

THE

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## Denominationalism

American Jewish Denominationalism:  
Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

*David Ellenson*

A Response to  
Trans/Post/Non-Denominational  
Critiques

*Dan Ehrenkrantz*

Torah, Scholarship,  
and the Mission of the  
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# From the Editor

RENA POTOK

This issue of *The Reconstructionist* — newly designed and streamlined — is devoted to the subject of denominationalism. The term “denomination” refers to a religious grouping within a faith that has specific beliefs and practices that differ from those of other groupings, and has its own system of organization. As Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi points out in this issue, we generally understand the Jewish denominations “through a range of liturgical form, theological orientation and social status, dividing the polity of congregations and their affiliations according to a spectrum or continuum extending from the most secular and humanistic elements of the Jewish populace to the most religiously observant elements.”

Leaders of the major movements and rabbinical seminaries in North America were invited to contribute articles to this issue, as were leaders of the Masorti movement in Israel. They were asked to consider the following questions in writing on the movement or seminary they lead: Why do you belong to this denomination and not another? Whom does your denomination serve? What are the major issues facing your denomination and how are you addressing them? What are the founding principles of the denomination you represent? If your denomination did not exist now, would you feel the need to invent it? What is the role of rabbis in your denomination, and (why) are rabbis still important? How does your seminary train its rabbi to serve a 21st century constituency? The writers’ responses are thoughtful and insightful, and as varied as the denominations from which they hail and the constituencies they serve.

We open this issue with an article by David Ellenson, President of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, who outlines the origins of American Jewish religious denominationalism. Ellenson walks us through the German beginnings, American historical development, modern trends and directions, and contemporary transformations and challenges of denominationalism. The essay also explores the fluid movement in contemporary Jewish life across and between denominational lines; it tries to explain why this movement has been so frequent, and to clarify what such passages might mean for the present and

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future state of denominational life in North American Judaism, and of the Reform movement in particular.

Rabbi Dan Ehrenkrantz, President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, responds to “non-denominational,” “post-denominational” and “trans-denominational” critiques of denominationalism, arguing that these terms take a stance against the status quo and often present an anti-institutional bias, but without clearly articulating a remedy for the present situation. Reconstructionist Judaism, he tells us, understands Judaism as “the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people,” creating a “people-centered” view of Jewish life that is at once grounded in tradition and encourages innovation and creativity, by incorporating into its goals, self-definition and rabbinic education — spiritual direction, new liturgy and *siddurim*, Jewish communal service, commitment to interfaith understanding and social activism.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, offers us a second look at the history of denominationalism in the United States, beginning during the time of the first of the Great Awakenings in the 18th Century, moving to the formation of new communities and prayer books that resulted from the arrival of the first German Jews in the 1840s, and then the first wave of Eastern European Jewry from the 1880s to the 1920s. The central idea of his essay is that the denominational continuum that swings from humanism to ultra-Orthodoxy is not the continuum on which Hasidism and Kabbalah operate. Jewish Renewal, which emanates from Hasidism and Kabbalah is, in Schachter-Shalomi’s view, not a denomination but rather a process, one that is perpendicular to the denominational access of Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist Judaism in North America. More than a denomination, Jewish Renewal is an “organismic cosmology” that stretches across boundaries of division and definition, in a way that can appeal and apply to *klal Yisrael* and its renewal.

In his inaugural address as Chancellor of The Jewish Theological Seminary (which we have reprinted here in excerpted form), Arnold Eisen discusses the mission of JTS and its immediate goals. For Eisen, it is not enough that future Conservative rabbis and cantors be learned in their tradition, its texts and music; to be successful, they must understand the communities, individuals and institutions they will serve, and to represent true pluralism. Furthermore, future clergy must combine mastery of these tools and skills with the development of an

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inner life of spirit and awe before God. Among Eisen's immediate goals for JTS: initiating a grassroots, movement-wide conversation about mitzvah, uniting with other movements to foster support of Israel and of Jewish communities internationally, and laying the groundwork for expanded cooperation with Christian institutions of higher learning and for dialogue with members of many faiths, especially with Muslims.

Saul Berman and Dov Linzer of Yeshivah Chovevei Torah were invited to contribute to this volume, but time constraints prevented them from doing so. We hope to be able to include an essay from Rabbi Berman in a future issue of *The Reconstructionist*.

In a series of three articles from the Masorti movement in Israel (celebrating its 30th anniversary this year) Yizhar Hess — Executive Director of the Masorti movement; Rabbi Dr. Einat Ramon — Dean of the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary; and Yonatan Elazar — Director of the Center for Sephardic Congregations of the Masorti movement — all discuss significant elements of Masorti Judaism in Israel, and its many manifestations. Hess provides the background to the Masorti movement and explains its unique adaptation in Israeli society. He discusses the congregations, youth movements and educational projects of the Masorti movement, and the particular challenges of its identity in Israel, during its initial decades. He goes on to explore new wave of secular culturalism in Israel and its implications for the movement. Ramon examines the Masorti world view, its transmission to rabbinical students at the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary and the particular challenges of Israeli Masorti rabbis. And Elazar introduces us to the Sephardim in contemporary Israel, and their emerging role in Masorti Judaism.

In addition to the articles on denominationalism, we include in this issue two pieces that look into very different topics: Michael Dickerman explores *Reconstructionist* responses to the 1950 attempt to draft an Israeli constitution. And Rebecca Alpert navigates her way through the relationship between genetic diseases and Jewish identity.

Finally, we offer book reviews by Joel Hecker and Richard Hirsh, on the subjects of mysticism and theology. Hecker discusses *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* by Menahem Kellner, and Hirsh offers a comparative reading of *Waiting for God: The Spiritual Explorations of a Reluctant Atheist* by Lawrence Bush, and *A Plausible God: Secular Reflections on Liberal Jewish Theology* by Mitchell Silver.

# American Jewish Denominationalism: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

DAVID ELLENSON

In approaching the topic of Jewish religious denominationalism in America today, I will begin with an autobiographical “confession.” I was raised in an Orthodox synagogue, sent all of my children either to Solomon Schechter schools or Camp Ramah, was a member of a Conservative as well as a Reform congregation for over twenty years of my life, am an Associate member of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association as well as an alumnus of the rabbinical school of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, and currently serve as President of the premiere educational institution of the Reform Movement.

My journey across denominational lines may well be instructive for a discussion of denominationalism, for my story of “boundary-crossings” is hardly unique among present-day American Jews. After all, denominational commitments and affiliations can be and have been approached on a host of different levels — ideological, institutional and folk. The first refers to the set of overarching general beliefs that inform the diverse movements and that are articulated by the elite leaders of each movement, while the second marks the organizational structures that mark each one. Finally, the folk level bespeaks those informal and highly eclectic sets of practices and beliefs that characterize the persons who affiliate with the diverse movements that are present in modern-day Jewish life. My journey is “instructive” precisely because it represents how permeable the borders often are for so many Jews as they traverse the diverse and multi-layered paths of modern Jewish life in their search for spiritual meaning and community.

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*David Ellenson is President of Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion where he serves as the I. H. and Anna Grancell Professor of Jewish Religious Thought.*

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This essay will seek to explain why this type of movement across and between denominational lines has been so frequent in contemporary Jewish life, and will attempt to clarify what such passages might mean for the present and future state of denominational life in North American Judaism. I will begin with a very brief excursus on the historical reality that gave birth to modern Jewish religious movements in Germany, and then provide an overarching portrait to the forces that gave birth to denominational divisions in North America at the end of the 19th century. The essay will then turn to a description and analysis of how religious denominationalism evolved and developed throughout the 20th century. Such historical contextualization will provide a backdrop for grasping Jewish religious denominationalism today and allow us to reflect on the likely directions Jewish religious life and movements will take in 21st-century North America.

### German Beginnings

Jewish religious denominationalism arose in Germany at the beginning of the 19th century as a way for the Jewish community to cope with the revolutionary political, cultural, religious and social changes brought on by the onset of the modern world. The Reform Movement articulated the first group communal denominational response to these transformations in Jewish life, and with such articulation modern Jewish religious movements were born. While Reform was at first a lay-led movement that aimed principally to recast traditional modes of Jewish worship in accord with 19th-century German standards of aesthetics, the rise of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and its attendant ideal that Judaism was not only *in* but *of* history, i.e., that Judaism developed through time and had to be understood in cultural context, provided an ideological fulcrum and an ideological basis that would allow for the growth of a non-Orthodox *Liberales Judentums* in Germany, with its antinomian Reform and Positive-Historical pro-halakhic ideological trends centered around the Abraham Geiger established *Hochschule fuer die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin and the Breslau-based Positive-Historical Jewish Theological Seminary of Zecharia Frankel. Cultural conditions in Germany were such that the ritual observance patterns among rabbis as well as lay adherents of these trends — ideological differences notwithstanding — were similar and these two wings of German Liberal Judaism functioned within a common institutional framework where graduates of both institutions joined the same rabbinical organization and served the same communal synagogues. It would take America, as will be explained below, with its

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cultural-social divisions between Jews of German and Eastern European descent, to foster the growth of distinct Reform and Conservative Movements that were latent in the ideological differences that separated Geiger from Frankel.

Orthodox Judaism itself arose in the 1840s, as Professor Jacob Katz pointed out over and over again in his voluminous and insightful writings, as a self-conscious attempt to defend Jewish tradition in an era when neither the beliefs nor the practices of the tradition were taken for granted. The works of Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer — the founder of the Orthodox Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin — and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch — the chief ideologue of modern Jewish Orthodoxy — place a consistent emphasis on the idea of a “*Torah nitzchit*,” an eternal Torah, and on the Hirschian assertion that the Law, both Written and Oral, was closed with Moses at Mount Sinai. Their writings and views reflect a polemical struggle with the non-Orthodox varieties of Judaism — both Reform and Positive-Historical — which were claiming at the time that all of Judaism, including the Law, were in a state of constant flux and subject to the transforming impact of history and ongoing cultural change.

Denominationalism arose as it did in Germany because figures like Geiger and Frankel articulated the philosophical-theological notion of an evolving Judaism embedded in historical contexts that served to justify both the patterns of practice and the types of continuity and change they desired Judaism to exhibit in the modern situation. Orthodox Judaism emerged in response to these men’s ideas in part because Rabbi S.R. Hirsch felt compelled to discredit the ideological claims to religious legitimacy that Reform put forth, and because he was further required to distinguish himself from the beliefs put forth by Frankel, who observed Judaism no less punctiliously than he himself did. Despite their common patterns of Jewish observance, Hirsch condemned Frankel as a *kofe*r (a heretic) on the grounds that Frankel’s commitment to the notion that Jewish law had evolved throughout time was beyond the pale of acceptable Jewish belief. Yet, precisely because there was cultural homogeneity among the Jews of Germany, no separate and distinct non-Orthodox Jewish movements arose on German soil. Instead, *Liberales Judentums* as a whole, with its distinct ideological trends, existed in opposition to Orthodox Judaism. The nature of denominational responses that initially emerged in Germany to the changed character of Jewish life in the modern world was thus twofold and institutionally narrower than the variety of denominational responses that would ultimately come to define American Judaism.

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## American Historical Developments

When Isaac Mayer Wise came to the United States and established the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1873 and the Hebrew Union College in 1875, he avoided the label “Reform” in the titles of his institutions because he did not believe he was creating a denominationally-distinct form of American Judaism. Instead, his intention was to create an “American Judaism” for a German-speaking American Jewish community that was culturally homogeneous prior to 1881. Wise did not aim to form, at least initially, a Reform Movement. Instead, he aspired to speak for all of American Judaism, and even claimed that the Hebrew Union College would educate both “Orthodox” and “Reform” rabbis.

However, Wise’s dream of a united American Jewish religious community perished in the 1880s with the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Jews to these shores. The cultural and religious cleavages between the Eastern European immigrants and their earlier-arriving German co-religionists were quite pronounced, and it soon became apparent that a union between these disparate groups was impossible. *Liberales Judentums* may have been possible in Germany, where cultural homogeneity promoted a similarity in observance that allowed two trends to co-exist in the non-Orthodox camp without erupting into distinct denominations. But the cultural heterogeneity that divided eastern European from German Jews would not permit this co-existence in the United States and soon two major non-Orthodox denominations — Reform and Conservative — arose, at the end of the 19th century.

One infamous story points to how the fissures caused by ethnic and religious divisions began to widen at this time. In 1883, the Hebrew Union College ordained its first class of rabbis, and Jewish leaders throughout the United States were invited to the graduation ceremony. At a banquet held to celebrate the ordinands, traditional Jewish dietary restrictions forbidding the mixing of milk and meat at the same meal were flouted and all types of forbidden seafood were served. While most historians assert that what has come to be labeled as the infamous “Trefa Banquet” was the result of a caterer’s error, there is no doubt that this banquet delivered a powerful message to Eastern European immigrants and other Jewish religious traditionalists. Judaism, at least as the Reform movement envisioned it, was no longer wedded to traditional Jewish law and practice. At this moment, American Jewish religious denominationalism was born.

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The Reform Movement gave explicit ideological expression to this denominational stance in the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885. Authored by Kaufmann Kohler, this platform asserted that Judaism was a universal faith ever striving to be in accord with postulates of reason. Kohler looked askance upon Jewish ritual behaviors and was a fierce opponent of Jewish nationalism. The posture Kohler and the Reform Movement now championed found practical liturgical expression within the walls of Reform temples. The removal of head-coverings for men during worship now came to be a near-universal Reform custom, and in 1895, the Union Prayerbook — composed almost entirely in English and highly universalistic in its orientation — was adopted as the official liturgy of the Reform Movement.

The Jewish Theological Seminary was established in 1886 in opposition to Reform and by the early years of the 20th century Solomon Schechter articulated the twin ideological foundations upon which Conservative Judaism was to be established — a non-fundamentalistic fidelity to Jewish law that recognized the historical character of Jewish tradition and law as well as an uncompromising devotion to “Catholic Israel.” The debt owed to Frankel could not have been more pronounced.

While this ideological posture was clearly distinct from that of the Reform Movement, the rise and growth of denominationally distinct forms of non-Orthodox Judaism that emerged in America almost a century ago undoubtedly resulted as much if not more from the sociological divide that marked the American Jewish community at this time than from any ideological factor. The religious attitudes and cultural patterns that divided first generation American Jews of eastern European and German descent from one another were simply immense. Reform Judaism thus came to be the denominationally distinct expression of the “folk Judaism” of German Jews in this country while the Conservative movement came into being to express the “folk Judaism” of eastern European Jews in this country as they successfully integrated into this nation and moved up to “areas of second settlement.” The notion of a “union of American Israel” perished principally because of sociological exigencies, i.e, the very real differences that distinguished ethnically heterogeneous German from eastern European Jews.

