

Denomination, Post-Denomination, Trans-Denomination: Whither, Indeed, American Jewish Movements?

Jerome Chanes

The story is told of the nineteenth-century Hebrew writer, Y.L. Gordon – we know him by the acronym Yalag – who paid a visit to Leopold Zunz, the grand guru of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Zunz asked Yalag, “What do you do?”

“I’m a Hebrew poet.”

“Oh. When did you live?”

This instructive story is illustrative of the time-disconnect many of us feel when we ponder the “denominational dilemma” in American Jewish religion. When did you live? Indeed. Our movements, contoured and tooled for eras long gone, are faced with new realities – and we are taken by surprise when our communities and constituents shape new responses to change.

Oy. All I hear about these days is “post-denominationalism” and “trans-denominationalism.” What happened to Jewish “movements”? Are the movements alive and well? Are our denominational groupings in fact yet “movements”? What are the fault-lines – indeed fissures – in our denominational world, both between and within our movements? How did we get to this place, where Orthodoxy is increasingly polarized, Conservative is splintering and worse, Reform is vibrant but deeply troubled over Jewish identity issues in an age of patrilineality and intermarriage?

If pre-modern Judaism was based on Talmudic and rabbinic traditions, “Modern Judaism” generated a range of responses – *Haskalah*, Bundism, Zionism, socialism; and in the religious arena *Hasidut*, the Eastern-European *yeshivah*, Neo-Orthodoxy in Germany, and of course Reform/Neolog and the first stirrings of Zechariah Frankel Conservative. Common assumptions and values were no longer common, nor were they assumed.

We need to keep in mind always that Judaism as we have known it for some centuries is not just “religion,” as is Roman Catholicism. As historian Lawrence Grossman has it, Judaism has, “in addition to its theological and spiritual essence, a national and ethnic dimension which is often characterized today as ‘secular’ – though the very concept of secularism is itself modern.”¹ This verity, of a religion that is many other things as well, is an essential dynamic of American Jewish denominationalism. Indeed, one of the ways in which our “movements” (as we call them) differ from denominations (in the American Protestant sense) is in this dynamic, as our movements may differ in their approaches to ethnicity. Further, in the Christian denominational world, what makes a “denomination” is that one denomination differs from another in doctrinal matters, and perhaps in some forms of ritual; but they all adhere to the fundamental beliefs of the parent faith-community, such as some level of belief in the divinity of Jesus. What is crucial in denominationalism is that no denomination in the American Christian world would ever deny the validity as Christian of any other denomination. Our movements are not denominations in this

sense. Members of Jewish movements accept as Jews every other movement's members (in accordance with each movement's understanding of *halakhah* and tradition) – but that's it. The word “movement” suggests ideological differences, not just disagreement over the number of sacraments or whether the bishop or the local congregation is the seat of authority.

Our recent denominational history – marked of course by the Jewish counter-culture and Jewish “Renewal” – is instructive. With the changes in American Jewish agendas in the 1960s, there were changes in our religious loyalties as well. *Havurot* in Boston, Washington, and New York redefined for many young Jews in the late 1960s Jewish spirituality and spirit, Jewish learning, and indeed the very idea of the synagogue itself. Whilst the core of the *havurah* founders and adherents came out of the Conservative/Ramah world, there were Orthodox and Reform from the beginning – and “just Jewish” members as well. But by the late 1970s there was pressure from both inside and without the *havurah* world for both experimentation and a look back. In the words of one former *havurah* member, a founder of the new Minyan M'at in New York, “If I hear one more high-flown analysis of the ‘*Akedah*’ I will go into shock.” Minyan M'at and the Library Minyan in Los Angeles – the first “post-*havurah*” generation of *minyanim* – provided opportunities for traditional, completely egalitarian services, with a strong measure of innovation built into the service, every *Shabbat* – and, with a solid base of Jewish text study.²

