzvah or confirmation.”¹⁸ This was a revolutionary policy change because Jewish law held that a person is Jewish if he or she inherits his or her Jewish identity from his or her mother or converts to Judaism.

The Reconstructionist movement changed this definition to allow for a person to inherit his or her Jewish identity from either their mother or their father. This fit better into their egalitarian ethos, and also seemed to be more logical, since what was important to them was how the child was raised rather than which parent had been born Jewish. The Reform movement voted to publicly accept patrilineal descent in 1983 – about 15 years later. It is true that the Reform movement had had a longstanding practice, dating back to at least 1947, of accepting the child of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother as Jewish without formal conversion if the child attended a Jewish religious school and studied toward confirmation, but the Reconstructionist movement was the first to pass an official public declaration accepting patrilineal descent.¹⁹ The issue became a full-blown controversy when the Reform rabbinate voted to accept patrilineal descent because the Reform movement was much larger and therefore their decision affected far more people.

In recent years, the Reconstructionist movement has experienced a spurt in growth – it has gone from 1 to 2 percent of the identified American Jewish population. There are just over a hundred congregations now affiliated with the Reconstructionist federation. Many are going through a major transition in terms of their structure and function. Most had started out as highly participatory groups of intellectuals and communal nonconformists. They met for prayers and studied in living rooms or basements and liked it that way. More than anything else, they wanted to avoid the emphasis on building grand synagogues that they believed afflicted the other Jewish denominations. Even today, many Reconstructionist Jews still feel that building campaigns generate negative energy, perverting genuine Jewish values and putting too much emphasis on who can give the most money. David Zinner, a member of the Columbia Jewish Congregation in Columbia, Maryland, said that his friends in their congregation prefer meeting in an interfaith center rather than going through the difficult process of fundraising. “A lot of synagogues see it as a major triumph when they get their own building. For us it might be a failure.”²⁰

The movement has published new prayer books in recent years, including a 1275- page *machzor* with gender-neutral English translation prepared by poet Joel Rosenberg. The editors have tried to balance the desire for spirituality with the need to remain somewhat faithful to Kaplan’s original religious vision. Many of Kaplan’s original religious beliefs have been reinterpreted or simply replaced in recent years. For example, Kaplan rejected the belief in a “supernatural” God, but many of the current generation of Reconstructionist leaders are attracted to approaches that emphasize mystical emotionalism rather than philosophical

rationalism. The movement prides itself on being on the “cutting edge” of Jewish life and therefore they expect to have a certain degree of inconsistency, as new ideas germinate and make their way from conception to implementation.

Orthodox Judaism

Orthodox Judaism teaches that both the written and oral law were given from God to Moses at Mount 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 Law given to Moses along with the Written Law, 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 the legal codes became the authoritative listings of what Jews needed to observe.

Synagogue Judaism in the American colonies and the early national republic followed traditional patterns. While the early American Jews differed in religious background and level of ritual observance, all those who attended synagogue participated in traditional prayer. The early German and Eastern European Jewish immigrants likewise either joined an existing traditional Sephardic synagogue or, after 1820, founded their own. While the majority of these congregations slowly gravitated towards Reform Judaism, some held on to their traditionalist principles. Isaac Leeser began using the term “Orthodox” and “Orthodoxy” in his monthly journal *the Occident* in the 1840s to refer to those who opposed the incipient Reform movement, which was then beginning to grow and develop throughout the United States.²¹

The traditional element was greatly strengthened after the Eastern European immigration began in 1881. There were, however, many pressures on the immigrants to abandon the strict observance of Halakah and the vast majority succumbed. When they were given the choice between working on Saturdays and facing severe economic deprivation, most quickly began to violate the Sabbath. There was, however, a small minority who were absolutely committed to strict halakhic observance, regardless of the economic or social costs. But Orthodoxy was a small group that seemed to be losing support throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