The institutional patterns and organizational structures that emerged from these distinctions remain with us to this day, even as the ethnic divisions that gave birth to these patterns and structures virtually have disappeared. For, Jews of Eastern European background were as anxious to acculturate to America as the German Jews

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had been before them. As they did so, the distance that separated them culturally from their German Jewish co-religionists began to diminish and Reform itself came to change. Traditional attitudes towards religious ritual and Zionism began to make inroads in Reform Judaism through the leadership of figures such as Rabbis Stephen Wise and Abba Hillel Silver, as well as through the influx of large numbers of Jews of eastern European descent into Reform temples. The 1934 publication of *Judaism as a Civilization* by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan and the ideal of Jewish peoplehood that stood at the center of his Reconstructionist philosophy had a profound influence upon many in the Reform Movement; Kaplan similarly impacted the transformations that began to mark Reform Judaism, and exerted a powerful influence in the Conservative Movement through his teaching at JTS. While the influence and numbers of Conservative Judaism remained strong, and Conservative Judaism became the dominant movement within American Judaism for most of the 20th century, the divide between non-Orthodox Jews on the folk level of observance and belief became narrower and narrower and this change would ultimately come to have a significant impact on denominational commitments in American Jewish life.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Orthodox Judaism began to establish itself more securely. The Orthodox at this time represented the least successfully acculturated elements among the Jewish immigrant populations that came to these shores. Under the leadership of Rabbi Bernard Revel, however, a nascent modern American Orthodoxy began to strike real roots. The establishment of Yeshiva College in 1928 and the incorporation of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary into Yeshiva University provided an institutional framework that would later prove to be critical for the growth of Orthodox Judaism in the United States.

The birth of Yeshiva University in 1928 was complemented by the arrival of elite Orthodox scholars such as Rabbis Moses Soloveitchik and his son Joseph Baer Soloveitchik to these shores in the 1920s and 1930s. These men were able to spread the influence of Orthodox Judaism among rabbis and laypersons alike. Perhaps the most significant of these Orthodox immigrant leaders was Rabbi Aaron Kotler, who established a traditional Orthodox yeshiva in Lakewood in 1941 and who inspired his students to establish a network of Torah Messorah Orthodox day schools throughout the United States long before such schools were a staple on the American Jewish scene. The appearance of large numbers of Orthodox Hungarian Jews who entered America after World War II also played a crucial role in rounding

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out the factors that would contribute to the resurgence of Orthodox Judaism in this country during later decades.

## Modern Trends and Directions

By the 1960s and 1970s, many of the sociological factors that became seminal in shaping the contours of American Judaism as we know it today were starting to emerge. The American Jewish community was no longer an immigrant community seeking to adjust to the United States. Old ethnic patterns that formerly preserved and divided the Jewish religious community were no longer present and the rivalry that had existed between American Jews of German and Eastern European descent was little more than an historical memory for most American Jews. While large numbers of Israeli, Russian, Iranian and South African Jewish immigrants have come to the United States in recent years, they now enter — unlike the eastern European Jews of the 1880s — into a well-established and fully organized American Jewish community that is composed largely of fourth, fifth and sixth generation American Jews. The cultural overlap among the overwhelming majority of American Jews is highly pronounced.

Furthermore, American Jews have been fully accepted into American life, and Jews of all stripes and ethnic backgrounds are now full participants in the cultural, social and economic spheres of the United States. As a result, the attitudes and beliefs that had so sharply divided Reform from Conservative Jews in the first half of the 20th century now have been blurred for many of these people, and a permeability has emerged that allows for crossover between the disparate movements. Indeed, the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey indicated that over 700,000 of the million plus persons who claimed to be Reform Jews stated that they had Conservative Jewish backgrounds.

Larger societal developments going on in the wider American culture have contributed to this crossover. With the rise in America during the 1960s of what came to be known as “the new ethnicity,” an expression of ethnic allegiances unprecedented in this nation’s history appeared, and a religious revival and a renewed search for religious and spiritual meaning has accompanied this expression. These forces had a decisive impact in promoting a renewed interest in Judaism among many, as did the exhilarating 1967 Israeli victory in the Six-Day War. These dynamics have been felt among American Jews across denominational lines and have propelled many Jews to seek out Jewish community and religion apart from denomination in an intensive

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manner that was unknown to their parents earlier in the century, while at the same time promoting the growth of yet additional Jewish religious movements.

Mordecai Kaplan himself had opposed the creation of a distinct Reconstructionist Movement. Instead, he preferred that his Reconstructionist thought permeate and inform all sectors of the American Jewish landscape. Yet, the inauguration of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1969 heralded and fostered the appearance of Reconstructionism as yet another distinct denomination on the American liberal Jewish religious spectrum, and the Reconstructionist Movement surely has succeeded as the locus for a great deal of liturgical creativity as well as social and political innovation and ferment on the contemporary Jewish American scene.

The Havurah Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s was another positive response to the developments of those years, and the appearance of what is today called “Jewish renewal” owes its origins to those years. Finally, the inroads of feminism in organized Jewish religious life were first evidenced with the appearance of the women’s group Ezrat Nashim at this time, as well as the ordination of Sally Priesand by HUC-JIR in 1972 and Sandy Sasso at the RRC shortly thereafter. Today, half the students at all non-Orthodox seminaries are women. In addition, feminist religious thinkers such as Judith Plaskow and Rachel Adler, liturgists and midrashists such as Marcia Falk and Ellen Umansky, and scholars and activists such as Paula Hyman and Blu Greenberg rose to maturity during these years, and their impact can be felt in every sector of present-day American Jewish life.

The explosion of Jewish day school education in the United States, an increased religious traditionalism among many, the opening of Jewish studies programs in universities, and the rise of trips to Israel among countless numbers of Jews also have led to a renaissance in Jewish religious life. Indeed, many herald the religious creativity and vitality of the current moment as signs of a Golden Age for Judaism in America, and the impacts of such creativity and vitality have been felt both within and beyond denominational boundaries.

At the same time, the reality of acculturation has fostered Jewish assimilation and record numbers of non-affiliation. Jewish demographic mobility from places of origin has led — as the National Jewish Population Surveys of 1990 and 2001 attest — to an attenuation of traditional Jewish associational and kinship patterns that previously promoted Jewish affiliation and commitment among large numbers of American Jews. As Jews have become fully accepted by gentiles as social equals and as traditional Jewish attitudes that opposed exogamy have weakened, intermar-

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riage rates have soared and the cultural cohesion that now marks the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Jews of eastern European and Germanic descent has been matched by a lack of Jewish ethnic homogeneity as a result of the high rate of intermarriage.

### Denominationalism Today and Tomorrow

*Mai nafka mi-nai?* What does all this mean for Jewish religious denominationalism in America today and tomorrow? On one level, this analysis clearly yields the conclusion that the denominational divisions that marked American Judaism during the 20th century will be different in the future than they were in the past. Reform now occupies the position that the Conservative Movement formerly enjoyed throughout most of the 20th century; it has become the current choice of a numerical plurality of affiliated American Jews. There are many reasons for this development, but one is clear: In a community where estimates of intermarriage rates fluctuate between 43%–52%, the affirmation of patrilineality and the willingness to embrace and welcome these couples and their offspring virtually guarantees the numerical dominance of the movement. Furthermore, there is an affinity between the emphasis that contemporary Reform places on both autonomy and community and the ideal of the “Sovereign Self” that Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen have coined to describe the highly individualistic search for meaning and community that marks so many North American Jews. In such an environment, Reform will surely continue to be organizationally quite strong for the foreseeable future. Given the comparable ideological and practical stances and positions of the Reconstructionist Movement, the growth that Reconstructionism is now experiencing should continue as well.

As for the Conservative Movement, membership is admittedly smaller. At the same time, the practices and beliefs of larger percentages of Conservative Jews increasingly display greater commitments to traditional Jewish practices and educational standards as articulated by the elite leaders of the Movement. The major educational institutions of the Movement — Ramah Camps, the Schechter Day Schools, JTS and the Ziegler School of Rabbinical Studies in Los Angeles — are also robust. If the Movement is becoming “leaner,” one can also argue that it is becoming “meaner.”

Still, all this success only underscores the particular challenges that confront the Conservative Movement. The emergence of Modern Orthodox Judaism and an

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eclectic reconnection with Tradition in liberal religious precincts have subverted the monopoly Conservative Judaism formerly possessed on arriving at a “proper balance” between “tradition and modernity.” It is this dilemma that confronts the leadership of the Conservative Movement today.

The challenges that remain for Orthodox Judaism are essentially twofold. For the traditionalists on the right, it remains to be seen whether a right-wing Orthodox Judaism that claims to look askance upon American culture can withstand erosion by its influences. And for those in the center or on the left, the issue is whether they will succeed in maintaining the distinctive stance of a modern Orthodox Judaism that remains simultaneously faithful to the Tradition and open to the larger surrounding culture in view of a seemingly sharp rightward drift in the Orthodox world.

All this is to say that denominations are in no immediate danger of extinction. Any elementary course on sociology can tell us that well-established and powerful institutions never disappear quickly. Yet, even as this assertion is made, it hides the larger and more important forces that are at play in American Judaism today. After all, all surveys of the American Jewish community indicate that “unaffiliated” is the largest growing category among American Jews. Additionally, more and more American Jews — for the reasons cited above — are indifferent to denominational labels in their highly eclectic and idiosyncratic search for meaning and community. Increasing numbers of these Jews are likely to move away from “an adjectival Judaism,” to employ Leo Baeck’s felicitous phrase, meaning a Judaism where the adjective — whether it be Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal or Orthodox — is more important than the noun, “Judaism.” They will not hesitate to move among movements and individual rabbis and religious teachers as they engage in their own personal religious and communal quests. The distinctions in theology and ideology that are so crucial to the elite leaders of the different movements are increasingly irrelevant to these Jewish folk, and many of the debates that occupy the leaders of these movements are regarded by many of these Jews as needlessly divisive and extraneous to the larger task of creating a Judaism that is vital and vibrant in the face of the challenges that modern-day America presents to Jewish life and commitment. As we move into the 21st century, it will therefore be interesting to observe whether denominational differences remain as significant as they once were for large numbers of non-Orthodox American Jews, or whether

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the cultural homogeneity that now marks more and more American Jews will create religious and communal patterns where denominational identifications are increasingly beside the point for vast numbers of these people.

In concluding, I would cite a statement issued in 1897 by Rabbi Nehemiah Nobel (who later became the *orthodoxer Gemeinderabbiner* — Orthodox Communal Rabbi — in Frankfurt) that is relevant to our concerns. Upon his graduation from the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary, Rabbi Nobel asserted that he viewed the task of the rabbi “to emphasize those matters that unite the Jewish people rather than those factors that divide them.” In his spirit, I would assert that the tasks the denominations confront in the modern American context — whatever the ideological distinctions and organizational commitments that divide the movements — are essentially identical. For, the charge that confronts all of them is how to make Judaism relevant, compelling, joyous, meaningful, welcoming, comforting and challenging to American Jews who have infinite options open before them, yet still ask that the human needs for meaning and community be fulfilled. The challenge, beyond denominations, is whether Judaism can succeed in doing this for large numbers of people.

American Judaism today stands at a crossroads where trends of weakened Jewish commitment and attachment compete with pockets of intense Jewish revival and knowledge — and all this takes place across traditional denominational lines and institutional patterns. The task of all Jews will be to strengthen these pockets of revival and knowledge; this task will compel us to recognize that such revival and knowledge must take place both within and beyond traditional Jewish denominational and institutional structures and affirmations. The future of Judaism in the United States depends upon the ability of all Jews, regardless of denominational identification, to maintain and revitalize Jewish religious tradition in light of the conditions that confront our community today.

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# A Response to Trans/Post/Non-Denominational Critiques

DAN EHRENKRANTZ

The contemporary conceptualizations of post-denominational, trans-denominational and non-denominational Judaism can function as a clarion call to Jewish unity, a reminder of shared sacred texts, the rich and fraught history of Jews around the globe and the splendid ethnic and geographic diversity of the Jewish people that we wish to embrace as part of our collective Jewish identity. Denominations are, after all, a relatively recent way of organizing ourselves, and we are a people whose shared credo resides in oneness. These terms that imply a rejection of denominationalism seem to celebrate Jewish diversity and Jewish unity over factionalism, with all of its negative connotations.

So what is the point of denominations anyway? In postwar American Jewish life, a denomination is made up of affiliated congregations and their members; a rabbinical association, such as the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association; a congregational association, such as the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation; and an educational institution, such as the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. A denomination has ideas or ideals, whether historic or presently active, that guide its particular approach to Jewish life.

Denominations are useful. In a non-divisive way, they help us to marshal our resources, organize our communities, make meaningful choices and sanctify our lives. We build open denominational institutions to clarify our values and live according to our highest ideals. Reconstructionist Judaism, in particular, represents

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*Rabbi Dan Ehrenkrantz is president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, where he serves as the Aaron and Marjorie Ziegelman Presidential Professor.*

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a singular approach to the tradition. It stands for particular processes and strives, in all of its manifestations, to promote Judaism and serve the Jewish people.

### Trans-Denominational, Post-Denominational and Non-Denominational

One popular approach to re-imagining the American Jewish community is usually labeled “trans-denominational.” This approach suggests that denominations have much to offer and that, rather than being part of a single denomination, we should be able to partake of all denominations.

This approach is based on the flawed premise that contemporary Jews do not already routinely connect with one another across denominational boundaries. The false implication of trans-denominationalism is that being part of a particular denomination means that one is unable to partake of what other denominations offer. Students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College study Reform, Orthodox and Conservative thinkers. Our students, our graduates and our lay people seek out interactions with other Jews, hoping to learn and grow as a result of those interactions. And we are equally conscious of the extent to which Jews who affiliate with other movements turn to Reconstructionist Judaism for liturgical innovations, for resource materials of all kinds, for scholarship and certainly for the support and leadership of our rabbis. The idea that one must be trans-denominational in order to be open to Jews of all denominations is akin to the idea that a person should not be an adherent of a particular religion but should embrace no religion in order to learn from them all.

