

# Denominations in a Pluralistic World—Where We Are Headed

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For many twenty-first century Jews, religious life is inextricably linked to post-denominationalism, in which the distinctions between “brands” that once defined different Jewish cultural and religious preferences have faded. This different way of envisioning organized Judaism stands in sharp contrast to the period following the immediate post-World War II era that witnessed wholesale population shifts from urban to suburban areas ringing most major cities, where Jews built and affiliated with synagogues based on conscious denominational preferences. In that insular world, initially there was limited crossover from one movement to another. Nevertheless, many Jews of recent immigrant and more traditional backgrounds migrated toward and fueled the growth of the Conservative movement, which seemed as authentic, but more modern and in step with the times, as Orthodox options. The Reform movement also experienced significant growth as Jews began to choose modernity over convention.

Fast forward five decades to today and the once-sharp distinctions between the various movements have blurred. For that reason, forecasting the future of the Reform movement cannot be accomplished in a vacuum that does not take into account the trends that are sweeping across weakened denominational lines. Twenty-first century American Jews see themselves in groupings that no longer mirror the movements once utilized as the measure for synagogue affiliation. The Reform movement is the beneficiary of a migration to Reform congregations that embrace many of the transformed categories by which Jews now redefine themselves. This is often facilitated by the perception that Reform congregations afford Jews the opportunity to practice “their” faith without being preached to about the requirements they must fulfill in order to be a “good” Jew. As such, the outlook of today’s liberal Jew sides with Mordecai Kaplan’s observation that tradition ought to have a vote but not a veto.

Jews and Americans in general are struggling to invent new ways of describing and participating in their faith. Their beliefs are eclectic, more like a patchwork quilt, and their commitments are becoming more private and self-centered than those of previous generations. Growing numbers of post-modern Jews customize their faith and define religion instead of religion defining them. They have moved the rabbi, cantor, and the synagogue off center stage, resulting in a spirituality that is more egocentric and self-absorbed than previously commended by Jewish tradition. Instead of “brands” defined by communally organized bureaucratic religious structure, they are looking for what Swiss psychologist Carl Jung termed *synchronicity* – the occurrence of “meaningful coincidence,” events so timely and moving that they are considered to be beyond mere chance or what theologian Rudolph Otto termed *numinosity* – the irresistible, undeniable, unforgettable feeling of being in the presence of the Divine. The flowering of Torah and Talmud study groups and book groups and even worship groups outside mainstream synagogues attests to the voracity of interest in spirituality and learning among Jews who find their needs better met in informal groupings than through conventionally organized religion.

Many Reform congregations have initiated a so-called “*minyán*-style” worship that features the old-world flavor of greater warmth and participation, have adopted a prayer

book that is characterized by more traditional and repetitive Hebrew liturgy, and have eliminated innovative experimental liturgy and grand performance-centered music as well as frontal worship in which the clergy preaches, prays, and chants at a passive congregation of “observers.” As a result, Jews who grew up in Conservative and even Orthodox congregations are increasingly comfortable in liberal congregations that have the trappings of traditional Judaism without some of its strictures. Reform congregations provide a higher level of comfort for those not fully subscribing to sanctioned halachic practices and demands of traditional movements. This author suggested to a formerly identified Conservative Jew who joined a Reform congregation that the “*minyán*-style” worship he attends at the Reform congregation is not Conservative Judaism. He replied, “I know it is Conservative ‘lite’, but it meets all of my needs.”

In cities where multiple synagogue choices exist, twenty-first century Jews frequently join the synagogue perceived to best meet their needs. As a consequence, crossovers from one movement to another frequently are made without regard to theology, practice, or dogma. In one-synagogue towns, congregations that once focused on performance-based worship try to accommodate a growing spectrum of worship styles and needs and thereby often become embroiled in what one Reform leader termed “the worship wars.” Jews have become more proactive in shaping personal worship experiences and do not necessarily accept what is offered up by congregations that they feel are out of step with the times. Demographic inversion is also influencing Jewish choices of where Jews hang their spiritual hats. Former suburban Jews are moving back into cities, revitalizing deteriorated downtown areas, breathing new life into once-faded synagogues, and transforming worship and educational offerings.

Furthermore, in addition to the blurring of denominational lines, twenty-first century Jews are increasingly identifying themselves by a variety of categories that are not considered by members of the Jewish “establishment” to be legitimate groupings for Jewish connectivity. Such Jews are not all that interested in established categories but rather delineate themselves through broader and more informal brushstrokes. Established congregations often do not know how to deal with self-defined Jews whose aggregate includes:

**Not-Very-Jewish Jews**—Jews living on the fringe of the Jewish religious and cultural life. Such Jews detached from organized Jewish life are frequently referred to as “the unaffiliated,” although they may dip into structured Jewish life for brief periods when they have specific life-cycle needs, only to disappear again when those needs are met.