Today we are in the second post-*havurah* generation. As *davenen* groups such as Minyan M'at were no longer “*m'at*,” and for many were no longer distinguishable from the Conservative shuls that housed them; and as Modern Orthodox congregations such as the Lincoln Square Synagogue – in the 1970s a trail-blazer in women's issues, singles, outreach, and the nature of the Orthodox service – moved to the right politically and religiously, a new generation of prayer groups emerged. Today, we in New York revel in Darkhei Noam, a Manhattan Orthodox congregation that reflects the practices of Jerusalem's Shira Chadasha and draws from the right of the right of the Jewish center and the left of the left of the Conservative;³ and in Kehillat Hadar, a vibrant egalitarian group and numerous other *kehillot* that were informed by Minyan M'at. A small Orthodox congregation on Manhattan's Upper West Side, Kehillat Rayim Ahuvim, looks like mainstream Orthodox, but it's not. It, too, “pushes the envelope,” a worthy successor to the *havurot* and the Library Minyan. I eagerly await the next, third post-*havurah*, generation. Whispers in my ear from voices as disparate as Hadar congregants and from Baltimore's *yeshivish* Ner Israel Yeshiva tell me that it's happening.

* * * * *

It is no *hidush* – no great revelation – to anyone that, as we approach the second half of 5769, the movements have their problems. Two questions suggest themselves: First, are these problems and issues outweighed by the strengths in each movement – and strengths there are? Second, whither the movements? Will there be three or four definable movements by the year 2025? Or will there be – as some of our essayists suggest – two: Heterodox and Orthodox? Or will there be none, with many religious “packages” – *Hasidim* and other sectarian Orthodox; congregations of renewal, and so on – serving the disparate needs of our community; or will the movements strengthen themselves internally, and re-emerge, reshaped?

“Denominationalism and Its Discontents” is what Rabbi Noam Marans calls it – and he ain't wrong. Post-denominationalism is not a movement; “[i]t is defined more by what it is not – a denomination – than by what it is,” says Marans. Post-denominationalism

comes out of a range of discontents – but it leads to new expressions of energy and creativity that we hope will energize the movements. Marans: “Do whatever we can do to strengthen the Big Three – Orthodox, Conservative, Reform – and the small but growing Reconstructionist.”

But consider Rabbi Yael Shmilovitz, a Reform rabbi: “Jewish identity is no longer negotiated through affiliation with large institutions. Instead it’s an intricate patchwork of complementing and contradicting elements, all increasingly personal.” Or Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal, who in his long career has seen *everything* with respect to movements: “Do we need new movements? What for? . . . There has to be a limit or else Judaism unravels and degenerates into a thousand different Judaisms.”

And so on.

Rabbi Marans’s analysis is worth staying with for a bit, because it illumines larger denominational issues. Marans moves, in concentric circles outward, from the problems with his own Conservative movement to Jewish denominationalism in general, and concludes that the weakening of the “center” – that is, Conservative – will act to the disadvantage of all of the movements.⁴ For, as he argues, “Without the Conservative movement to buffer the increasing insularity of the Orthodox and the wide opening of the Reform tent, . . . it is only a matter of time before the Jewish community is divided into two groups: the Orthodox and everyone else.”

Marans is partly right; partly right, therefore partly wrong. The idea of Conservative as “center,” as midpoint between Orthodox and Reform, doesn’t work that well any more. Conservative is not necessarily *between* the two movements, an “Orthodox Lite” or a “Reform Heavy”; Conservative has an identity of its own, which ought be enhanced, and not via its identification with “hot-button” issues, as legitimate as those issues are. The “center” position, in any case, is relative: to many in the Orthodox world, Conservative is “heterodox”; to many in Reform, Conservative is “Orthodox.”

This suggests something important about an American religion that is positioned in American pluralism, a “take” on the “transformationalist” position beloved by a number of sociologists of the American Jewish experience. Recall that the transformationalists respond to the “assimilationists” – those who say “*Oy*, it’s awful: American Jews are illiterate, we are intermarrying, we are assimilating, we are in terrible shape. The answer lies in strengthening our inner core . . .” And so on. Transformationalists suggest that it’s neither better nor worse; it’s *different*. American Jews are *transforming* the ways in which they are expressing the Jewish experience. And thus it ought be, they argue: we cannot evaluate American Jews in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with the same criteria we use to evaluate Vilna and Warsaw and Berlin in the nineteenth. “America is different!”