The post-denominational approach, sometimes called “non-denominational,” implies that the denominations have had their day and that it is now time to give way to new approaches to Jewish life. Many reasonable critiques of denominations are contained in this approach, since denominational ideologies are frequently outdated. Denominational affiliations often serve to separate Jews from one another rather than to draw Jews closer together, and synagogues often fail to attract many Jews or to inspire the Jews they do attract. The problem with the post-denominational approach, however, is that these critiques propose no solution. “Post-denominational” and “non-denominational” are negative definitions — they tell us what they are not, but fail to tell us what they are.

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What exactly is it about denominations that post-denominationalists and non-denominationalists want to leave behind? Are they against the existence of synagogues, educational institutions, congregational associations and rabbinic associations?

I hear the post-denominational objections already: “Of course we don’t need to do away with these functions; we just don’t like how they are being filled.” If that is the case — if all the functions would remain but be filled by new organizations, then the term “post-denominational” is really defining a desire for a new denomination. That is not *post-denominational* at all. If people would like to create a new denomination, they should do so. The terms “post-denominational,” “non-denominational” and “trans-denominational” stop people from creating a new denomination because the very definition of these terms excludes this possibility.

Perhaps the post-denominational objection is not to the functions that denominations serve, but to the ideas and ideals that guide them. Perhaps postdenominationalists are saying, “The ideas and ideals of the denominations have outlived their usefulness; they are no longer vital sources on which we can build a vibrant Jewish life.” I have much sympathy for this view. But the answer to this problem must surely be the development of new ideas and ideals.

If we need new ideas and ideals and new institutions that are capable of carrying those ideas and ideals into the world, then what we need is renewed denominations or perhaps even new denominations. The terms “non-denominational,” “post-denominational” and “trans-denominational” sound as if they hold out the promise of a new approach upon which future Jewish life can be built. But a closer examination reveals that these terms are taking a stance against the status quo without clearly articulating a remedy. They often hide an anti-institutional bias — a bias that makes it very difficult to create the institutions necessary to improve upon our present situation.

## Labels

People do not like to be labeled and, indeed, identifying oneself as Jewish does not require any additional adjectives. It is enough to say “I am a Jew” without needing to define oneself further, as in, for example, “I am a Reconstructionist Jew.” However, one must be willing to say, “I am a Jew.”

Labels carry implications. Labeling oneself as a Jew carries the implication of a special connection to the people and ideas of the Jewish past, present and future. Most people in the Jewish community would bristle at the idea that carrying the

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label of “Jew” implies that they are separating themselves from the broader human community. Yet we know that sometimes such separation occurs.

The challenge revolves around how we wear our labels. Identifying as a Jew can actually bring us closer to the broader human community through Judaism’s humanistic and universalistic ideals and practices. Identifying as a Jew can help us understand and empathize with the attachments others hold to their traditions and people. Whether being Jewish separates us or brings us closer to the broader human community depends upon how we choose to live out our Judaism.

We are not all Jewish in the same way. This variety is good for the Jewish people and should be part of what we value as Jews. We seek others whose approach to being Jewish is similar to our own to create a Jewish communal life that reflects our priorities and values. We need not restrict ourselves to this group; neither must we separate ourselves from those who do not identify with this group. Those who label themselves as “non-denominational,” “trans-denominational” or “post-denominational” and who participate actively in Jewish living engage in this process of group identification just as actively as those who identify themselves with a particular denomination. The pretense of having no label ends up being a distinction without a difference.

The challenge is to use our labels and their attendant identities to bring us closer to other people rather than to separate us from them.

## Denominations

Denominations are made up of institutions. Institutions are neither inherently good nor inherently bad. Jewish institutions exist in order to bring certain missions and visions into the world. They should be evaluated based on their missions and visions and their successes and failures in bringing their visions to life.

The institutions of Jewish life will, to a large extent, determine what Jewish life will look like in our day and in the future. Anti-institutional biases must be discarded in order to create an environment conducive to building vibrant institutions capable of responding to the Jewish needs of our day. The negative self-definitions of post-denominationalism, non-denominationalism and trans-denominationalism must give way to definitions that use positive attributes, e.g., pluralistic, democratic, engaged etc.

Denominations are groups of interrelated institutions and people. Non-denominational and trans-denominational rabbinical training institutions do exist that

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are not connected to other institutions, but I am convinced that a lack of affiliation is not a strength. If a nonaffiliated rabbinical training institution fails to become connected to an association of its rabbinic graduates or to the congregations they serve, this weakens the training institute. Formal affiliation increases accountability and helps to ensure that rabbinic training will be responsive to the lay community rabbis serve. Both the ability of rabbis to grow in their profession after graduation and the ability of the profession to set standards and to monitor itself depend upon strong rabbinic associations. For a rabbinic training institution to actively advocate to have no rabbinic association is irresponsible. For a rabbinic training institution to advocate that their graduates should join the rabbinical associations connected to other educational institutions fails to appreciate the meaningful interrelationship of rabbinic education, rabbinical associations and affiliated congregations.

Every new institution does not need to develop the same kind of complex of interrelated institutions that the denominations now comprise. But the types of institutions that make up denominations — rabbinical seminaries, congregations and rabbinical associations — are weaker, not stronger, if they choose to go it alone.

Synagogues are not the only Jewish institutions necessary to address the challenges of Jewish communal life. New institutions and new approaches are welcome. Sometimes, new approaches have come from within the denominations (e.g., [www.ritualwell.org](http://www.ritualwell.org)) and sometimes, from outside of them (e.g., Jewish healing centers). All effective new approaches and programs are welcome.

Institutions with approaches to Jewish life outside of the denominations (e.g., Jewish community centers) have existed for a long time without announcing themselves as replacing or going beyond the denominations. The denominations have never expected or wanted to be the only institutions within Jewish life.

Congregations that choose not to affiliate with a denomination are congregations that fail to help support the institutional structures that most likely have trained their leadership, produced their *siddurim* and created a number of other resources those congregations utilize. Although there is a number of legitimate reasons for certain congregations to remain unaffiliated, their lack of affiliation should not be seen as desirable or as a strength.

If denominations are made up of ideas and ideals and the institutional structures to implement them, then what we need are new and/or renewed denominations. This renewal, plus other new and creative approaches, is the answer to the problem of a Jewish community that is frequently uninspired by Jewish organizations.

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Unfortunately, many creative philanthropists and activists seek to address today's challenges by concentrating only on those programs and ideas that emerge outside of denominational structures, thereby ignoring the potential for change that can emerge from within denominations. The implication seems to be that the denominations are either incapable of self-renewal or that their renewal will perpetuate rather than address the problems of Jewish life.

But even as we acknowledge the potential for renewal within denominations, we must also acknowledge that no denomination can survive outdated ideologies, a divided Jewish community or dysfunctional synagogues. Denominations that are not functioning correctly need to repair themselves. A denomination incapable of self-repair should cease to exist. Members of the Jewish community would do well to support those denominations that are functioning well or are on the road to self-repair and to deny support to those that are not.

## Reconstructionist Judaism

Reconstructionist Judaism understands Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people. This definition leads to a people-centered view of Jewish life that is deeply grounded in tradition while simultaneously encouraging innovation and creativity to meet the challenges of the day. We offer our best efforts to the community in the hope that they will help the world become a better place. Among other recent innovations, we have played a leading role in incorporating the practice of spiritual direction into the Jewish community; enriched prayer and liturgy with our groundbreaking *siddurim* and our Web site, [www.ritualwell.org](http://www.ritualwell.org); addressed ourselves to the spiritual issues facing a graying Jewish community; published elements of a contemporary guide to Jewish practice; increased our emphasis on interfaith understanding and the importance of Jewish-Muslim relations; embarked upon an effort to revitalize the holiday of *ta'anit* Esther by connecting it with courageous social activism; and made special efforts to improve educational attitudes and responses toward those with learning differences. Our strength comes to us in no small part from our ideological commitment to serving the entirety of the Jewish people.

Jewish communal life is not a race or a contest. Despite the fact that a majority of Jews are most comfortable with most of the ideas and ideals of the Reconstructionist movement, the number of Jews affiliated with the Reconstructionist movement remains relatively small. In my view, the market-share approach to evaluating the

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success of Reconstructionist Judaism and other denominations is odd. Reform is not “winning” because they have the most affiliates. If the same market-share analysis were applied to Judaism as compared to other world religions, it would be clear that we Jews should give up immediately, since based on such an analysis, Judaism itself should be judged an abject failure.

A more meaningful approach to evaluating the success of a religion or a denomination within a particular religion would be to measure positive impact and influence. Unfortunately, impact and influence are more intangible than numbers of affiliates and therefore more difficult to evaluate.

Using positive impact and influence as the measure rather than numbers of affiliates, Judaism itself and Reconstructionist Judaism in particular have a proud legacy. Most observers of Jewish life would agree that the Reconstructionist movement has been a source of important innovative resources, transformational ideology and significant new approaches to education. That so much positive impact has come from such a small percentage of the Jewish population should be understood as an achievement.

## Educating Rabbis

The Reform, Orthodox and Conservative movements were all founded to answer the question, “Can Judaism change, and if so, how?” Another important question for these movements was “How can we be both good Jews and good citizens?” These questions are no longer the essential questions for the Jewish community.

The Reconstructionist movement was founded to answer the question, “What is Judaism, and what is its purpose?” The answer offered by Mordecai Kaplan — “Judaism is the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people whose purpose is to bring us closer to salvation” — still rings true.

The programmatic implications and practical applications of Kaplan’s response have not come from the Reconstructionist movement alone. Nevertheless, having clearly articulated ideas and ideals has helped those associated with the Reconstructionist movement to be at the forefront of positive change within the Jewish community for more than 70 years.

Our outsized influence is an outgrowth of our defining ideas and ideals. We do not embrace the view of Judaism that begins with God creating Judaism, God looking for a people to carry that religious program, God choosing the Jewish people to bring that program into the world and then the Jewish people doing their best

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to conform to that program. Reconstructionist Judaism has suggested a different approach. The approach we embrace is that Jews created Judaism in order to fill their lives with spirit, purpose and meaning.

This view of Judaism has sometimes been mistaken to be an argument for a Judaism without God. This is an unfortunate misunderstanding. God's existence and attributes are not dependent upon the view that God created Judaism.

Because we believe that the Jewish people created Judaism in order to add spirit, purpose and meaning to our lives, our orientation is humanistic. This emphasis means that we judge ourselves based upon whether we have truly made the world a better place for its inhabitants — including, as we move into the 21st century, its nonhuman inhabitants.

The role of rabbis is to be leaders in the effort to make the world a better place. Whether rabbis are serving a group or individuals, running an organization or teaching in a university, they should take advantage of the opportunities available to them to improve the lives of individuals, groups and/or society at large.

The academic training that enables rabbis to fulfill this task is first and foremost a deep immersion in the history, thought and literature of the Jewish people. We hold that Judaism — the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people — has a tremendous capacity for helping us to make the world a better place. Only a deep immersion in Jewish learning can equip rabbis to bring the transformative power of Judaism to the people they serve.

At RRC, this immersion experience is enhanced by a chronological approach to Jewish study. Our study of Judaism begins when Judaism begins — in the biblical era — then proceeds through our entire history and concludes with the present day. This chronological approach flows directly from the idea that Judaism was created by the Jewish people. A study of Judaism that does not peer through the prism of history in this way typically carries with it the erroneous assumption that because God created Judaism, influences of culture and time period are incidental rather than central.

The chronological approach enables RRC students to emerge from rabbinical school with knowledge of the ways in which Judaism has changed over time. They appreciate the fact that Judaism's capacity for adaptation and innovation has helped to keep the Jewish people alive. And they are emboldened and equipped by their studies to become innovators and original thinkers themselves.

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Immersion in the history, thought and literature of the Jewish people is necessary but not sufficient. Rabbis must possess a wide variety of skills and personal attributes. RRC has a rigorous program of courses that prepares students for the various tasks rabbis face, whether that involves conducting a funeral or doing public-relations work. And RRC has an expansive program that cultivates the life of the spirit. It is our hope that this training equips our graduates to better serve those who come to rabbis with their own spiritual quests and questions. We also hope this training will help our graduates to avoid burnout by strengthening and clarifying their core commitments.

### Serving the Jewish People

Our approach to Jewish life — an approach that places the focus on people and on Judaism's ability to improve their lives — enables us to be expansive as we think about rabbinic vocation. Roughly 50 percent of RRC's 300 graduates serve as rabbis of synagogues. The other 50 percent serve as educators, campus rabbis, chaplains and staff members of various Jewish agencies. Our educational program is designed to prepare our graduates to serve in all these settings.

Wherever they serve, rabbis provide Jewish content. Many new gateways to involvement in Jewish life have been created in recent years. In particular, programs for Jews in their teens, 20s and early 30s have received a great deal of attention. Not all programs need to have rich Jewish content. But individuals who want their programs to have such content will be well-served if they look to rabbis to be both content providers and designers. Rabbinic training is a tremendous communal resource and should be valued and utilized.

It is important for rabbis and other educators to be able to acknowledge the particular perspective they bring. And it is false to think that it is either possible or desirable to bring no perspective to education.

Jewish life will be largely shaped by the underlying ideology of the rabbis and educators who are the providers of Jewish content in programs and institutions. Although ideology is presently out of fashion, we ignore it at great cost. What approaches to Judaism will work to engage Jews in the 21st century? And what kind of Jewish future do we want to create, anyway?

Reconstructionist rabbis work to create a Jewish future in which Judaism is understood as one religion in the family of religions. We recognize that religion has often been a source of conflict, and we work hard to fashion a religious approach

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that can embrace other Jews, other religions and people with no religion. We challenge ourselves to look honestly and critically at ourselves and our heritage. We do this in order to fill life with spirit, purpose and meaning.

Reconstructionist rabbis bring to the community Jewish wisdom, practical skills and an ability and willingness to innovate. It is our mission to serve the community at large and we do that within avowedly Reconstructionist settings and outside of them.

## The Future

The structure of the denominations is a little more than 100 years old, a relative newcomer on the Jewish scene. Will this structure continue to hold for the next 100 years?

Whatever the future brings, a few principles should guide us:

- 1) Organizations and/or institutions are necessary in order to put ideas and values into practice. Anti-institutional undercurrents can be valuable when they intelligently critique existing institutions. They are not valuable when they deplete the strength and growth of institutions doing good work.
- 2) As a profession, clergy would benefit by moving toward the level of professional oversight and continuing-education demands made of other professionals, be they doctors, lawyers, realtors or beauticians. (Because they have licensing and continuing-education requirements, all of these professions have structures for peer professional oversight that are more stringent than those for clergy.) The societal trends that de-emphasize the role of rabbinical associations should be resisted.
- 3) Flexibility, adaptability and creativity will be necessary if existing institutions are to serve the Jewish people well. This applies equally to denominations and to organizations and initiatives that are not denominationally based.
- 4) The organizational strength of the denominations, particularly the educational institutions, should not be underestimated. A few institutions of higher education have lasted for centuries and many more seem destined for similar longevity. Jewish institutions of higher education that have significant endowments and are able to manage their finances responsibly are likely to be around for many years to come.