As early as 1918, a group of Orthodox Jews from Poland established the Torah Vodaath Yeshiva in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It began as a modern Orthodox Zionist school, but in the following decade evolved into a “black hat Yeshiva.”²² Torah Vodaath was the exception; most of the major American yeshivas were established by refugees from Nazism. During the 1930s, the American Orthodox community was being strengthened by the arrival of thousands of Orthodox Jews fleeing the Nazis. Legal immigration permits had been reduced drastically in 1924,

and it was extremely difficult to be given a visa of any type to the United States. Nevertheless, a few lucky or well-connected Orthodox Jews were able somehow to make it to America, escaping the catastrophe looming over the Jews of Europe. Many were Lithuanian yeshiva students (also called Litvisch or Litvak in slang diminutive), devoted to the study of Talmud and codes. Sometimes called “black hat” Orthodox Jews because of the type of formal hat that the men frequently wore, they quickly formed yeshivas modeled on the Eastern European Talmudic academies that they had been forced to abandon.

There were also a number of important Hasidic leaders who arrived in these years, including the Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Joseph I. Schneerson, who came to New York in 1940. His son-in-law and future successor, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, arrived a year later. The Satmar rebbe, Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, came in 1946. Schneerson moved to Crown Heights while Teitelbaum settled in Williamsburg, both in Brooklyn, New York. There were more than a dozen other Hasidic sects who were able to reorganize in the United States, mostly in Brooklyn. The surviving Hasidim flocked around their rebbes, or if their rebbe had been murdered, found a new spiritual leader.

In the years following World War II, the mainstream American Jewish community paid little attention to these Orthodox refugees. Most segregated themselves in strictly Orthodox subcommunities in Brooklyn and a handful of other locations. They participated little, if at all, in broader Jewish communal organizations or community efforts of any type. But, over the next fifty years, they would come to assume a much greater importance, as the Haredim (the ultra-Orthodox) began to pressure the more accommodationist modern Orthodox leaders to withdraw from multid denominational pluralistic organizations such as the Synagogue Council of America (SCA) and the New York Board of Rabbis (NYBR). Many of the sectarian Orthodox groups began to build new institutions to accommodate their growing communities. They began to publish an extensive literature which was read eagerly by those connected to their communities.

Unlike the Conservative, Reform, or Reconstructionist denominations, Orthodoxy was always diverse and never had one set of denominational institutions. The moderate (called modern or, more recently, centrist) Orthodox come the closest to replicating the model of having one central organization or institution to represent the union of congregations, the association of rabbis, and the rabbinical training program. The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, also known as the Orthodox Union (OU), the National Council of Young Israel, and the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) represent the modern or moderate congregations within Orthodoxy. The Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) represents the bulk of the more modernist Orthodox rabbis. Yeshiva University’s Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) and, more recently, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT), provide professional training to future modern or centrist Orthodox rabbis.

The various haredi 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 become known primarily for its periodic issuing of polemical attacks against the non-Orthodox. The main umbrella group for the haredim is Agudath Israel of America. Agudath Israel was founded in 1912 in Katowice, which was then in Germany and is now part of Poland, and the American branch was established in 1939. Agudath Israel is primarily an advocacy organization. Its representatives testify at government hearings and before government bodies, seeking to explain the Orthodox position on various issues to politicians, legislators, judges, and the like. It also has numerous departments which provide educational, legal, or religious programs to its members and other interested parties.

Scholars of the postwar era were almost uniformly negative about Orthodoxy's future. Many Orthodox Jews likewise had grave doubts about the future of their own movement. In an often quoted comment, Marshall Sklare wrote in 1955 that the history of American Orthodoxy was "a case study of institutional decay."²³ Sociologists subscribed to the theory that conservative forms of any religious group corresponded with low social and economic standing. Therefore, Orthodoxy was incompatible with the middle-class aspirations of most American Jews, and was destined to decline as they became more affluent. But those who expected Orthodoxy to disappear were to be disappointed. Most of the nonobservant Orthodox faded away, but there remained substantial numbers of committed Orthodox Jews of various theological convictions. To the astonishment of those who had predicted their demise, the Orthodox began to rebuild. In an article published in 1998, Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter wrote, "With its increasing confidence, institutional strength, and extraordinary unselfconsciousness, Orthodoxy has achieved a presence and a prominence in America simply and literally unimaginable even a mere four decades ago."²⁴