**Very-Jewish Jews**—Jews who define their lives by everything Jewish. They unquestioningly affiliate, support, and often participate in synagogues and a variety of other Jewish cultural, educational, and social action programs and institutions. Their synagogue choices are frequently dictated by family and childhood experiences. They often want more than what synagogues that cater to the “mean” Jewish population are able to offer.

**No-Longer-Jewish Jews**—Jews who have tossed aside their Judaism and are often written off by the larger Jewish community. One thoughtful rabbi compared such Jews to a tiny oven pilot light that’s always on but waiting to be fueled into a blazing flame. Not infrequently, when

such an individual reemerges in the Jewish community, it is to the approbation and approval of all other Jews.

**Suddenly-Jewish Jews**—A small minority of Jews whose newfound knowledge of dormant Jewish ancestry results in a reconnection and resurgence of Jewish life. Frequently, Suddenly-Jewish Jews feel like they have recovered something that was missing their entire lives as they become fervent in their devotion to their new-found faith.

**Half-Jewish Jews**—This is the most controversial category, one that the Jewish world is extraordinarily uncomfortable with and generally denigrates and/or ignores in the hope that it will go away. With approximately half of all Jews marrying non-Jews, the number of children under age eleven born of such marriages exceeds the number of children born of two Jewish parents. This statistic is difficult to ignore because it presents fertile territory for both argument and action as the Jewish community seeks to respond to the challenge to embrace such families. However, the Jewish community often is silent about how to encourage strong faith-based lives in children who choose to practice the different religious traditions of both their parents. This act of blending two halves into a single hybrid, called by one half-Jewish woman “a dazzling act of existential virtuosity,” defines the tension inherent in blending two cultures where a so-called half-Jewish child often becomes the consummate outsider/insider, ashamed of his “neitherness.”

**Spiritual-But-Not-Religious Jews**—An increasingly growing group of Jews whose formative Jewish experiences are often described by tales of boredom and irrelevance, and religious and communal experiences devoid of joy. They are uninterested in and feel alienated from synagogues that seem corrupt because of their compromise with modernity. Nevertheless, Spiritual-But-Not-Religious Jews are spiritual seekers who look to connect with a non-bureaucratic, non-judgmental religion that unquestioningly accepts them.

The resurgence of spirituality that is sweeping through Jewish life has occurred many other times according to sociologist Robert Wuthnow, author of *The Crisis in the Churches: Spiritual Malaise*. Wuthnow contrasts two types of spirituality: “habitation spirituality” and “journey spirituality.” “God occupies a definite place in the universe and creates a sacred space in which humans can dwell” according to Wuthnow’s definition of habitation spirituality, which he also refers to as “settled times.” In Western religion, habitation spirituality is a temple religion of kings and priests where imagery centers on dwellings. In contrast, journey spirituality “emphasizes negotiation: individuals search for sacred moments that reinforce their conviction that the divine exists.” Journey spirituality is a tabernacle religion of prophets, sages, faith pilgrims, sojourners, and wanderers. Whereas the metaphor for the former is a mighty fortress, for the latter, it is not physical space but rather mystic, itinerant preachers, and charismatic leaders.

The shift that is overtaking religious life in America is a repositioning from “dwelling” to “seeking.” It coincides with the shift away from the way we once lived as a

residential community where people settled and worked, to a technologically savvy commuter community where individuals flit in and out at will, and can embrace people, religious communities, organizations, and interest groups scattered all over the globe. The formerly stable put-down-roots community is now filled with drifters, exiles, refugees, newcomers, transferees, and lonesome internet surfers. Whereas people once identified their faith with belonging to a faith community, in the age of journey spirituality, faith is no longer something inherited; it is something that is sought from a wide variety of *à la carte* choices. Jews seek instruction in spirituality from the personal insights and psychological truths of Sufi, Hindu, Buddhist, Native American, and Hasidic teachers, among others. The popularity of such homespun spirituality attests to Americans' self-actualization and personal spiritual pursuit in today's quest culture. Indicative of this is the fact that since 1960 more new religions have been founded in the United States than in all the other centuries of American history! In addition, what is different is that today's young Jews do not have the same grounding as their parents or grandparents, who were linked to the old country, a reservoir of Jewish experience, a sentimental attachment to Yiddish and Old World culture, and a solid grounding in Jewish texts, traditions, and practice. Today's post-modern Jews are searching for something else, because the religion of their childhood was one that frequently engendered guilt over Israel and the Holocaust, one in which parents seemed like hypocrites because of their totally secular lifestyle and lack of participation in the life of the synagogue except for the High Holy Days or family occasions when they would mouth words that had little meaning to them, and a patent disregard for the environment and the destructive forces of a rising world population, and a lack of concern for hunger, AIDS, crime, and terrorism.

The Reform movement faces new challenges as do all the other streams of Judaism. How they respond will determine whether or not Judaism will offer viable opportunities that draw Jews of all stripes into a community that is diverse but not so fragmented that it has no voice or vision. At the present time, it does not appear that the Reform movement or any of the other streams of Judaism is fully able to respond to such challenges in a way that will richly impact Judaism in the coming decades.