

Denominationalism and Its Discontents

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Post-denominationalism. Just Jewish. Renewal. Independent minyanim. Non-denominational seminaries. Emergent spiritual communities. Secular Judaism. Chabad. It is enough to make a committed denominationalist disconsolate. Whatever challenges these and other early 21st-century Jewish religious phenomena present to the historic American Jewish denominations, it behooves us to do whatever we can to strengthen the Big Three – Orthodox, Conservative and Reform – and the small but growing Reconstructionist movement. They have been indispensable pillars of American Jewish life and the Jewish people would be poorer without them.

The major denominations have enabled Jews to connect with like-minded co-religionists who benefit enormously from the collective association of religious movements. Specifically, denominations provide the advantages of:

1) Strength in numbers: All of the major movements have demonstrated that more can be done with critical mass and creative and financial resources. We might not always be satisfied with our respective movement organizations and leadership, but there is no denying that size has enabled them to create networks of schools, camps and youth movements, Torah commentaries, prayer books and more that have enriched their respective constituents, as well as the broader American Jewish community, including those who do not identify with a particular denomination.

2) Cross-pollination: While each movement may not readily acknowledge it, their differing ideologies and creative programming initiatives have, over time and in many ways, inspired and been inspired by one another. Each of the three leading movements has a signature program or value that has impacted the others. For example, Orthodoxy's universal commitment to day school education has spawned Conservative, Reform and community day schools. Early 20th-century Conservative-based Zionism has led to near-universal support for the State of Israel, an essential component of American Jewish life. Reform's role-modeling of Jewish commitment to social justice has contributed a moral conscience to the fabric of American Jewish life. The youngest movement, Reconstructionism, has modeled integration of spirituality and non-hierarchical decision-making that has become most closely associated with *havurot* and is recently manifest in the impulse to empower the laity within a traditional synagogue organizational structure.

3) Standards: Whether a movement is governed by *halakhah* or Jewish law or, alternatively, celebrates autonomy and choice, association with a particular movement reflects commitment to conventions and norms for religious leaders, congregations, schools and camps. Religious behavior within denominations is not uniform but all movements do set boundaries, whether these are explicitly stated or tacit, that define theological beliefs, core values and Judaic practice. Judaism as a religion and as a

cultural identity is inseparable from a commitment to boundaries. Each movement has contributed its values and understanding of who is or is not a Jew, what is or isn't authentic Jewish practice and other issues of boundaries to the communal conversation.

Post-denominationalism, denominationalism's foil, has gained traction in recent years with its embrace of creativity, diversity and, above all, autonomy. It is defined more by what it is not – a denomination – than by what it is. Post-denominationalism is, by its very nature, uncomfortable with unifying standards and boundaries. But it is a commitment to these values that has assured Jewish viability and group-cohesiveness throughout the centuries.

Religious life has evolved and changed, but the longevity of Judaism has been predicated in part on its ability to change slowly, almost painfully so. When denominations are functioning well, they provide structure and limitation to change, keeping the wheels of change moving at a tolerable pace that maintains Judaism's vibrancy without destroying its inherent character and historical thread.

4) Choice: The American Jewish system of movements assures that American Jews have choice. Freedom to choose is the American way. In contrast, the lack of officially sanctioned religious options in Israel has created a polarized society of religious (observant) vs. secular (non-observant). If one has the ability to choose to be Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative or Orthodox, one does not need to completely opt out of religious life when a particular movement fails to meet personal theological beliefs or practical needs. As a Conservative rabbi, I am relieved that there are viable substantive options to both my left and right when the spiritual guidance I have to offer cannot satisfy the religious needs of a particular Jew.

Notwithstanding my belief in the historic and enduring value of denominationalism for American Jewry, all is not entirely quiet on the movement front. Each movement faces its own particular challenges.

The Orthodox can take pride in their dramatic demographic advances and advantages, including:

- 1) 10 percent of all adult American Jews identify as Orthodox, but an astounding 38 percent of all synagogue-affiliated children are Orthodox (NJPS 2000-2001).
- 2) Orthodox Jews have many more children than non-Orthodox Jews. The modern Orthodox birthrate is twice that of Conservative and Reform Jews and the *haredi* birthrate is four times that of the non-Orthodox (Jack Wertheimer, *Commentary*, February 1999).
- 3) The Orthodox intermarriage rate is a mere 5 percent while the intermarriage rate for Jews as a whole is 47 percent (NJPS 2000-2001).