Despite many good faith efforts, the Jewish community has become divided between Orthodox and non-Orthodox, with the modern or centrist Orthodox trying to remain linked to both camps. According to one viewpoint, the Orthodox and non-Orthodox were destined to go their different ways. Non-Orthodox Jews were determined to acculturate into American society, and that acculturation process inevitably meant that they would develop common interests with non-Jewish friends and neighbors. This would lead to higher rates of intermarriage, and many of these intermarriages would not lead to the conversion of the non-Jewish spouse. Since Jewish law recognizes as Jewish only those children that are born to a Jewish mother or who were converted to Judaism according to Halakah, it was inevitable that substantial and growing numbers of American Jews would not be Jewish by Orthodox criteria.

The Orthodox had understood there to be an unwritten agreement with the non-Orthodox – the non-Orthodox might deviate from traditional Jewish belief and practice, but they would not change the very definition of who was a Jew. This was the bedrock upon which Jewish unity was based, because it was the determination

of who was a member of the Tribe. Like any family, the Jewish people might disagree about all sorts of things, but they were still family.

But in 1983, the Reform movement officially accepted patrilineal descent as a basis for claiming Jewish identity. At their annual conference, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) voted to accept the report of the Committee on Patrilineal Descent. “The purpose of this document is to establish the Jewish status of the children of mixed marriages in the Reform Jewish community of North America.” The rabbis went on to say that the issue of mixed marriage was one of the most “pressing human issues” for the Jewish community. “We face today an unprecedented situation due to the changed conditions in which decisions concerning the status of the child of a mixed marriage are to be made.” While the Patrilineal Descent Resolution is regarded as the breaking point in the Orthodox/non-Orthodox relationship, it really was precipitated by the drastically increasing intermarriage rate. This increase motivated the Reform rabbis to respond proactively, and it was this increase that created an unbridgeable gulf between the movements.

The Patrilineal Descent Resolution and the Orthodox reiteration that Halakah could never accommodate such a policy led to fears that there would be two types of Jews and two separate Jewish communities. The one hope was that a joint *beit din*, a religious court, could be created that could convert non-Jews to Judaism for all of the American Jewish denominations. Since each of the movements had different and indeed contradictory religious principles, such an institution would have required a great number of concessions by all parties.

Efforts to create a common approach to personal status go back to the interwar period. At that time, there was relatively little concern about the intermarriage issue. What worried rabbinical authorities was the differing approaches towards bills of divorce. The Reform movement had done away entirely with the need for a religious divorce. This meant that if a Jewish couple were married by a Reform rabbi and later divorced, they would probably not bother to go through the Jewish divorce procedure since their Reform rabbi would tell them that a civil divorce was sufficient. This was not acceptable to traditionalists, who followed the law specifying that a woman was regarded as married until she received a get. Should she have children with any other man – even though she regarded herself as divorced – she would be regarded as committing adultery, and her children could be classified as *mamzerim* (the closest English word would be illegitimate children). Jewish law allows mamzers only to marry other mamzers, and stigmatizes them in a number of other ways.

This concern was partially alleviated when Orthodox authorities ruled that Reform marriages were not halakhically valid and therefore couples married by Reform rabbis did not absolutely need a get. In what became one of his most important halakhic rulings, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein wrote a *teshuva* that two Jews who had been married in a Reform wedding ceremony did not require a get when they got divorced because Feinstein did not regard the ceremony as

being legitimate. As a consequence of this seemingly rejectionist decision, women who had remarried without getting a get would not have mamzer children as long as their first marriage had been officiated at by a Reform (or possibly Conservative) rabbi. Therefore, Feinstein's decision served to avoid the designation of thousands or even tens of thousands of offspring as mamzers. This decision became quite important after the *baal teshuvah* movement gained momentum in the 1970s. This was an informal grouping of mostly younger Jews who embraced Orthodoxy after having been raised in assimilated homes. Many of the baalei teshuvah might have been regarded as mamzers if Feinstein had ruled that non-Orthodox wedding ceremonies were halakhically valid Jewish rituals.