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# Denominationalism and Jewish Renewal

BY ZALMAN SCHACHTER-SHALOMI

Edited and annotated for publication by Netanel Miles-Yepetz

## The Background of Jewish Denominationalism

Denominationalism began in the United States during the time of the first of the Great Awakenings in the 18th Century.<sup>1</sup> It was the time of the great proliferation of Protestant Christian denominations. Often, the distinctions among the various groups were minute, making it difficult to tell the difference, for example, between the First-Day Baptists and the Seventh-Day Baptists,<sup>2</sup> and sometimes even between the Free-Willers and the Determinists. However, they all sang the same hymns, despite the fact that they worshiped in different churches.

During this period, there were approximately 2,000 Jews in America, mostly Sephardic Jews from Spanish and Portuguese families, who first began to arrive in New Amsterdam under Dutch rule in the 17th Century. These Sephardic Jews, for the first time in several centuries, were treated with unique goodwill and accepted as Americans, as the famous letter from George Washington to the Sephardic congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, shows: “May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in the land continue to merit and enjoy the goodwill of the other inhabitants — while everyone shall sit safely under his own vine and fig-tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.”<sup>3</sup> And this was an important seed-factor in Jewish denominationalism.

These early Sephardic Jews in America even created a *siddur* (prayer book) in which the divine name was translated as “Eternal Self-Existence,” reflecting both their kabbalistic roots and the freedom and ferment of religious ideas then available

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*Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi is the founder of the Jewish Renewal Movement, professor emeritus of Jewish Mysticism and Psychology of Religion at Temple University, and retired World Wisdom Chair at Naropa University.*

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to them in America.<sup>4</sup> But it wasn't until after the Second Great Awakening in the 1840s that the first big waves of German-Jewish immigrants began to arrive in the United States. At that time, their prayer books were in German translation, as were their sermons.<sup>5</sup> It was Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900), himself an immigrant, who created an English translation for these new German-Jewish immigrants — a prayer book based on the German-Ashkenazic Hebrew rite (with some changes) that he called “Minhag America” (American Custom).

Later, when the first wave of Eastern European Jews came to America in the 1880s through the 1920s, there was a desire to have a *Rav HaKollel*, a chief rabbi over the congregation of scholars and a chief rabbi for New York. Rabbi Jacob Joseph (1840–1902)<sup>6</sup> was the first and only person to hold this title, but after seven years, he was forced to admit defeat because of the great diversity (and divisiveness) of New York Jewry and the way in which the American separation of church and state allowed for any congregation to be freestanding.

By that time, small synagogues were mushrooming in the big cities along the East Coast. Some of them were based on *Landsmann-shaften* — that is to say, based on the area in Europe where they came from. The proliferation of different rites practiced in these small synagogues, along with their social self-help organizations, gave each one of them their independence. The first congregation I served as rabbi, Agudas Achim<sup>7</sup> in Fall River, Massachusetts, in 1949, was such a synagogue; it was the *Russishe Shul* (for people who came from the Ukraine), and just two blocks away was the *Litwische Shul* (for those who came from Lithuania). Today, these small synagogues have largely disappeared or merged or been assimilated along more conventional lines.

It took another generation for the national denominational organizations to arise. The Reform movement was for many years just too far out for the general Jewish population to embrace (some of those congregations even meeting on Sunday for bareheaded worship!). Rabbi Sabato Morais (1823–1897) and Rabbi Solomon Schechter (1847–1915) wanted a different option. These founders of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the American Conservative movement were liberal in many ways, but generally conservative when it came to the liturgy, which they wished to be “catholic” for all Jews. That is to say, they wished Jews all over the world to be able to recognize the liturgy and be comfortable with it. Morais and Schechter introduced a new historical approach to Judaism and modern methods of

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research. They applied these methods to their theological framework, but stopped short of applying them to Scripture.

In Europe, the *kahal* (“community,” which in Germany was called *der Kultusgemeinde*) was trying to keep it all together, but there were already the beginnings of a separation of the liberal elements from the general group.<sup>8</sup> It was Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) of Frankfurt am Main who started his *Austrittsgemeinde*, a separation community that he called the “Torah-True” *kahal*, and that others began to call “Orthodox,” a term borrowed from Christianity. Up to that time, every city had its own Jewish community council and all the synagogues belonged together.

In the large liberal “temples,” as they like to call their synagogues, cantor and choir provided liturgical music in a setting of high decorum. The president and board members would sit in special pews, dressed in formal attire and wearing top hats along with their *tallitot* (prayer shawls). Still, they identified with the nominally Orthodox general community, whereas in Hungary, Rabbi Moshe (Hatam) Sofer (1762–1839) created a staunch separation between himself and the neologues, the Hungarian Jewish reform elements.

## Denominationalism and Jewish Renewal

Nowadays, we generally understand the “denominations” through a range of liturgical form, theological orientation and social status, dividing the polity of congregations and their affiliations according to a spectrum or continuum extending from the most secular and humanistic elements of the Jewish populace to the most religiously observant elements — those that are often called ultra-Orthodox.

In an article I wrote more than 20 years ago,<sup>9</sup> I already claimed that this continuum is *not* the continuum on which Hasidism and Kabbalah operate. Hasidism and Kabbalah are perpendicular to the continuum that goes from humanism to ultra-Orthodoxy. There is a dimension of seriousness, a piety in which the reality of God is taken into deep consideration, that applies equally, whether one is praying from the Reform movement’s *Union Prayer Book* or *davvenen* out of a traditional *siddur* with an ultra-Orthodox *minyan* in Meah Shearim. On the other hand, there are also Orthodox pan-halakhists like Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903–1994), as well as liberal Jews whose orientation has much less focus on the living God.<sup>10</sup>

So where does Jewish Renewal fit into the current continuum, including secular Jews, humanistic Jews, Reform Jews, Reconstructionists, Conservative Jews and

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the entire palette of Orthodox Jews? Do we need to understand Jewish Renewal as a new denomination? It is true that you will find congregations and *havurot* that label themselves “Jewish Renewal.” There is an organization called ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal (and congregations affiliated with it and its biannual Kallah). There is even an association of renewal rabbis called, Ohalah.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, my sense is that Jewish Renewal is a process.

Of course, there are and will continue to be fellowships of like-minded people who wish to identify with that “process” and “renewal values,” and who will wind up naming themselves “Jewish Renewal.” But I want to stress the aspect of Jewish Renewal that is, as I said, perpendicular to the continuum of denominations. After all, there are some Conservative congregations, and even some Reform and Orthodox ones, that will want to offer their members occasional renewal-type services, or rabbis who will use various innovations born of the renewal process. Likewise, there are various “happy *minyanim*” that exist in many Orthodox synagogues, and many others that advertise the occasional “Carlebach-type” service, during which portions of the liturgy are often sung in melodies composed by my late friend, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach (1925–1994). Moreover, I really want to stress the cross-fertilization that has already occurred. For instance, take a look at how many people across the denominations are wearing the “Rainbow Tallit”<sup>12</sup> I designed in the early 1960s. These things are almost considered to be in the public domain today, the source of the music sometimes being forgotten under the assumption that these are “traditional” liturgical melodies! Far from being dismayed by this, I take it as an indication of how much the process of renewal has penetrated into the continuum of Judaism and has reached the stage of common usage.

## Reconstructionism and Jewish Renewal

In the article I referred to earlier, “Neo-Hasidism and Reconstructionism: A Not Only Imaginary Dialogue,”<sup>13</sup> I tried to deal with what the Renewal and Reconstructionist movements share, as well as with how they differ. At this time, I want to add the following comments:

Reconstructionism and Renewal share in the sense of taking our traditional observances and “reconstructing” them, so that they would fit our own religious values and spiritual needs today. What is not shared is the “ceiling,” the sense that there is a Divine Being Whom we can contact and Who seeks to contact us; this is a more present concern of Jewish Renewal.

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There was a time when the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) had Dr. Arthur Green as its president and much more of the mystical element of the Kabbalah and Hasidism entered into the Reconstructionist conversation.<sup>14</sup> During those years, I was adjunct teaching at RRC and would often conduct labs in “davvenology,” attempting to enlarge the repertoire of the rabbis-to-be for encountering the liturgy on a deeper level. And to some extent this is still available to the students who seek it. I also proposed at that time a need to explore the issues of spiritual direction with the rabbis-in-training, since pastoral care is a critical part of congregational work. But this was seen as not quite fitting within the school’s context. However, in recent years, I have had several opportunities to speak to students at RRC, and I am pleased to see that this is shifting. Now, we are able to talk about the practice of prayer and *mitzvot* (commandments) in the presence of the living God and about a serious study of spiritual direction with few limitations.

### Klal Yisrael and the Organismic Model

The more important issue behind the question of denominationalism is to be able to see everything as part of *klal Yisrael*, the entire community of Israel as an organic body. From that perspective, using the organismic model as a means of understanding an entire people, it becomes clear that the diversity in the range of form and content within Judaism is necessary for the health of its body. And it is not only in relation to Judaism that we need to see things from an organismic perspective; one must also see Judaism as part of the planetary totality, with all religions, all people and all life on this planet.

In this way, I have been teaching that every religion is a vital organ of the planet. It would be absurd to expect that the entire body be made up of liver or heart. Rather, each organ of the planet needs to do its part for the healthy functioning of the other organs, and most of all for the health of the entire body. So every religion, in order to be healthy, is interdependent on all others. And within this vital organ of Judaism, the same necessities prevail. We need to be aware that there are some people who are performing one part of the vital process and some who are performing another part. And therefore, the notion of separating these diverse lines on a denominational basis is only a convenience for the people who like to create a taxonomy from which to point out the differences. However, if we are to allow that there is an organismic relationship between various groups, then it becomes very clear that we all are interdependent with each other. In such a view of *klal Yisrael*,

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we need to make room for people on both the far left and right sides of the Jewish continuum, especially concerning how they relate to *halakhah* (Jewish law) and the *ba'alei t'shuvah*, the returnees, bringing with them an awareness of new reality maps, meditation, an ecological spirit and an egalitarian view of masculine-feminine relationships.

The current quantum cosmology — including zero-point field, string theory, and morphogenic fields in relation to the Gaian hypothesis—has brought with it a new “Whole Earth” awareness. Thus, in opposition to the current fundamentalist inflammation, there is also a growing consensus that religions have to see themselves from a post-triumphalist point of view. To be sure, there are some holdouts of “jihadic triumphalism” in all religions who will not embrace an organismic, planetary view in harmony with Teilhard de Chardin’s *noosphere*,<sup>15</sup> a transhuman consciousness emerging from the interactions of human minds. Yet notice how even those who want to take us backward in time use the evolving tools of conscious-connectivity to do it, how they use the modern technologies available to them to enhance their position! There is no going backward.

This new organismic cosmology, combined with an update on the traditional kabbalistic worldview, is behind much of the thinking in Jewish Renewal. The more this cosmology will become the matrix underlying the theologies of the various “denominations,” the more Jewish Renewal will be absorbed and assimilated by them. My hope and dream is that *klal Yisrael* will be renewed in this way as part of a whole and healed Earth.

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## Notes

1. The Great Awakenings refer to several periods of dramatic religious revival and ferment in American religious history. There are four generally accepted Great Awakenings in American history: the First Great Awakening (1730s–1740s), the Second Great Awakening (1800s–1830s), the Third Great Awakening (1880s–1900s), and the Fourth Great Awakening or Consciousness Revolution (1960s–1970s).
2. The First-Day Baptists (who called themselves “The Brethren”) were an altogether different group from the Seventh-Day Baptists. They were also sometimes called the “German Baptists” to distinguish them from the Baptists, and even the “Dunkers” or “Tunkers,” names derived from an attempted transliteration of the German word meaning “Baptist.”
3. This letter was written on Aug. 17, 1790.
4. Can you imagine what sense “Eternal Self-Existence” would have made to New England transcendentalists visiting the Touro Synagogue in Newport?
5. Up until the 1960s in Rio de Janeiro, Reform congregations received their sermons in German.
6. Rabbi Jacob Joseph had studied in the Volozhin *yeshivah*, where he was known as “Rav Yaakov Charif” because of his brilliance, and was one of the foremost students of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter. In 1888, he accepted the position as chief rabbi of New York City’s Association of American Orthodox Hebrew Congregations. Although Rabbi Joseph certainly possessed the credentials needed, he was confronted with many problems, primarily diverse groups of Jews that also included anti-religious factions and Communists. After six years, the association stopped paying his salary, although the kosher butchers continued to consult with him until 1895.
7. I served as congregational rabbi and principal at Agudas Achim from 1949 to 1952.
8. Imagine a synagogue with an all-German liturgy, organ accompaniment and bells calling the worshipers together!
9. Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman. “Neo-Hasidism and Reconstructionism.” *Rayonot* 4.3 (Summer, 1984). This article was later reprinted in Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman. *Paradigm Shift: From the Jewish Renewal Teachings of Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi*. Ed. Ellen Singer (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1993).
10. Yeshayahu Leibowitz was an Israeli philosopher and scientist noted for his outspoken and often controversial opinions on Jewish ethics, religion and politics.
11. *Ohalah: Agudat HaRabbanim L’Hithadshut HaYahadut* / *Ohalah: Association of Rabbis for Jewish Renewal*. [www.ohalah.org](http://www.ohalah.org).
12. This *tallit* uses the light-color spectrum to depict the seven lower *sefirot* (divine attributes) of Kabbalah in accordance with the words, “He was wrapped in a robe of light and it began to shine.” Of the original five Rainbow tallitot, one was given to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one to Rabbi Arthur Green, and one to Rabbi Everett Gendler.

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13. Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman. *Paradigm Shift: From the Jewish Renewal Teachings of Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi*. Ed. Ellen Singer (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1993) 127–133.
  14. Look at the first edition of the Friday-evening prayer book, in which the names of God were offered in a particular formula.
  15. Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) was a French Jesuit priest trained as a paleontologist and a philosopher whose major work, *The Phenomenon of Man*, set forth a sweeping account of the unfolding of the cosmos.

