

Toward a Post-Ideological, Therefore a Post-Denominational Liberal Judaism?

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Introduction

Being an academician affects my answers to Rabbi Zlotowitz's questions in several regards, so that I'll start by raising a terminological quibble.

I'm not sure if Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and other contemporary forms of Judaism should be called denominations, a term borrowed from Protestantism, or even whether they are social movements in the sense that sociologists and historians use the term. They are tendencies or segments of the organized religious continuum of American Judaism. Specifically, they are conglomerates, each comprised of a rabbinic school, a federation of legally autonomous congregations, a union of rabbis, and associations for youth, women (sisterhoods), and men (brotherhoods).

Moreover, how these denominations (it's impossible to avoid the term completely) emerged in the past can be contrasted with their orientation at present. Jewish pluralism surfaced in periods when the overall situation of a branch of the Diaspora was in great flux, yet being Jewish was a high priority. Older definitions of Judaism had become problematic or even unattractive, leading to the emergence of new ideologies. Once new tendencies establish a solid membership, they can evolve in ways quite different from the original impetus. Recall the Karaites, Kabbalah, or Beshtian Hasidism, whose status in Jewish history was drastically transformed in the course of time.

Do I identify with a particular denomination or movement?

I identify with Reform Judaism. A bit of autobiography may be in order.

I was sent to "Sunday School" (that's what it was called) at a rather stodgy Classical Reform synagogue in St. Louis. My grandfather arranged that I become bar mitzvah in a Conservative synagogue. I was pushed through the drill by rote. My main involvement as a teenager was in the Reform youth movement, initially as a member of a new Temple youth group created by a charismatic, recently ordained rabbi (Eugene B. Borowitz, who later became an eminent Reform theologian). Participation in the Missouri Valley Federation of Temple Youth (whose perimeters at that time stretched from Illinois to Colorado) led to involvement in the National Federation of Temple Youth. Rabbi Samuel Cook, the director of NFTY, brought together young creative rabbis to be the staff of its summer "camp institutes." This ambiance made a tremendous impression on my cohort of Reform Jewish teenagers, leading some of us to the rabbinate.

At that time the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion had an intellectually diverse faculty, many of whom were at the height of their scholarly vigor. The students were thoroughly committed to Jewish survival and interested in liberal religion, but few of us were particularly observant or pious. At that point HUC did not require study in Israel, but some of us went there on our own to attend an *ulpan* and take courses at Hebrew University. During my HUC years I was drawn to the study of Jewish history and a possi-

ble career in teaching. After ordination I entered Columbia University to study for a PhD in Russian and Jewish history, just as positions in Jewish studies began to open up in secular colleges and universities. Immediately after my dissertation was accepted, I became a member of the History Department of Hunter College of The City University of New York, where I have remained ever since. Besides all periods of Jewish history, I offer courses in world and modern intellectual history. Although I have been a member of several Reform synagogues, the board of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and its Rabbinic Ethics Committee, my primary professional involvement has been through the Association for Jewish Studies.

The AJS is one of the most successful ecumenical Jewish organizations in North America, bringing together Judaic scholars of every orientation. Among other reasons, Jewish studies is thriving in North America and elsewhere because it transcends the denominations. In my professional capacity as professor of history and director of the Hunter Jewish Social Studies Program, I am committed to a presentation of Judaism that is outside any particular religious commitment. I have Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and totally secular students. Very few colleagues and students realize that I am also a Reform rabbi.

On the current transformation of Reform Judaism

“Classical Reform” was the cutting edge in Germany and America until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, seeking to win recognition for Judaism as a respectable and thoroughly modern religious option in an age of emancipation. It experimented with changes in Jewish beliefs and practices, some of which turned out to be viable and others not.