Yet there were many cases where the husband would not or could not give his wife a get, making her an *agunah*, an abandoned wife who could not remarry because she had no get. In 1935, Rabbi Louis M. Epstein recommended adding an amendment to the *ketubah* in which the wife would be entitled to receive a get without her husband's signature if he disappeared or refused to cooperate. Epstein, who was a scholar in the Conservative movement, had hoped that his halakhic argumentation would persuade Orthodox rabbinic authorities to go along with this legal innovation, but they would not. In 1953, Rabbi Saul Lieberman, also from the Conservative movement, floated a new halakhic solution to what was called the problem of the *agunah*. Lieberman found new halakhic justifications that he hoped would sway the Orthodox sages, and he met secretly with Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in an effort to create a joint Orthodox-Conservative *beit din*. Soloveitchik respected Lieberman's Talmudic acumen, and he did his best to encourage moderate elements within Orthodoxy to cooperate, but this did not lead anywhere either.

Soloveitchik urged Orthodox Jews, and particularly Orthodox rabbis, to continue meeting with Reform and Conservative leaders, since the non-Orthodox represented the majority of the American Jewish community and it was only possible to address communal problems through dialogue. He did, however, also seem to stress that this cooperation should only be for the purpose of meeting Jewish communal needs and he rejected any "religious" interaction. Despite this very significant "but," the responsum was remembered primarily as a liberal ruling. Despite the already distant relations between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox, there were a number of forums where they came together. The two major motivations for such interdenominational cooperation were the search for philanthropic support and the need to combat antisemitism. Rabbis or lay leaders representing the Orthodox did sit together with non-Orthodox representatives in meetings held under the auspices of the United Jewish Appeal (UJA, since renamed the United Jewish Communities); the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations; the World Zionist Organization (WZO), the Jewish Agency and other Zionist groups; and the Anti-Defamation League, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and other groups devoted to fighting antisemitism.

The Council of Torah Sages of Agudath Israel rejected Soloveitchik's argument for cooperation with the various denominations on communal issues, stating that organizational cooperation with the non-Orthodox was de facto recognition and endorsement, and therefore prohibited. In 1956, 11 yeshiva heads, under the aegis of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis (Agudas HaRabbanim), signed a statement prohibiting any Orthodox rabbis who accepted their authority from interacting with Conservative or Reform clergy in any joint organization or for any common religious purpose. "It is forbidden by the law of our sacred Torah to participate with them [the non-Orthodox denominational movements] either as an individual or as an organized communal body."

The ban on cooperation with the non-Orthodox included the Synagogue Council of America (SCA), a pluralistic organization established in 1926, which had members representing the full spectrum of Jewish religious life. Those who see Soloveitchik as a relative liberal believe that he refused to sign the petition, responding that there were many topics that required the cooperation of all the American Jewish denominations. Those who see Soloveitchik as more conservative believe that he was never given a chance to sign the petition. Whatever the historical truth may have been, both the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) and the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (OU) used Soloveitchik's supposed stand to justify remaining as members of the Synagogue Council of America.

While Soloveitchik had apparently approved Orthodox participation in the Synagogue Council of America, those more to the right continually worked to undermine that decision. After the Reform movement ordained Sally Priesand in 1972, some lobbied for Orthodox withdrawal from the New York Board of Rabbis. The more moderate Orthodox were able to ward off the challenge to the status quo at that time, although they felt a tremendous amount of pressure. Fears grew that the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox would split into two separate groups, two separate peoples. One Orthodox rabbi warned of "the coming cataclysm."²⁵ The United Jewish Appeal stopped using their slogan "We Are One" because it seemed to no longer represent either reality or any reasonable hope of a short-term future.