Nonetheless, Orthodoxy is in the throes of an internal identity crisis. Will a centrist philosophy that embraces modernity within the context of Orthodox observance regain its footing or will what has been described as "*haredization*" (Chaim Waxman) and "sliding

to the right” (Samuel Heilman) continue to overtake the movement? Despairing of the pervasive secularity of the broader American Jewish community and fearful of growing Jewish assimilation into wider American society, Orthodoxy has turned increasingly insular, with the *haredim* persistently increasing their numeric and ideological influence. This internal identity crisis will inevitably affect Orthodoxy’s relevance to and interaction with the rest of the American Jewish community. An insular Orthodox culture risks being irrelevant to mainstream American Jewry, affiliated and unaffiliated.

Like Orthodoxy, the Reform movement does not face a decline in numbers, but in fact has more adherents than ever, with Reform now surpassing the Conservative movement as American Jewry’s most popular denomination. But as Orthodoxy is engaged in an internal ideological battle, Reform is struggling to define its limits. Having opened the gates wide to intermarried couples and interfaith families, Reform is understandably proud of its success in getting more people to affiliate Jewishly. Today, at least 25 percent of Reform synagogue members come from the ranks of the intermarried (NJPS 2000-2001). The overwhelming majority of intermarried Jews who belong to synagogues affiliate with the Reform movement. Reform’s superior organization, creativity in programming and institution-building savvy, along with its recent return to tradition in liturgy and practice, has made it an attractive home for many American Jews. But how will the reality of its appeal to the intermarried affect the future identity of the Reform movement? Is there a tipping point for the Reform movement wherein the increasing presence of interfaith families will dramatically affect identity?

There’s no getting around the dismaying reality that the Conservative movement has lost too many members, although arguably, the core of Conservative Jewry today is more committed to the movement’s future. After all, 30 percent of youngsters in Conservative-affiliated households attend day school, a tangible measure of investment in that denomination’s continuity (Steven M. Cohen, *Contact*, Summer 2005). The overall decline in Conservative membership can be attributed to the American Jewish retreat from the traditionalism of the earlier immigrant generation and geographical migration from Conservative strongholds (Northeast, Midwest) to Reform strongholds (South, West).

Compounding this numeric decline are the movement’s internal debates. Is Conservative Judaism still a *halakhic* movement? How far will it go to welcome intermarried Jews? Is Conservative Judaism modern, flexible and welcoming enough or too stodgy, exclusive and traditional to renew its widespread appeal?

The current weakening of the center that is the Conservative movement is bound to have unwelcome consequences for denominationalism as a whole. Without the Conservative movement to buffer the increasing insularity of the Orthodox and the wide opening of the Reform tent, some observers of contemporary American Jewish life have suggested that it is only a matter of time before the Jewish community becomes divided into two groups: the Orthodox and everyone else. This observation is often coupled with a prediction that Conservative Judaism will be subsumed into Reform, that the middle ground in Jewish religious life will disappear.

There is reason to be concerned. Most Reform and Conservative Jews today are in fact more similar to one another in outlook and practice than either one is to their Orthodox brethren. In the past, this was less the case because there were significant numbers of Jews who affiliated Orthodox but did not live an observant lifestyle. That is no longer the reality. Additionally, fewer non-Orthodox Jews are choosing their affiliation based on ideolo-

gy but rather on less lofty considerations, such as the convenience of a synagogue's location; the number of times per week that the congregational ("Hebrew") school meets (once, twice or three days); and the charisma of the rabbi and cantor.

A narrowing of religious choices for American Jews would be a very negative development. That's why not only Conservative Jews, but all Jews should be rooting for the Conservative movement to rebound – and sooner rather than later. It is important to note that there was a time when many believed that Orthodoxy would disappear. How wrong that view was, and how fortunate we are that Orthodoxy is thriving.

On what will the future of Conservative Judaism depend? Will Conservative Judaism follow the Orthodox model of the mid-20th century and batten down the traditionalist hatches hoping for a brighter day (unlikely), or will it re-invent itself and draw closer to its sister movements on the left (more likely)? If Conservatism preserves its distinction from Reform it will maintain its important niche as a modern *halakhic* movement that believes in tradition and change. If not, there really might come a time when the denominational spectrum will narrow to just two: Orthodox and everyone else.