Yes, it is – and whilst I personally have a lot of loyalty to the assimilationist position, the reality is that each generation does re-contour our religion to face the demands of that generation. In terms of our movements, my sense – and my hope – is that the movements will continue (to paraphrase William Faulkner) not merely to endure, but to prevail and flourish – but *not* to look as they do now. Each movement in our pluralist religious world will rethink and reshape its structures, its constituencies, its expectations. In my movement, Orthodoxy, my expectation would be that its rabbinic leadership (and here I make no distinction between the Modern Orthodox and the sectarian) would recall that normative Judaism was traditionally informed by and nurtured by a mimetic tradition of orthopraxis – “I did what was the traditional practice of my community”; “I did what my father did”; “It was my mother’s practice” – so long as the practices fell within the general guide-

lines set down by our *poskim* and *gedolim*, such as the Shulhan Arukh and the Rama. Our mimetic tradition had elasticity, an ability to accommodate a range of practices, an elasticity that appears to have been lost in many, perhaps most, Orthodox circles. The “*haredization* of America” is one in which *humrah* – a stringency that was always a matter of personal choice – has become standard, and one who doesn’t keep the *humrah* may be, in the eyes of the community, suspect in all other areas of religious life. This area is most serious; it runs counter to the elasticity that characterized the mimetic tradition of orthopraxis.

For Conservative, the choice of a chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary – for historical reasons the absolutely regnant institution in the Conservative world (in this it is unlike Orthodoxy and Reform) – who comes *davka* out of the Jewish Renewal and counterculture movement, ought to send a powerful message to the movement. As an Orthodox Jew, I part company with most of my fellow Orthodox Jews: I think that it would be a disaster for American Jewry were the Conservative movement to fold. Similarly for Reform. But Reform needs to redefine for itself protocols on who in reform congregations is Jewish, and who is not. In Conservative and Orthodox the boundaries are clear and they are firm. In Reform they are not.

Beyond this, our newest expressions, “congregations of renewal” across the board – not so new anymore, to be sure – will revitalize *all* of the movements. The *havurot* were, early on, co-opted by the synagogues; and the second-generation Jewish renewal (the Library Minyan in Los Angeles, Minyan M’at) began looking like movement-based *minyanim* – and that’s not a bad thing. The newer independent *minyanim* – Hadar, Darchei Noam – are our new expressions, not only of religious observance, but of Jewish identity. And they will become “mainstreamed” as well. *Abi gezunt*. It’s as it should be.

A number of the authors in our symposium dance around the issue of freedom. And indeed, that is the American dilemma, and the over-arching dilemma of modernity. Modernity is all about the freedom to choose, and this is especially true in American Jewish religion. A *chosid*, unhappy with his *rebbe*, can go across the street – and often does. Any Orthodox Jew can choose, overnight, to become Reform, or secular, or convert; and many Reform and Conservative Jews become *frum* – or *they* become secular. With this atmosphere of free decision-making regnant, the only thing that will work to ensure our future is to make Jewish religion a positive experience for the individual Jew.

Finally, at bottom, it’s all about young Jews. The magic word, “affiliation,” is a troubled word. To take one serious example, young Jews, Birthright/Taglit notwithstanding, are distanced from Israel – sometimes even for good reasons. Are our young people going to *shul*? If they do, our movements, whatever they will look like – and we may not recognize them in twenty-five years – will thrive. If not – “When did you live?”

¹ “Jewish Religion in America,” from J. Chanes, N. Linzer, and D. Schnall, eds, *A Portrait of the American Jewish Community* (Westport: Prager, 1998), 77.

² At least in principle. The egalitarian nature of these *minyanim* sometimes got in the way of serious attention paid to text.

³ The model, developed by Dr. Devorah Steinmetz and Drisha’s Rabbi David Silber, is of the participation of women in many – but not all – public rituals of the synagogue, with the *mehitzah*.

⁴ To Marans, the Conservative weakness is measured in numbers. True, the movement is leaking, perhaps hemorrhaging, both to the right and to the left. But amongst the many issues for Conservative, two stand out: (1) the continued splintering of the movement; and (2) the age-old disparity between the official positions of Conservative (“We are a *halakhic* movement”) and the observance of the rabbis, on the one hand, and the lack of observance of the congregants in the pews, on the other.