After many years of criticism, the moderate Orthodox who sustained pluralistic Jewish dialogue finally buckled under to Haredi pressure. They withdrew from the Synagogue Council of America (SCA), which then disbanded in 1994. The push to end interdenominational religious cooperation eventually caused virtually all of the multid denominational organizations and programs to stop functioning, or to become de facto associations of non-Orthodox rabbis. Since then, there has been far less interdenominational dialogue. While some observers such as Jack Wertheimer have been surprised that the level of conflict appears to have been lowered, others argue that the fighting has mostly stopped because there is nothing left to say.²⁶

Increasing Focus on Personal Spirituality

Why do most American Jews practice only some of the requirements of their religion? One reason is that the practice of Judaism has been strongly influenced by the impact of individualism on American society. Since the 1960s, Americans have come to regard religion more and more as a matter of personal choice, rather than an inherited obligation. This choice includes being able to choose one's perspective within one's denomination, but it also includes the ability to choose from among different religious denominational alternatives. It even means having the choice of choosing whether to affiliate with any religious tradition or remain completely removed from religious activity of any type. This individualistic approach has produced a "religious marketplace" in which numerous faiths and denominations openly compete for believers by recruiting new members from outside of their congregational spheres to supplement their existing memberships.

To put this in theoretical terms, Charles S. Liebman presents two models to explain how the individual Jew has related to Judaism in the modern period. One model is that of public Judaism, where the individual is seen as part of the collective entity. The individual feels a sense of responsibility towards the Jewish people and understands that they have obligations to fulfill toward this entity. They do not have the right to pursue their selfish interest to the exclusion of the collective needs of the Jewish people as a whole. In contrast, private Judaism refers to the individual meaning that each person finds in the religion. For those who see their Jewish commitment as privatized, what matters is the spiritual benefit that the individual Jew can derive from the beliefs and practices of the religion.²⁷ The 1980s and 1990s were a time in which private Judaism became more and more popular and public Judaism less and less.

The most successful approaches to Jewish religious revitalization all stress the spiritual wisdom that has lain hidden in Judaism, inaccessible to the emotionally semi-involved participant who was sent to Hebrew school and pushed through a "bar mitzvah factory" as part of childhood rites of initiation. A relatively small group of spiritually hungry seekers began a process that helped many American Jews rediscover the deep spiritual wisdom of the Jewish tradition. They are – or at least, they were, until recently – mostly on the edges of the Jewish community, struggling for acceptability or in some cases reveling in their reputation as rabble-rousers and troublemakers. Many of the most creative ideas for revitalizing Judaism have come from small groups of young people looking for personal ways of connecting to God. The massive Jewish organizations headquartered in fancy office buildings in New York were unable or unwilling to provide much leadership, and it is primarily those on the periphery who provided the new models of spirituality.

There has been a growing awareness of the importance of bringing the sacred into the family, particularly into the lives of children. Jewish tradition required a

great deal of time and effort to be expended in household preparations. The entire day on Friday was needed to cook and clean and prepare the home for the Sabbath. Cleaning the house for Passover took at least a week, which included taking everything out of the cabinets and searching for foods prohibited on Passover. The sheer energy exerted in these efforts was an effective instrument of religious training because they included grandparents, parents, and children, aunts and uncles, neighbors and friends. The children saw how the entire community worked together to prepare for the holiday and they understood how important that must make it. Those days are long gone, and those parents that want their children to feel some of that spiritual energy need to consciously make plans to create it themselves.

Having a residual loyalty to Jewish ethnicity is clearly no longer enough to compel American Jews to make the effort to preserve Judaism as a living religion for themselves and their families. They need to feel that Judaism can open up new sources of enlightenment to the complex questions they face along with their families. These are not generally metaphysical questions about how to understand the universe but rather practical issues about how to live their lives in a complex society.

Deciding to be Jewish is not a rational choice that is derived from an objective analysis of the pluses and minuses of doing that versus doing something else. Rather, it is an emotional decision that is the result of a complex set of variables that include the relationships one formed in childhood and the experiences that one has undergone in camp, school, and synagogue. Many Americans now have multiple identities, and the American Jewish community is in the process of adapting to that fact. The stronger the pull of a vibrant and compelling Jewish spirituality, the more competitive Judaism can be in the “religious marketplace.”

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