The membership of movements range from a leadership that takes the ideas and program seriously, indeed, to followers whose identification is basically social and casual. On the one hand, some of the most important exemplars of modern Judaism have been associated with Reform Judaism: Abraham Geiger, Hermann Cohen, Leo Baeck, Stephen Wise, Judah L. Magnes, Abba Hillel Silver, Emil Fackenheim, Henry Slonimsky, Samuel Atlas, Jacob Rader Marcus. Jacob Petuchowski, Gunther Plaut, Eugene Borowitz, Rachel Adler – to mention only a few. On the other hand, a high percentage of the membership are Reform because it is, in one way or another, convenient. The ideology of Classical Reform articulated in the Pittsburgh Platform was based on *wissenschaftlich* rationalism, anti-particularistic universalism, progressivist optimism. The Reform Judaism in which I was brought up was epitomized by the Columbus Platform, which was far more positive about Zionism and other elements of Judaism that the earlier leadership had thought obsolete. In the post-World War II era, the membership of Reform Jewish synagogues shifted to include those whose family roots had been in Eastern Europe. Some of the leaders had been brought here from Germany in the late 1930s. (Not long ago, the presidents of HUC, the CCAR, and the UAHF were all born in Germany.) The Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now the Union for Reform Judaism) moved its headquarters to Manhattan, was positive to Jewish ethnicity, supported Israel enthusiastically, and became increasingly appreciative of aspects of the tradition that had previously been jettisoned, from bar/bat mitzvahs to wearing of *kippot* during prayer, to increasing use of Hebrew in worship. The dreary aesthetic ambiance of “God is in His holy Temple, earthly thoughts be silent now” gave way to lively new, sometimes traditionalistic melodies. The role of the Reform rabbi

shifted from focusing on being a civic leader and orator to a far greater involvement in pastoral advice, ritual concerns, and explicating Judaism.

This tendency toward “neo-traditionalism” represents a strengthened sense of belonging to *klal Yisrael* and a positive connection to the Jewish past on the part of Reform, a trajectory leading to turnarounds such as Reform *tashlikh* ceremonies and talk about Reform *kashrut* and restoring *tehiyat ha-meitim* in the new prayer book. At the same time, there has been an transformation of gender roles in Jewish leadership, masculine identifiers for God, and inclusion of gays and lesbians. The question arises then, what makes Reform Judaism still distinctive, other than its organizational structure?

In my opinion, the strength of Reform Judaism has been its intellectual honesty *vis-à-vis* the ideals of the Enlightenment, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and their later manifestations. It acknowledged that there were outdated aspects of the Jewish heritage that must be dropped if Judaism is to remain a living, progressive faith. When, however, does critical change become loss of continuity and coherence? In theory, “nothing Jewish should be alien to a Reform Jew” (especially to a Reform rabbi), so there is always the possibility of filling old bottles with new wine. Are there parameters without which Reform loses its identity and becomes “Conservative Light” (this phrase is my only sound bite ever)? To be sure, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and even Orthodox Judaism face that issue in their own way.

For me, the linchpin is not only to render it compatible with this or that scientific, historical, or psychological finding but to take modern historiography seriously, as I will explain below.

What do you think are the positives of identification with a movement?

We are shaped by the cultures and subcultures in which we are raised, even while we view them critically (and liberal Jews are highly critical people). Isolated individuals have great difficulty in making an impact in the community by themselves. Just being “just Jewish” just “doesn’t do it.” Jewish survival requires settings that provide a framework for socialization, philanthropy, and study. Our version of “*noblesse oblige*” should involve an obligation to support institutions that further the creative survival of Judaism according to its highest values, paying back by contributing to the flourishing and improvement of the matrix from which an abiding core of our identity derives.

How would you describe the future of the current movements?

The future of the denominations depends to a great extent on the overall religious climate in the United States. Will Americans become, like Europeans, increasingly indifferent to organized religion? This is quite possible, considering the social and educational level of the vast majority of American Jews and their increasing integration into the mainstream, including through intermarriage. Reform and Conservative Judaism may shrink but for somewhat different reasons, such as trends in demography, migration, and even the economy (belonging to most synagogues is expensive). Conservative Judaism was to a great extent locked on a commitment carried over from immigrant parents or grandparents. Some of their children have either become more *frum* or, especially if they have intermarried, joined Reform synagogues. Nevertheless, the surge of Reform Judaism in recent decades, which made possible the claim that it is the biggest denomination, may turn out

to be temporary. My friend and colleague Lance Sussman, the rabbi of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel in Philadelphia, wonders if after the growth in the previous decade Reform has already entered a period of numerical decline, like Conservative Judaism. The smaller movements, Reconstructionism, Humanistic Judaism, Jewish Renewal, and groups less well known – all of which have passionately committed memberships – may continue to grow, but they form a small percent of American Jews who are “belongers.”

Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism are now umbrellas, each covering a range of positions. As I suggested earlier, they sustain and are sustained by panoply of institutions that require considerable funds for salaries, the upkeep of buildings, and other expenses. If the abiding division turns out to be the line between Orthodox and all forms of non-Orthodox Judaism, perhaps the liberal sector will be consolidated in order to cut down the total overhead. But given the vested interests involved, it's hard to see how that will happen soon.

What challenges or changes to you foresee?

One of the main problems is the alienation of those who want more than what one of my friends calls “happy clappy Judaism” that relies mainly on nostalgia, sentimentality, emotionality. Many American Jews probably feel something is missing in our society and culture – a dimension which they call “spiritual,” and are therefore open to being shown that modern Judaism renders the treasures of the past compatible with a modern scientific view of nature and history, including the history of religion.

The methodology and some of the findings of contemporary historiography run up against the traditional presentation of what Emil Fackenheim called the “root experiences” of Judaism. Modern historians evaluate evidence about the past skeptically. For example, the biblical image of the formative personalities and events of biblical history before the age of the kings Omri and Ahab may have been to a large extent invented much later: the patriarchs and matriarchs, the Exodus, the covenant at Mount Sinai, the conquest of Canaan, the united kingdom of David and Solomon. Most biblical scholars now date the final redaction of the Pentateuch to post-Exilic times, centuries after Moses (if there was a Moses). There is the problem of sifting through the multiple forms of Judaism that flourished during the late Second Temple period and when to date the inception of the Oral Torah. Modern historiography has analyzed the tensions that characterized the most creative medieval periods of Jewish history and the periodic reconfiguration of what it meant to be Jewish in modern times. There is no final version of the new Jewish history because novel approaches and fashions repeatedly surface in scholarship – it is built into modern scholarship that that happens. All this is grist for the mill of historians, but can be confusing for ordinary Jews.

In sum, history poses theoretical issues that all but the fundamentalist forms of Judaism have to face in justifying that they are legitimate continuations of the tradition. (I avoid the problematic term “authentic”). The bottom line is whether modern Jewish historiography is merely the “faith of fallen Jews” as Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi famously observed in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* – or is it integral to a thoroughly modern Jewishness? Zionism provides one answer. Can liberal diaspora Judaism continue to articulate its own convincing vision of an evolving heritage?

The viable meaning(s) of Jewish history overlap the denominations, blurring the difference between them. The sharpest dividing line may be between those who insist on observance of the *halakhah* as understood according to scholars using traditional religious methods and those who accept that *halakhah*, whatever its value in confirming *klal Yisrael*, is mutable, adjustable, and conditional, so that ultimate affirmation of Judaism rests on other grounds.

What are and what will be effects of pluralistic developments?

The more choices there are for expressing one's Jewishness, the more people will find a comfortable and meaningful home within the Jewish heritage. We live in an age of rampant individualism, so that a variety of options may provide more Jews with a Jewish grounding. Complicating the picture is that people can be "very Jewish" at a certain point in their lives and less so at other times, and that the most meaningful Jewish occasions may be life-cycle events such as birth, turning thirteen, marriage, death – and crisis-moments when they feel they need pastoral counseling.

Another factor that encourages pluralism is the new tier of rabbinic academies that have come to the fore: the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the American Jewish University, Boston Hebrew College, The Academy for Jewish Religion, and others. These don't seem to be creating movements in their wake, but, by breaking down boundaries, may facilitate the amalgamation of a supra-denominational liberal Judaism.

All this blurs the parameters between the denominations and between Judaism and the world, with negative but also with positive effects for the survival of the Jewish heritage as a living faith that applies to life as it is lived.