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# Torah, Scholarship and the Mission of the Jewish Theological Seminary

ARNOLD EISEN

The *hineni* prayer chanted by the *sheliah tzibbur* on Rosh Hashanah has been much on my mind as I've prepared for the privilege of assuming leadership of the JTS community. The institution is strong, our faculty extraordinary, our student body excellent, our administration highly efficient, our trustees both wise and dedicated, and our many supporters extremely generous. The work JTS does in training rabbis, cantors, educators, lay leaders and scholars is good, very good. But we all know that we can do better and must do better because this is not an easy time for the Jewish people, or America or the planet. No communal leader at such a time can avoid concern that we are collectively *'ani mi-ma'as*, poor in achievement, when compared with the tasks facing our society and our world. Educational leaders in particular have ample reason to be — *nir'ash ve-nifhad* — awed by the challenges we need to meet in training a generation of students who are ready for the work required: not only competent but confident, appropriately humble but also suitably determined.

It has heartened me to find that some of America's most thoughtful leaders in the field of higher education have dedicated themselves and their schools to precisely this task. The books they have published in recent years are filled with the call to raise great institutions of higher learning to still "higher ground," to fulfill "a larger sense of purpose," to achieve public goods and promote private virtue. None of these books argues, as they might have done only a few years ago, that the mission of the university is the increase of knowledge for its own sake. Instead they

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*Arnold Eisen is Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. This article is excerpted from his inaugural address, delivered on September 5, 2007, with permission from the Jewish Theological Seminary.*

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speaking of the research university—I quote a typical formulation—as “a company of scholars engaged in discovering and sharing knowledge, with a responsibility to see that such knowledge is used to improve the human condition.” That was certainly the conviction of Martin Meyerson, *zichrono livracha*, who, when he was president of the University of Pennsylvania, and I was his student assistant, taught me more than anyone else about universities and their potential to do good. Our Sages, I think, would have applauded the vision of American higher education as a true *yeshivah shel ma’alah* on this earth despite the shortages and imperfections that are built into every *yeshivah shel mata*. The point of higher education is to take us and our world higher.

That has always been true of JTS. Our mission is scholarship for the sake of Torah: for the sake, that is, of Jewish tradition, the Jewish people and—through both of these—the world. JTS has always recognized obligations beyond its walls to the Conservative Movement in particular, to the education and betterment of Jews everywhere and to our country. We are a seminary, after all—indeed, as we like to say—THE seminary. Teaching Torah, working toward the greater practice and fulfillment of Torah in its broadest sense, has always been central to our mission. In Schechter’s vision, followed by all his successors, the indispensable path to that goal is first-rate scholarship and teaching. Our research, like our classrooms, must be distinguished by rigorous academic standards, including the critical distance these require, as much as it is characterized by commitment and loyalty to tradition and community. These have always gone hand in hand for us.

How can one prove loyal to the past unless one knows it, truly knows it, in all its complexity and variety? How do we carry that past forward in unprecedented conditions, with the confidence that one is preserving tradition rather than breaking from it, unless we have true mastery of the texts, the history, the languages shaping and shaped by both thought and events? How else can we speak cogently to the larger society and the issues of the day? And how do we accomplish these goals without serious, respectful argument *le-shem shamayim*? At JTS we have always known that honest difference for the sake of heaven makes us stronger—just as in-depth knowledge and thoughtful criticism of our tradition make Torah stronger. As Schechter put it in his inaugural lecture, “Faith and scholarship are not irreconcilable.”

He meant that as an understatement. So do I. *Shamor* and *zachor* must be part of every *dibbur* we utter at JTS. Nuanced remembrance is key to all that we observe and preserve, including most especially what we preserve by changing it.

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This is never simple, of course, and there are many who would see the fidelity to both scholarship and Torah as an oxymoron. We do not, just as we do not see full participation in the society and culture surrounding us and total immersion in our tradition as irreconcilable, but rather, mutually reinforcing. We treasure the fruitful tensions built into these goals. The combination of intellect and passion, faith and criticism, is essential to the work our students do after they graduate—and particularly essential to the educators and clergy whose privilege it will be to help Jews live, teach and practice Torah, and in so doing to help perfect the world.

Given the vastly changed circumstances of the Jewish community and particularly of the synagogue in recent decades, the first major task that the faculty will undertake under my leadership will be a curricular review of the rabbinical and cantorial schools. We will be looking hard this year at what we teach and how we teach it. It's not enough that our future rabbis and cantors be learned in their tradition, and especially its texts and music, though they will of course continue to graduate with that learning and the ability to transmit it effectively. Future rabbis and cantors, to be successful, must understand the sociology of the communities they will serve, the consciousness of the individuals they must inspire and counsel, and the detailed workings of the institutions they will lead. They must be prepared to teach and represent Jews who stand alongside other communities in true pluralism. As if that were not difficult enough, our future clergy must combine mastery of these tools and skills with the development of an inner life of spirit and awe before God as they understand these. We will help our students do so, moreover, not only by what we offer them in the years leading up to graduation but in an expanded program of continuing education available to them once they are out in the field.

These changes in the preparation of rabbis and cantors for the Conservative Movement are only one of the ways we will increase our service to the Movement this year. Let me say, before going any further, not only as a leader of Conservative Judaism but as a lifelong Conservative Jew and a scholar of American Judaism, that I utterly reject talk of decline when it comes to the state of the Movement and its prospects. Malaise is in the eye or head of the beholder. It is certainly not in mine. I spent a good part of last year traveling around the United States and Canada listening to Conservative Jews tell me what they appreciate about the Movement, as well as what they would like to see changed. I can tell you that the desire to see the Movement thrive is strong, and the talent to make it so—among laity and professionals alike—is no less strong. We have many schools and shuls, camps

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and youth groups, men's clubs and women's league chapters, that are truly excellent and whose success bears witness to that excellence. Others need work to raise them to that standard.

Quality in this Movement as in any organization is not uniform. We will direct JTS's resources at improving it and help to secure other resources for the task.

The Movement undoubtedly suffers, too, from insufficient coordination among its various arms. JTS will convene representatives of those arms to find ways of working together better. I am hopeful on all these counts. The fundamentals are there, the approach is sound, the set of Jewish paths on which we are walking are, to my mind, as to my heart and soul, the right ones.

JTS's expanded contribution to the Movement this year will come primarily in the area of message. I heard from many Conservative Jews this past year who do not know what their Movement stands for. Some believe that we stand for nothing in particular, or for everything, so long as it is somewhere in the middle between Orthodoxy and Reform. I want to reach as many Conservative Jews (and others) as possible this coming year with clear formulations, well-articulated and cogently argued, of my understanding of this Movement. I want to share why I believe, in all humility and with full respect for other voices in our community, that this is the way on which God and Torah want us to walk.

In his inaugural address twenty years ago, Ismar Schorsch, whom I'd like to thank once more for all the help and counsel he's given me this past year, and for all he did as chancellor to make JTS the great institution it is today, called the balance that we seek — the balance between halakhah and Aggadah, conservation and innovation, full immersion in the tradition that holds us fast as well as total embrace of the society and culture in which we live — by the name “stereophonic Judaism.” Perhaps I can capture something of the same point by commenting briefly upon the portion of Deuteronomy that we read this coming Shabbat. It on the one hand sets before us a stark dichotomy of blessing and curses, good and evil, life and death, and urges us to choose life. But the Torah insists on the other hand that our choices are often complicated. The hidden things we desperately need to know in order to choose wisely are stored up with God, while we have only that which is revealed to work with. The Torah provides for leaders who will guide us in interpreting its words in every changing situation. It assures us that the way of mitzvah is “not in heaven” or “across the sea” but here with us, in us, to do. God demands this part-

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nership. The rabbis rejoiced in the gift of this partnership, and knew that all we are—heart, soul and mind; reason, science and history—is essential to this task.

Conservative Judaism is the way I have been taught—and the best, most authentic way I know—for bringing this vision to life. When I met Heschel in his office at JTS one day in 1971, ostensibly to interview him but in fact to ask the questions which most concerned me, I asked him—with the chutzpah that only a twenty-year old could possibly muster—where he got the nerve to say, as he did in the first paragraph of *God in Search of Man*, that religion had declined not because it was refuted by modern science and philosophy but because it had become “irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid.” I went on to ask a few moments later how he could declare with such certainty that the war in Vietnam was wrong—and what good all his words of protest were doing anyway, what good words ever did. I needed to know how Heschel could make the tradition speak so forcefully to the crises of the day. “You doubt—that’s my problem,” he replied quietly. (I quote from the interview published under my byline in *The Daily Pennsylvanian*.) “My good friend, words count.” He dared to tell people how they should live, he said, because of “certain climactic moments of my own life, certain convictions and insights,” and because of “a tradition of wisdom which I feel has enriched me, has given me values.” That tradition, the source of Heschel’s insights and convictions, had given him, he said, not only a right but a duty to express them, to share them, and to try to have them guide human lives. His was no mere middle path between extremes, no mere balancing of tradition and modernity, but the Torah burning inside him, guiding his pen in his study and his feet at Selma, a life-giving path of meaning and community, intellect and passion, on which he, following his teachers, sought to lead us.

This path in Torah, throughout my life, has been set primarily by Conservative Judaism. At its heart—and the heart of the portion of Torah we read this week, and at the center of the renewal to which the High Holiday liturgy calls us—is the notion of mitzvah. That notion is therefore the first piece of the message of Conservative Judaism that JTS will address this coming year. Working with the Movement’s rabbis, we will facilitate and guide a grassroots conversation about mitzvah. It will be distinguished, first of all, by the fact that it is a grassroots conversation—not a set of lectures that tell Conservative Jews what mitzvah is and exactly what mitzvot they are obligated to perform, but a set of discussions in which they speak with one another about mitzvah in all the senses of the word stored up in Written and Oral Torah: what obligates them; what they feel responsible for; what engages them;

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what they feel they owe to God or their community or their tradition or themselves; what they do because it is commanded; what they do out of sheer love. An intensive pilot program in nine synagogues around the country, prepared by JTS, will enable their members to bring the shared understandings garnered in guided conversation about mitzvah to bear on key texts and practices of their tradition. This conversation about mitzvah will, we believe, bring our Movement closer together; provide it with common language and vocabulary, and stimulate resolve for greater personal and communal observance. It will strengthen our pride in being who we are and living Judaism as we do.

JTS's contribution to the Conservative Movement goes hand in hand with our work on behalf of the Jewish people as a whole. I am pleased to see representatives of other movements in Judaism here today. I hope the strengthening of our several movements never blinds us to the fact that far more unites us than divides us. The ends we serve are larger than ourselves. In May we will of course be celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of Israeli independence — and will do so at a time not only of moral quandaries, inside Israel and outside it, but of continuing threats to Israel and worrisome decline in attachment to Israel on the part of American Jews. The data also show an attenuated sense of peoplehood among Jews throughout the world. JTS is committed to addressing these problems in immediate and tangible ways. Along with significant relevant faculty expertise, JTS has the advantage of close ties with Machon Schechter in Jerusalem and the Seminario Rabinico in Buenos Aires. Our ties with the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, too, will grow closer in the coming years. We sponsor Project Judaica in Moscow. We have the resources to foster exchanges of faculty, students and supporters among these institutions, and particularly between the United States and Israel. We have the resources, too, for the conceptual work needed to overcome the growing gap between Israeli and American Jews. I hope in the course of the year to announce initiatives designed to do that; we will not only be marking and celebrating Israel's sixtieth birthday with a series of events, activities and forums, but doing all we can to make sure that by the seventieth, Israelis and American Jews will be more closely related to one another, appreciative of the parallel paths on which they are seeking to build Jewish communities and revitalize Jewish tradition.

We do this, finally, at a time when the very notions of religious tradition and strong community are suspect in some quarters, because religion and community have so often and so visibly proven sources of violence and intolerance in recent

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years. That is why the presence of members of other faith communities here today means so much to me. Heschel's speech across the street at UTS in 1965, "No Religion is an Island," made it clear just how important tolerance and mutual respect among religions are to the integrity of those traditions and the survival of the planet. He also explained why tolerance, let alone respect, has been so rare among the world's religions, why they are difficult theologically and not only practically. We have no choice but to try to bridge those differences. Louis Finkelstein pledged JTS to this purpose half a century ago, and the need for it is clearer still as we gather in the city of New York on 9/5, a mere six years after 9/11. The Torah demands we address this issue, and the welfare of America, not to say the world, requires it. So we will. JTS will do so, in the first instance, by making sure our curriculum prepares leaders who understand that pluralism does not mean relativism, that faith can actually be an instrument of cooperation and not only a ground of divisiveness and dismissal. In addition, we are already laying the groundwork for expanded cooperation with Christian institutions of higher learning and for dialogue with members of many faiths and especially with Muslims. Together we will help our students and our communities wrestle with the very real dilemmas of how to affirm one's own commitments while not denying or disparaging those of others.

It is hard enough for Jews, in the words of the prayer book, to give each other permission to sanctify God. But we do manage that, at times; were all of us sufficiently filled with love, adequately clear-headed, and strong enough not to bear the consequences — *ahuvim*, *brurim*, *giborim* — as the Siddur puts it — we might just prove able, even with members of other faiths, to perform in fear and trembling the will of our shared Creator, and to open our mouths together in song to the Most High. The prayer book speaks poetry and not prose at this juncture. It knows the difficulty of the task it sets, and I have no illusions about the ease of the one I have just accepted. But those of us who take religion seriously owe it to ourselves to make sure that tradition and community are sources of life and known by all to be so.

We also owe this to our teachers. I wish I could thank Heschel personally for enabling me to reach this day. He, like my mother and many of my other teachers, are among those who, as Deuteronomy puts it, "are not with us here today". I am grateful that my father, source of my life and my teacher, when it comes to life-force, is here to celebrate, thank God, at age ninety-six; I am thankful that my friend and teacher Rabbi David Hartman is with me here, along with other friends and teachers; and I am especially pleased that my wife and children and extended family

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are here, all of them having put up with a lot more than chutzpah from me over the years and having validated more than once Heschel's assurance, Deuteronomy's assurance, that words matter and that love is transformative of individuals and of communities.

*Teshuvah* is possible. Renewal can be accomplished. We all know this from experience, and it is always the best teacher. We have some work to do this year at JTS. Thank God. We can do it, with your help. I cannot imagine better work to do, or a better place to do it, or better people to do it with. Let's make our classrooms sing with Torah in 5768 and carry our learning deep and far. May we all be written in the book of life this Rosh Hashanah. And may this year come to be written in the annals of JTS as one of joyous renewal, among the best that the institution has known. *Ken Yehi Ratzon*. I want to thank you for being with us today and in the future.