Ironically, preserving Jewish tradition and observance from the changes legislated by the Reform movement was a founding principle of Conservative Judaism. Zacharias Frankel and his co-religionists in Europe first threw down the gauntlet in 1845, breaking with Reform leadership over the proposal to change the language of prayer from Hebrew to German. Today's battle lines within the Conservative movement have been drawn on two related fronts noted earlier – the questions of whether the movement is still *halakhic* and how flexible it might be in incorporating interfaith families into its synagogues.

Above and beyond the movements' internal challenges, there remains the question of interdenominational relations. In *Jewish Unity, Denominationalism, and Postdenominationalism in the United States* (American Jewish Committee, 2005) Jack Wertheimer argues that "for the most part, public expressions of antagonism [between the denominations] have receded." (p. 2) Wertheimer regrets this development and concludes his essay with, "A people famous for its disputatious nature has convinced itself that consensus has been reached, when, in reality, healthy debate has been silenced – for now." (p. 26)

The movements may be farther apart than ever before, as Wertheimer postulates, but movement leaders have concluded that fighting in public is not good for business. Moreover, the Jewish people's "disputatious nature" has been diverted to internal debates within the respective denominations. However, we shouldn't necessarily bemoan this interdenominational public civility or underestimate the value of visibly cordial intra-Jewish relations, for these can lead to the development of alliances that can serve the Jewish people well, while steering clear of the ideological fault lines that only cause acrimony. Even in an age when many local Jewish federations are hurting in terms of membership and financial support, remarkably, federations and Jewish Community Relations Council chapters have succeeded in getting Orthodox and non-Orthodox rabbis to sit at the same table. But it is unlikely that the hot-button issues of personal status will be discussed (or resolved) across denominational lines any time soon.

What is the greatest challenge to denominational viability? It is indeed the challenge to the continuity of American Jewish life in general: engaging the emerging generation of young adults. In this regard, Orthodoxy is doing better than the liberal movements, given its demonstrable commitment to lifelong Jewish learning. But most American Jews are

leaving synagogue and denominational life for decades following bar/bat mitzvah, just as their Jewish identities and communal ties should be solidifying.

Young Jewish adults often do not return to affiliation until their oldest child is ready for a Jewish education. In general, American Jews are marrying later than their parents did, if they marry at all. They become parents later and give birth to fewer children than the previous generation. Nearly half marry out of the faith. Whatever Jewish identity they form as young adults is increasingly reliant upon non-synagogue Jewish encounters that foster opportunities for personal enrichment more than religious/spiritual experiences or communal obligations. They cherish open, inclusive and pluralistic environments, preferring the edgy to the bland and informal networking to formal belonging. Most are uncomfortable with Jewish institutional and organizational life and constructs like “peoplehood” and “continuity.” They seek new forms of identification through the panoply of creative expressions of Jewish music, art, creative writing, journalism, political and social action and so forth. The elite among them have produced such innovative ventures as *Heeb* and *PresentTense* and spawned artists like Matisyahu and spiritual experiments like independent *minyanim*.

It is hardly surprising that these young American Jews are increasingly unwilling to be categorized by the labels of the past. In a consumer-oriented society, where you can surf the Internet and belong to whatever group you choose for as long or as short as you’d like and purchase whatever product you want as soon as you want it, the historic structure of American Jewish denominations will undoubtedly seem far too constricting. These young Jews are fueling, in part, the fastest growing “denomination” in Jewish life, the “just Jewish” movement. Most “just Jewish” Jews are not connected to a Jewish community and represent the weakest links in American Jewish life. But some “just Jewish” Jews are highly engaged Jews, so-called post-denominationalists who eschew denominational classifications but contribute to and partake of the cultural and religious cutting-edge phenomena of American Jewish life.

Will these cultural and religious expressions of young American Jews evolve into a new movement along denominational lines? I would argue not. They are simply doing what young people in every generation have done: refashioning the demands and expectations of their parents. A generation ago the *havurah* movement arose in reaction to stale synagogue life, and now, many *havurot* happily co-exist within the synagogue structure, affiliated with one of the conventional movements. Just as denominations and their affiliated synagogues have historically incorporated maverick forms of creative expression to strengthen themselves, they must now look for ways to co-opt these contemporary outside-the-box expressions. It will not be easy. After all, *havurot* were, at their core, expressions of religious identity. With the exception of independent *minyanim*, most of the new endeavors peddle Jewish culture, not religion.

American Jewish denominations and, indeed, the American synagogue, will sink or swim depending on whether they can learn to fill the pews with today’s young Jews.