## The Masorti Movement in Israel

YIZHAR HESS

Some nine years ago, my wife and I saw an ad in the paper. We were in our early 30s, living in Jerusalem with our first child. We were both starting new careers: I had just received my law degree and my wife, Yael, had just been promoted to a new position in the Israel Defense Forces. We had reached the age when one starts to see the world from an adult point of view, and then we saw a newspaper ad published by the Jewish Agency for Israel that was looking for *shlichim* (emissaries) to serve in the United States. It did not fit in with our careers; and we both felt apprehensive about the prospect of being far from our aging parents. Nevertheless, we had a gut feeling that did not allow us to forget this ad. We responded, and after a long screening process that lasted nearly a year, we landed in Tucson, Arizona, on one of the sweltering summer days of 2000. Soon enough, we realized that there are no balmy summer days in Tucson. Truth be told, spring and fall are quite scorching, as well.

Our three years in Tucson were fantastic. Being a *shaliach* is not a job; it is a way of life. It involves the whole family — the spouse, the children, even the rented house that becomes a natural meeting point. All become part of the *shlichut* to the community. The idea is to increase the number of quality interactions with the community and, with those interactions, the ability to touch people. This turns Israel from an abstract idea into a physical reality; it brings Israel onto first-name terms.

In our case, and I have since learned that this is true not only in our case, the effect was mutual. We gained at least as much as we gave.

Several weeks after landing in Tucson, we received an invitation to the *bat mitzvah* of the daughter of one of the leaders of the Jewish community there. We replied immediately. One of the indications of a *shaliach's* integration into the community is the number of family *simchas* (joyous celebrations) to which he is invited. We were

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*Yizhar Hess is Executive Director & CEO of the Masorti Movement in Israel*

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happy to attend. It was a hot Saturday, like all Tucson Saturdays, and Congregation Anshei Israel, one of several synagogues in Tucson, was full. I vaguely remember the service of that Saturday, but one moment emerges in my memory again and again. It was the girl, the bat mitzvah, who had an *aliyah laTorah* (going up to read the Torah). In one of the *aliyot*, she honored her grandmother, who stood next to her on the *bimah* (stage), and they were holding hands.

I was reminded of my own bar mitzvah in a small neighborhood Orthodox synagogue in Jerusalem, what I then thought to be the only type of Israeli synagogue. It was the beginning of the summer of 1980, and I was a young lad, my voice breaking as I began to chant from Parashat Korach.

It had been my grandmother's dream that on my bar mitzvah I would read the whole Torah portion. I loved my grandmother and wanted to make her happy. And so I, an average secular Israeli youngster, started going with my father to synagogue every Saturday for almost a year, and also twice a week for an intensive and long private lesson.

I successfully completed my mission. I read the whole portion and realized my grandmother's dream. But at my bar mitzvah, my grandmother did not stand next to me. She was there, but I did not see her and she could hardly see me. She stood in the women's gallery, behind the barrier, trying to get a peek of her darling grandson.

Honor her with an *aliyah*? Hold hands with her on the *bimah*? In the synagogue where I had my bar mitzvah, only men had that privilege.

The Saturday of my bar mitzvah was the last time I attended an Orthodox synagogue. After that, when I happened to visit one, I would leave after 10 minutes. I did not feel comfortable there, not during my bar mitzvah, and not later.

And here, away from Israel, thousands of miles from Jerusalem, in Tucson, Arizona, in the Diaspora, I experienced my first significant Shabbat. How absurd. My family has been living in Jerusalem for 10 generations. Hebrew is my first language. My parents are caring and educated. I followed a common Israeli track—elementary school, high school, youth movement (scouts), military service as an officer and university. Yet it took getting to the end of the world, as far from Israel as only Tucson, Arizona, can be, in order for me to significantly connect with my Jewish identity. This was not just absurd; it was shameful and a missed opportunity.

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## The Masorti Movement

The Masorti Movement is celebrating its 30th anniversary in Israel. (Some communities were established earlier, but there was no organized movement.) The movement made aliyah some 30 years ago and, on the way, it bravely changed its name. The name “Conservative” Judaism, which is derived from the debate with Reform Judaism, was left behind in the Diaspora. Here, in the land of our ancestors, we wanted the name to connect to the Israeli experience on a most authentic level, and the name “Masorti” (traditional) does just that. It is a true, natural and necessary bridge between the people who tried to leave the Jewish religion behind and tuck it deep into the closet — namely, secular Jews — and those who saw the return to the land as the beginning of their religious redemption. The latter, the modern Orthodox, did not think or did not want to connect the great Zionist revolution with new changes in the Jewish religion and *halakhah* (Jewish law).

The Masorti Movement endeavored to bring a new message to Israel, one that was innovative and could create a fundamental change in the attitude of Israeli society toward Judaism. In many ways, this was the most fascinating solution that could be suited to Israeli society. This was not Reform Judaism, which can be seen to be too progressive and too radical, too un-Israeli and, sometimes, too innovative. It was not Orthodox Judaism, modern or otherwise, which conducts a dialogue primarily within itself and which will never be truly egalitarian or able to accept those that are different. It was not Israeli secularism, which, even in cases where it is self-aware, stays on the intellectual rather than the experiential level. (This point will be elaborated later.)

Thirty years — three decades. The Masorti Movement made many important and significant achievements during these three decades, but let us admit it: The revolution never came.

There are some 50 Masorti congregations in Israel. Some are very prosperous. We have a youth movement (NOAM), a student organization (Marom), and quality educational projects (we are the only organization in Israel that holds *b'nei mitzvah* ceremonies for children with special needs). These are great achievements, but we have not yet been able to become an influential, opinion-shaping force in Israeli society.

It is primarily a question of budget. In Israel, there is no separation of church and state, but the only ones reaping benefits from the situation are the Orthodox organizations (modern Orthodoxy, “knitted *kippah*,” and *haredim*, fervently Ortho-

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dox). Orthodox schools, yeshivas, kindergartens, *mikvaot* (ritual baths)—all are financed by the state. Furthermore, the government employs some 3,000 Orthodox rabbis in rabbinical positions. (It is difficult to obtain the exact numbers.)

Egalitarian budgets would lead to major shifts, but it is not just a question of money. It is also a question of readiness. Thirty years ago, when the Masorti Movement was established, Israeli society was different from what it is today. Wherever it existed, the religious and cultural dialogue with Judaism and with Jewish literature was different. The Israel of 30 years ago was able to digest the Masorti message only if it was well camouflaged. *Tali* schools (schools for enhanced Judaism studies) that were established then by the Masorti Movement are a perfect example of this phenomenon. It is one of the best educational programs in Israel and many schools belong to the system. But in order to enter the Israeli educational system, Tali had to fold the Masorti flag and, along with it, some of its principles. Otherwise, it would not have stood a chance. In order to enter through the main entrance, the movement decided then to relinquish its identity.

## Self-Definition

Now, after 30 years of Masorti activity, is Israel a different place? I think it is. But first, let us look at some statistics.

Last year, on *erev Pesach*, a few hours before the seder, I received a call from Rabbi Barry Schlesinger, head of the Rabbinical Assembly, the association of Masorti rabbis in Israel, and the rabbi of Jerusalem's Kehillat Moreshet Avraham. A survey of 1,000 Jewish adults in Israel had been published that morning in *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Israel's leading newspaper. Conducted by Dr. Mina Zemach, one of Israel's foremost statisticians, the survey dealt with the Jewish identity of Israelis.

"Have you seen it? Schlesinger asked me.

"Indeed, I have," I told him.

A few weeks afterward, we conducted the first meeting of the leadership of the Masorti Movement, during which we expressed a sense that some of us had had for several years: Something was changing in Israeli society. We discussed the results of the survey.

The survey's first question asked the banal and unsophisticated question that many of us would hesitate to ask because it is so direct: "Do you believe in God?" Seventy-seven percent of the respondents said yes; another 8 percent said they believe in some supreme power; 12 percent said no; and 3 percent gave other replies.

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The second question tried to ascertain how we, the Israelis, define ourselves. Fifty percent said they are secular; 30 percent said they are traditional (those that keep tradition, a term unrelated to the Masorti Movement); 12 percent said they are religious; and 8 percent said they are *haredi*.

There seems to be a contradiction between the answers to those questions. If 85 percent of Jews in Israel believe in God or some sort of a supreme power, how can it be that half of Israelis consider themselves to be secular? Who is the secular Israeli?

This question is enhanced by the survey's other findings. According to the survey, 96 percent of Israelis (61 percent always, 35 percent sometimes) make *kiddush* (the blessing over the wine) on Friday nights, and 84 percent of Israelis light Shabbat candles (61 percent always, 9 percent often, 14 percent occasionally).

The survey asked many more questions, some of which will be dealt with further on. They all led to one conclusion: The secular Israeli is not "secular" in the superficial meaning that emerges from the English translation of the Hebrew word "*hiloni*." The secular Israeli is not devoid of religion and is not an atheist. The secular Israeli holds a strong, nonconfrontational and even traditional link to Jewish tradition. Secular Israelis respect their tradition and, if it does not threaten their way of life with coercion, they experience this tradition actively.

This trend, which has been growing in Israeli society for a while, can be seen in the results of this survey. It matches trends such as those in two surveys conducted by the Guttman Institute for the AVI CHAI Foundation in 1991 and 1999.

One must not be confused by these results. They are fascinating and a source for some optimism, but they do not teach us anything about Israelis' level of knowledge of Jewish heritage and of Judaism as a culture and a religion, or about their willingness to experience Jewish activities at the synagogue or to learn about the non-Orthodox Jewish movements.

And yet, the answers to this survey are revolutionary. There was a good reason for the conversation I conducted with Rabbi Schlesinger on *erev Pesach*. This survey showed us that secular Israelis are ready, more than ever, to hear the message of the Masorti Movement. They are ready to accept the non-Orthodox Jewish movements without a need for the latter to hide their identity.

Two questions in the survey dealt with conversion and marriage. The answers to both were significant. Forty-five percent of Israeli Jews support Reform and Conservative conversions. Fifty-three percent believe that the state has to recognize Reform and Conservative marriages.

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For someone who does not reside in Israel, these answers seem banal. But make no mistake: This is a revolution. Had these questions been asked a decade or two ago, the percentages would have been dramatically lower.

Israeli society is ripe, more than ever in the history of the State of Israel, to accept the liberal interpretations presented by the non-Orthodox movements in Judaism. It has been a complex and prolonged educational process, but this is a golden opportunity. If it is missed, we will lament it for many generations. This opportunity requires us to be creative, attractive, fascinating and exciting in a way that will completely change Israeli society within one decade.

### High Holiday Observance

For many years, the non-Orthodox Jewish movements in Israel had to play a defensive game. They suffered discrimination in public funding, did not get equal legal rights, were oppressed by the chief rabbinate and were ignored by the central government and local authorities. The Masorti and Reform movements felt that they were being persecuted from the day they started operating in Israel. Every change was obtained through major efforts and significant private funding. Every plot of land we received for the construction of a synagogue for one of our congregations was accompanied by legal and public confrontations. The question of “Who is a Jew?” and the struggle to gain recognition for conversions are still unresolved. The battle to receive financial support from the state for our educational and cultural activities, in the same way Orthodox organizations are supported, is endless. And there are still many more unresolved issues.

Nevertheless, we have not lost heart. It is important to continue these struggles even today, but we must also go beyond that. Masorti Judaism in Israel cannot remain in this arena. We must not be identified as a movement whose essence is to struggle for equal rights with Orthodox Judaism. This will not lead to our growth or to our reaching more and more people. This is not the way to deeply influence Israeli society. In order to enter the heart of Israel’s mainstream society, we have to create real opportunities for Israelis to identify with us. Nobody wants to identify with the victim who complains year after year that he is being victimized. This does not mean that we are not right but, while evoking some empathy, we could also cause indifference. Enough crying! It is time to present a different message.

This message will come from the grass roots and we can already feel it budding.

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On this past Yom Kippur, 800 people participated in the Ne'ilah service at the Hakrayot Masorti Congregation in Kiryat Bialik. Even the mayor was there. He could little afford not to be there. This synagogue attracted more people than any other synagogue in the northern suburbs of Haifa, and perhaps in all of northern Israel.

Kehillat Tiferet Shalom, one of our three congregations in Tel Aviv, located in Ramat Aviv, the heart of secularity, attracted 450 people to Ne'ilah.

At Hod veHadar in Kfar Saba, 700 crowded in for Ne'ilah and 450 filled Magen Avraham in Omer, near Beer Sheva, during Kol Nidre.

This was the case in many of the 50 Masorti congregations throughout Israel.

I've chosen examples outside Jerusalem. We have nine prosperous and impressive congregations in Jerusalem, but these do not necessarily represent Israel as a whole. In order to examine our influence on Israeli society as a whole, we need to analyze the movement's successes outside Jerusalem.

This year, more than any other year, tens of thousands of Israelis throughout the country chose to celebrate the High Holidays with the Masorti Movement. Indeed, it is a small number when compared to our potential membership, but it is an important trend. It is also important to notice that these tens of thousands of people came to us despite the fact that it would have been easier for them to choose alternatives. The alternatives are easier for a number of reasons. We are not known enough, since the Masorti Movement has not invested in marketing in all its years. Many of our synagogues do not look like synagogues, because some 60 percent of our congregations do not have a place of their own, using instead temporary locations, such as bomb shelters, kindergartens and schools. Therefore, the people who did come to our services, most of whom were Israeli *sabras* (natives), came because we managed to convey the feeling that we are the most appropriate place for them. We are the golden mean that is suited to their Jewish identity.

It is from here that change will come. It is already happening. In all the places where we have presented appropriate spiritual and community-oriented leadership, the Masorti Movement has become the center of Jewish activity, with a widespread influence on the community.

## Secular Culturalism

"Where are you going for *tikkun*?" I was asked this question about the gatherings of Shavuot a few days before the holiday by a friend from Tel Aviv, a Ph.D. and a "devout secular Jew." I didn't need any explanation. Whoever is aware of the changes

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that have taken place in Israel in the last decade knows about the new secular trend of holding a *tikkun* on Shavuot. It is a variation of the traditional *tikkun* (all-night study session), emerging from the confines of the synagogue. Dozens of cultural institutions in Israel participate in this new phenomenon and come out with diverse, fascinating, colorful and creative educational and intellectual programs.

If we tried to map the non-Orthodox Jewish sector in Israel, the liberal Jewish sector, we would find three very distinct focal points. One is Reform Judaism, which over many years of investing in marketing has managed to turn itself into a well-known brand name, even if it doesn't have a big following. Another is Masorti, or Conservative Judaism, with its dozens of congregations in Israel. Although not well known, Masorti has managed to acquire an ever-growing number of members. The third group is secular-cultural Judaism, which, in recent years, has seen some of its institutions attempting to receive recognition as yet another denomination of Judaism.

The differences between Reform and Conservative Judaism are well known, especially to readers of this article. The more interesting question is, what are, if any, the meeting points with secular-cultural Judaism?

The first signs of this new wave of secular culturalism, an intellectual and self-aware secularism, appeared in Israel at the end of the 1970s. The crisis following the 1973 war led to many changes in Israeli society and culture. Alongside the phenomena of *hazara bi-teshuvah* (return to the commandments), and *hazara bi-she'elah* (return to questioning), new groups of secular Jews appeared who tried to find their own connection with the "Jewish bookcase" — the corpus of Jewish writings from throughout the ages — to learn about Judaism without wearing a *kippah* and with no apologies. Their claim was that Judaism is a culture and not a religion. The definition of Jewish culture was appropriately extended. Every work created by Jews fit into this updated definition. There were no longer secular and religious texts, sacred and secular poetry. And so the extended shelf carried the poetry of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi and texts by Amos Oz, talmudic Midrashim and S.Y. Agnon's books, biblical lamentations and poems by Yehuda Amichai. The "Jewish bookcase" became a term that, until today, defines this phenomenon. This process was primarily intellectual but also political, trying to initiate the democratization and popularization of classical Jewish texts. The leaders of this movement claimed that the Bible, the Mishnah and the Talmud did not belong to religious Jews any more than to secular Jews, and that secular Jews have equal ownership over

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them. Furthermore, they claimed that works written by Jews over the past century, most of which are secular works, are literally and historically as important as the religious writings of prior generations. Jewish culture has always been built tier by tier, each generation adding to what was created by its predecessors. The secular Jew is sovereign and not subject to the rabbis. He does not need rabbinical mediation between himself and his cultural roots.

This was and still is a fascinating phenomenon that has accelerated over the last decade. Secular-cultural educational institutions were opened as well as cultural centers and a secular *yeshivah*. There is an organization in Israel that certifies “secular rabbis,” which in itself is a somewhat strange term. These rabbis perform life-cycle ceremonies with a secular interpretation.

Israel’s institutionalized Orthodoxy preferred to conduct a dialogue with secular organizations rather than to confront its counterparts in Judaism, namely, the Masorti and Reform movements. Secular Jews were perceived as *tinok shenishba* — as a kidnapped child raised among non-Jews — as opposed to the Masorti and Reform Jews, who are seen as those who have studied and made their own interpretation. The dialogue with secular Jews was seen by the Orthodox as non-threatening. Even today, in meetings meant to bridge the gaps between religious and secular Jews, the secular organizations work with more lenient Orthodox organizations. The liberal movements are usually absent from such meetings. When it comes to government budgets, secular institutions receive state assistance, but those belonging to the Masorti and Reform movements receive no assistance. Of course, if there were Reconstructionist institutions in Israel, they would be treated the same as the other liberal movements.

Secular-cultural Judaism is intellectually stimulating and appealing, but it is not a widespread popular phenomenon. It cannot be such. Its strength is intellectual and therein lies its weakness. How many people can realize their Jewish identity by participating in weekly study groups? Does a critical study of Talmud, even in a diverse group, formulate the authentic identification created by a community? And if we ignore for now the important question about belief in the Creator, is there a true replacement for the synagogue and the community that is built around it, not to mention the authentic nonintellectual aspects of Jewish culture?

It is important to remember that the Zionist revolution was a secular one. The state would not have been established without the secular revolutionaries, the adamant ideologues who chose to reject the *bet hamidrash* (house of study) and the

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religious way of life in order to come on *aliyah* (ascension) to the land of Israel. Those revolutionaries insisted on returning to agriculture as part of the redemption of the land. The best example of this is the kibbutz. The Zionist ethos developed around the kibbutz as an ideal. The kibbutz, this exciting, important and heroic human experiment, tried to formulate a new code for human and social behavior and tried to infuse it with content and with another kind of Judaism. This secular experiment was much more fascinating than the secular wave of our days. New Pesach haggadot were written and new content was given to some of the holidays (Shavuot, Tu B'Shevat). The holidays that could not be integrated into this new Jewish-Zionist ethos, such as Tishah B'av, were cast aside.

It was an exciting experiment, but it failed. Some may claim that this was due to the failing of the socialist model of the kibbutz. I hold a different opinion. It is no coincidence that today most *kibbutzim* celebrate Pesach with the traditional haggadah. The kibbutz's attempt to create a novel Judaism was too revolutionary and too radical, and therefore did not withstand the test of time. The revolution brought on a reaction. The first generation knew the classical Jewish world and therefore knew how to rebel against it. The second and third generations were born into a void. This is expressed in the words of Berl Katznelson, one of the main leaders of the Labor movement, a sharp philosopher with succinct statements. He once said: "We wanted to raise a generation of heretics but instead raised a generation of ignorant Jews." The revolution had been authentic for the first generation, but it was just a bunch of slogans for the second generation; it lacked depth and, therefore, it dissolved. Uprooting Judaism from its natural roots, the religious rituals, the synagogue and pure faith was an unnatural process.

It was here that secularity failed in the past and, today, secular-cultural Judaism is following the same path, albeit less enthusiastically and with less ideology and dedication. Judaism is a religion, primarily a religion, and only secondarily a culture.

## Post Denominationalism

The liberal Jewish discourse in the world and also in Israel gives much consideration to the issue of the multiplicity of denominations or, more precisely, what is sometimes called the "post-denominational" state of Judaism. Have we reached a point where the distinction among liberal Jewish streams has become anachronistic? Is the distinction among Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Jews obsolete in a pluralistic, tolerant and multicultural era? Is it preserved only because

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of historical, organizational, and financial considerations, and not because of pure ideological reasons?

One assumes that this discourse will accompany non-Orthodox Judaism in the next generations, and it is hard to determine if those who support the idea of post-denominationalism or those who hold onto classical definitions will prevail. It seems that in Israel the answer is clearer. This discussion is appropriate in an ideological and theological forum, but if we disconnect from ideology, concentrating on and examining the practical aspects, we will see that the post-denominational approach is mistaken. It will not increase the non-Orthodox Jewish camp in Israel; it will actually diminish it.

Israel is a conservative country. Even secularism, as shown in the survey discussed earlier, is very traditional. Therefore, there is great significance to the differentiation among the various movements. Some Jews will be open to the message of the Masorti Movement, presenting an open Judaism that confronts the principles of *halakhah*, whereas joining the Reform movement will be seen as too radical, extreme and unreasonable.

A union — even if only organizational — between the Conservative and Reform movements in Israel, although it has many supporters, will blur the necessary differences between the two movements. It will support the solution that seems clear, decisive and more liberal and will turn the more nuanced Conservative-Masorti solution, the golden mean, into one that is swallowed up by the general statement. In the era of mass media and 10-second sound bites, when statements are reduced to black or white, it will be difficult to maintain a distinct Conservative voice when it is heard together with all other non-Orthodox Jewish voices. The man in the street will see it all as Reform Judaism.

We all stand to lose from this, the Conservative as well as the Reform movements. The post-denominational debate is not relevant to Israel's reality. If there are fewer flowers in the Jewish flowerbed, secular Jews will have fewer chances to enjoy their fragrance and maybe even pick one. The flowers need to be different from each other. A flowerbed full of different flowers with different colors is more exciting than one that is uniform in type and color.

## New Directions

The Conservative movement is faced with an immense challenge. We have the key, perhaps the most authentic key, to serve as the bridge for Israelis seeking a con-

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nection with tradition and the Jewish religion. The Conservative approach of our rabbis, who create changes in *halakhah* using halakhic tools and with much respect for tradition, as well as the egalitarian familial experience that typifies us, combine to present a worthy, accurate and fitting option for Israeli society. This combination has a chance to take root in Israel in the next decade.

Most of our congregations were established 20 to 30 years ago by *olim* (immigrants) from the United States; today, however, they are becoming more and more “Israeli.” New congregations join the movement and seek a home therein. A few months ago, Degel Yehuda in Jerusalem became the first Sephardic congregation to join our movement. It is an egalitarian congregation that uses Sephardic melodies and customs in its services.

The buds of change have appeared. We, as an ideological movement, have to be determined and brave enough to nurture these buds.

Over the next years, the Masorti Movement in Israel will work in two directions. The congregational arm will aim to develop and foster our existing congregations all over Israel and create opportunities for the establishment of new ones. But let us not delude ourselves; not all Israelis will join these congregations. For that purpose, our other arm will offer open, egalitarian, quality religious services according to *halakhah*. Jews, even those very disconnected from religion, require religious services up to four times in their lifetime: circumcision, bat/bar mitzvah, wedding and funeral services. We have to be there for them. We have to create a situation where we will be the providers of those services. Paradoxically, to build on the old joke, we have to aspire to a state of affairs in which the synagogue that the average Israeli does not attend is a Masorti one.

## American-Israeli Connections

And one last point.

The growth and development of Conservative Judaism in Israel, and that of non-Orthodox Judaism in general, may have a beneficial effect on the bond between Jews living in Israel and those all over the world — in particular, North American Jews.

Neither Israeli Jews nor world Jewry can afford to lose the common identifying points between physically remote elements of the Jewish people and thereby allow them to dwindle. The success of the Taglit-birthright Israel project has shown to what extent Israel can be the anchor prism through which young Jews identify with their Judaism. An entirely Orthodox Israel, a clerical and illiberal Israel, will

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undermine this effort. In a long-term strategic approach, world Jewry, and especially North American Jewry, must do its utmost to assist the non-Orthodox Jewish movements to establish themselves in Israeli society. This support is an investment in future generations.

American Jews gave me one of the best presents I could receive. I was exposed to the Conservative Jewish way of life and understood that authentic Judaism does not have to be Orthodox. I hope that through a joint effort from both sides of the ocean, we will be able to extend this feeling to many more Israelis.

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# Schechter Rabbinical Seminary and the Religious Masorti *Hashkafa* (Worldview) and Spiritual Home

EINAT RAMON

## A Framework for Differences of Opinion: Denominations, Boundaries and Globalization

For the past 150 years, most Jews (with the exception of the ultra-Orthodox) have prided themselves on upholding a religious philosophy that follows the Mishnah from the Ethics of the Fathers (5:17):

A difference of opinion (*machloket*) for heaven's sake will have lasting value, but a difference of opinion not for heaven's sake will not endure. What is an example of a difference of opinion for heaven's sake? The debates of Hillel and Shammai (Mishnah, Avot 5:19). What is an example of a difference of opinion not for heaven's sake? The rebellion of Korach and his associates.

The model of the students at Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel presented in the Mishnah below teaches us that Jewish men and women married each other in the midst of very serious controversies among political and religious camps.

Even though these prohibit and these permit, these declare ineligible and these declare eligible, Bet Shammai did not refrain from marrying women of Bet Hillel, nor Bet Hillel from Bet Shammai (Yevamot 1:4).

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*Rabbi Dr. Einat Ramon is Dean of the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary in Jerusalem. The first Israeli-born woman rabbi, she received her ordination from the The Jewish Theological Seminary of America and her doctorate from Stanford University.*

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While scholarly portrayals of the ancient disputes between Bet Shamai and Bet Hillel (Ben Shalom 1993) convey a historical reality that was much more complicated than the nostalgic depiction of the Mishnah, the philosophical-political idea behind *tarbut hamachloket*, the culture of differences of opinion, was that each set of opinions must have a clearly defined spiritual home in the form of a *bet midrash*, a school of thought. The modern version of the ancient schools of thought was denominations and/or Jewish political affiliations (particularly in Eastern Europe and Israel). Within one's spiritual home — a family, community or an ideological movement — one's cluster of beliefs and observances were deepened and celebrated while maintaining a common sense of peoplehood through interdenominational direct or indirect dialogue.

Although historically, denominations sprouted from deep religious disputes originating in the anti-ritualistic and anti-national contexts of the 19th century (Eisen, 1998), philosophically they rested upon two assumptions: a) that no Jew holds the key to the ultimate truth — thus, debate on questions of the Jewish norm creates a stronger Jewish culture when the argument is clarified in that context (Alexander, 2001, 168); and b) that each person is different — thus, the channels to Judaism that suit one person, one family or one community may not necessarily suit another and there must be room for all. This forced us to recognize the need for different configurations of Judaism.

Owing, largely, to Zionism's dominance throughout the mid-to-late 20th century, differences of opinion concerning the boundaries and norms of *halakhah* (Jewish law) ceded to the idea that “Judaism begins not with an individual leap of faith, but with a leap of solidarity with the Jewish community” (Hartman, 1999, 195). Spiritual homes are important as long as we hold on to the overriding spiritual framework: the Jewish people. I would further argue that as a result of the centrality of the idea of peoplehood, the concept of “heresy” in Judaism is weak, when compared to other world religions. As Rabbi Aba Rav Zavda claimed: “A Jew (an Israelite) even though he had sinned, is still a Jew” (*Sanhedrin* 44a).

Given the fact that denominations served the Jewish people well in balancing the dialectic of solidarity and disagreement, we must ask ourselves, what mechanism does the “post-denominational” mindset offer in its stead? How should we continue to disagree in a civil manner on matters of *halakhah*, Jewish norms and boundaries? In addition, at least half of the Jews worldwide (including Israeli Jews) have never been introduced to non-Orthodox denominations. What does it mean

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that while some among us have discovered a need for a particular Reform or Conservative denominational approach to organize our Jewish lives, American Jews have decided that denominationalism is no longer relevant and denominational frameworks should be discarded? It seems that “big-tent” Judaism, which refuses to set boundaries out of fear of controversy, may become too wide and too undefined for others who feel alienated from a diluted religion.

I suspect that while “post-denominationalism” presents itself as an outcome of Jews’ greater agreement with one another, it may actually be a symptom of Western global culture’s fear of differences of opinion and its desire to erase cultural differences in general. One alarming fact is that “Half of all human languages will have disappeared by the end of the century, as smaller societies are assimilated into national and global cultures, scientists have warned” (Knight, 2004). Languages signify cultures and moral perspectives. Yet those of us who are so dedicated to preserving endangered species and the environment seem to be oblivious to the extinction of small-world cultures, including our own Jewish culture, denominations included. We, non-Orthodox Jews, embrace too often the new at the expense of dissolving the old. Organic families, communities and indigenous ethnic cultures that tend to conserve traditional models of ethics are facing real dangers of fragmentation and annihilation (Wade, 2007). Small cultures and small peoples are “impediments” to globalization, since they signify difference, disagreement and, often, criticism of modernity.

How do we draw the line between the blessings and curses of modernity? The tension between embracing universalism *vs.* particularistic cultural boundaries, technology *vs.* technological restraint, is not new. In fact, it is embedded deep within Jewish narrative, already demonstrated by one of the earliest stories in the Torah, that of the Tower of Babel:

Behold, they are one people, and one language for all, and all this they have begun to do. Now, nothing that they scheme to do shall be withheld from them (11:6).

As Rabbi Jonathan Chipman eloquently summarizes:

The early chapters of Genesis concern the dilemma of how powerful ought man be allowed to be? Judaism certainly affirms human responsibility and free will, but sees a subtle line separating valid use of auton-

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omy, intelligence, and initiative, from hubris. The Tower story would say: God's move to limit man's powers is rooted in a moral position. Humanity has been blessed with awesome powers, [...] But with this comes hubris: the desire to transcend limits. The moral life of humanity in fact revolves around the acceptance of limits, and the humility of knowing that we are not infinite, that we are not God, knowing that *nothing* is fail-safe, that even the wisest of men cannot anticipate every last possibility. Without advocating a latter-day Luddism, many of the world's problems today are the result of unforeseen consequences of technological progress.

Judaism, by its very definition, is a civilization that draws boundaries. Boundaries are not walls; they are the vehicles by which the Jewish people and its different spiritual communities build themselves. One of the major tasks of rabbis as scholars, teachers and leaders of the people is to draw the lines for the definition of our Jewish spiritual homes, and on that issue there are serious disagreements.

It is true that to some degree we have seen in our generation how challenges presented by one denomination to the other have been taken seriously and have created change. An example of that could be the recent embrace by Orthodox Judaism of religious feminism and the Reform movement's shift from anti-Jewish nationalism to an identification with Zionism. And yet, many, many disputes remain unresolved. Among these are old differences of opinions regarding the degree to which we must embrace Hebrew, Jewish law, Shabbat observance and Zionist commitments, and the effort to set a boundary vis-à-vis intermarriage. Today's questions often also concern issues of gender: Is it within the boundaries of our hermeneutical approach to tradition to ordain women or to count them for a minyan? Is it immoral if we do not do so? Should the traditional definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman continue or cease to be the norm? Is educating for a covenant between a man and a woman central to Jewish peoplehood and Jewish civilization or not? Jews today clearly disagree over such issues, because different Jews have different moral intuitions on such topics we cannot simply fit into one big tent.

Rabbis are the people responsible for setting the boundaries. But can our task to educate, set boundaries and serve as role models be carried out in a global context that is culturally antagonistic to boundaries and "small tents"? To be the children of Abraham and Sarah is, perhaps, more difficult today despite, or because of, technological advancements.

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Rabbi Yehuda used to say [about Abraham]: The entire world is on one side and he is on the other side (VayikraRaba 42).

The deeper meaning of Judaism, according to this midrash, is challenging human civilization and the total unity of humankind. It is our role to be *ivrim*, those on the other side. To emphasize that humanity is an expression of accepting human vulnerability and admitting that we need particularistic limits that link us to the particularistic combined voices of our fathers and mothers, through whom we connect to Jewish peoplehood. Yet how could we do so in a society so antagonistic to the acknowledgement of human differentiated vulnerability? Perhaps the solution lies in preserving the idea of a camp full of “small spiritual tents.” We begin our morning prayers at the synagogue by chanting

How fair are your tents, O Jacob,  
Your dwellings, O Israel

Our Torah celebrates Israel’s many tents and many dwellings. A tent is a defined space with clear though not rigid boundaries. Thus, perhaps the bureaucratic, dogmatic denominational structures may no longer work for those who grew up in them and for those not yet introduced to them. However, *batei midrash*, rabbinical schools, each with a worldview and a circle of communities that share that worldview, may be our future dwellings. Such minimovements will be the new forms of Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel, schools of thought in theology and in interpretation of Jewish law (Shay, 2007, 200–201) that have differences, and yet convey solidarity with each other in the midst of differences.

### Features of the Schechter Rabbinical School’s Masorti “Tent”

What, then, are the features of our “small tent” — that of the spiritual home of the Masorti *hashkafa* (worldview) as promoted by the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary in Jerusalem (established in 1984)? Our theology draws from two ideological sources that are historically intertwined: Zionist thought and Rabbi Zacharias Frankel’s positive–historical approach to Judaism (Germany 1801–1875). It has been a common understanding in Zionist thought, beginning with the early days of the first *maskilim* (the Enlightenment’s Hebrew writers) in Eastern Europe that the Jews’ return to their land demanded a new way of thinking about the Jewish religion (Feiner, 1998). Yet, by the same token, there has always been a concern that the renewal of Jewish tradition in Israel must take a different shape and form than the

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evolution of modern Judaism in the Diaspora. Living in the land of Israel, in a sovereign Jewish state, of necessity entails moral and physical demands.

It was Gershom Scholem (1887–1882), the major scholar of Kabbalah at the Hebrew University, who articulated this idea very clearly: The restoration of a religious Jewish culture related equally to *halakhah* and to the Zionist secular rebellion against *halakhah*, is, according to Scholem, an unavoidable necessity. It responds to the growing existential emptiness among secular Jews, on the one hand, and to Orthodox extremism on the other. When the Jewish people live in their own land, the “religious” (Orthodox) and the “secularists” participate together in this dialectical process. Both contribute to the return of Hebrew secularism to its Jewish religious roots. Both camps, together, help formulate a religious position in Israel that is neither rigid nor totally individualistic. In other words, in Israel the renewal of the Jewish religion is a national-Zionist task in which different spiritual homes simultaneously participate. While Scholem hoped that its Israeli context would cause open religious Judaism to blossom, he also feared the simplistic import of non-Orthodox individualistic theological thought patterns from the United States. Thus, his article “Thoughts on Jewish Theology,” published in 1974, states that “it is clear that the question of the significance of secularization for contemporary Jewry is a piercing question”...

However:

... must we accept the values determined by today’s permissive American society, which are a logical outcome of extreme secularism? ... it seems to me that this question must now be open to debate. ... I am convinced that behind the secular façade Zionism inevitably includes religious content, and this religious potential is much stronger than what is expressed in the “religious Zionism” of political parties. Why? Because the central question is the dialectics of a living tradition, and within the framework of Judaism this means primarily the tradition of *Halakhah*. Even if it challenges tradition, this question will be asked here in a more fruitful manner than by cowardly laws enacted for the benefit of political parties, where it [*Halakhah*] is confined today. The secular nature of the Zionist movement has always contradicted the involvement of religious issues, which are inescapable ... As long as faith in God represents a fundamental phenomenon for everything created in God’s image, and cannot be liquidated by

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ideology, the complete secularization of Israel can, in my opinion, be prevented. Confronting this secularization, with its truth and limits, is fruitful and crucial. (Scholem 1976: 586–590)

It is to that challenge, the nonindividualistic renewal of Judaism, out of the Zionist moral and cultural revolution, that the Schechter Rabbinical School wishes to rise, by introducing the voice of dialectical thinking signified by the positive-historical worldview. From its inception, theological and halakhic interpretation by the positive-historical school of thought, later known as the philosophical approach of Conservative Judaism, was marked by looking at Torah as God's will that unfolds through rational interpretations focused on the vision of establishing a community that conducts itself in holiness. It therefore had prided itself in its ability to adapt *halakhah* to the times, while setting clear boundaries and limits to changes that deviated from the spirit of *halakhah* and of the Jewish people. On the one hand, the positive-historical school of thought was always committed to "normative pluralism" that respected conflicting stances, not for lack of conviction, nor from a desire to gradually eliminate the opinion with which we disagree (whether it be Orthodox, Reform or secular), but from a respectful recognition of all spiritual abodes within the Jewish people (Sagi). The courage to set limits to change based on historical research has its beginnings in the legacy of Frankel, founder of the movement and head of the Breslau Rabbinical Seminary, who said:

Not all streams of influence of the times have their source in the divine; we do not wish to slight the spirit of our time, but neither do we want to ignore its shortcomings; concessions are made mainly because of passing impressions, or temporary pleasures, and in our haste we lose much of the exalted, that which could enable us to attain a deeper understanding.

Frankel's adversary, Rabbi Avraham Geiger (1810–1874), relied upon a clear halakhic ruling that permits the publication of Jewish prayer books in German (Mishnah, *Sotah* 7:a), with which Frankel fiercely disagreed. He felt that the spirit of Geiger's words was an evasion from the critical national and religious task of his generation: "to teach Hebrew to the youth — so that it understands both worship of God, and the sacred writings."

By setting up these hermeneutical principles, the Masorti worldview serves as a spiritual home for two groups: those who observe a *halakhic* way of life but feel

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that orthodoxy, however modern, constricts Judaism with its pedantic and stringent rulings; and those who come to it aspiring to *halakhic*, values-based inspiration even if they are unable to commit to a *halakhic* way of life. Thus, the movement is a varied human mosaic whose common strand is a conscious and public commitment to the preservation of traditional *halakhah* through selective adaptation, abiding by clear intellectual, historical principles.

Our challenge is that Israelis, being Jews from different ethnic backgrounds who live together, tend to be suspicious of non-Orthodox sectarian divisions and definitions. Most Israelis, including the nonobservant ones, still vaguely and intuitively hold on to Orthodox theology and *halakhic* philosophy upheld by the religious institutions of the State of Israel (Tabory, 1981, 1982). So how can we, Israelis who feel the urgent need to educate according to the worldview of the classical “positive-historical” perspective, reach out to our people in a “post-denominational” age, in a secular spiritual setting that was never denominational to begin with (Tabory, 2000)?

A similar challenge is that of the rabbinic vocation. Institutional processes that have affected the definition of the rabbinate in the West (Schorsch, 1993), where there is a greater political separation between religion and state, have been absent in the State of Israel (Tabory, 1981, 1982, 2000). Due to the absence of official state (and therefore public) recognition of Masorti rabbis as clergy in Israel and the resulting lack of funding (Golinkin, 26), the work of Israeli Conservative/Masorti rabbis is more difficult than that of their colleagues in the United States, Europe and South America. Most of our rabbis, therefore, end up working simultaneously in a number of jobs and must become experts in diverse rabbinic professional fields. This, too, sets a particular creative challenge to our rabbinic program.

In response to this vision and its challenges, the structure of the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary’s curriculum emerges from a synthesis of *yeshivah*-style learning and common curricular paradigms employed in academic theological seminaries. Similar to students in *yeshivot*, our students spend the bulk of their time in school studying Talmud and *halakhah* (although these do not make up the majority of courses). Prior to their formal classes, students study talmudic, midrashic, halakhic and philosophical texts in *hevrutah* (pairs) at the *bet midrash*, while the teacher instructs the students individually. Applying a four-tiered approach to a Masorti-Conservative Jewish context entails the following commitment for persons interested in becoming spiritual-religious leaders: They are required to gain

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a strong foundation in biblical and rabbinic sources; to understand Judaism's historical development and the history of the Jewish people, especially in light of the moral and political implications of Zionism; to understand fully Judaism's various hermeneutical principles and boundaries vis-à-vis the Torah; and to develop the professional skills required to fulfill the role of a religious leader in modern times (including leading prayers, employing music and art in the development of a religious community, counseling and utilizing educational and administrative skills).

Training rabbis who can respond to our fascinating and complex Israeli reality means that we must search for strong and courageous people who do not fear to be *Ivrim* — those on the other side that challenge both orthodoxy as well as secular and Reform modes of thinking. They must listen to various ethnic traditions that were brought into Israel through the ingathering of the exiles and reconstruct those lost traditions while weaving them back into revived biblical and rabbinic traditions. They should be able to serve as halachic and moral role models. Then will they be able to responsibly interpret and transmit Jewish law, while setting the appropriate boundaries. We believe that by creating a dialogue among many conflicting voices, we, lay leaders and rabbis who share the Masorti worldview, can bring about a thriving Israeli positive-historical school that will respond to the deep thirst for meaning among our people. We know that it is not upon us to finish the task, yet neither are we free to neglect it (*Mishnah, Avoth II:21*).

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# Sephardim in the Masorti Movement in Israel

YONATAN ELAZAR

Israel's Masorti movement has recently absorbed its first *Sephardic* congregation, *Degel Yehuda* in Jerusalem. The congregation has existed for seven years and has been unaffiliated until now. As part of its goal of embracing different sectors in Israeli society and deepening its involvement and presence in Israeli society, the Masorti movement has decided to make a major effort to bring the *Sephardim* into the fold.

The *Sephardim* in Israel are the great unknown to many within this pluralist and liberal organization. There is a number of possible reasons for this, none of which are mutually exclusive. One such reason is the predominantly *Ashkenazic* (as well as American) identity of the founders and many of the current activists in these movements. As such, they addressed *Ashkenazic* issues and instituted *Ashkenazic* liturgy, customs and forms. Another element is the fact that the *Sephardim* have never truly been a part of the public sphere in Israel. Their interests and needs do not figure in such elemental and disparate areas of Israeli life as urban planning, education and the public media. It is therefore no surprise that the liberal religious movements in Israel have not, to date, given them serious consideration, either. The seemingly conservative and traditional character of the *Sephardim* in Israel would have left them outside of the regular scope of target audiences for these movements, in any case.

So who are the *Sephardim*? Well, they constitute a great variety of cultures, and they come from all walks of life. Some are day laborers, and some manage high-tech companies. They live in development towns and small villages, and in the trendier

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*Yonatan Elazar is the director of the Center for Masorti Sephardic Congregations. He lives with his wife and two children in Jerusalem.*

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neighborhoods of Herzliya or Ra'anana. Some have large families, and some small. In short, they are as varied as any other Israeli group. Although the *Sephardim* came to Israel from a wide range of countries and territories, in Europe (including Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece and Yugoslavia), Asia, Africa and the Middle East, there are certain broad characteristics that apply to all. One of these is that, due to the history of modernization in these countries, along with the nature of the halakhic (Jewish legal) traditions there, the Jews of these places experienced no sudden and total break with Jewish tradition, such as occurred in *Ashkenazic* countries. Thus, *Sephardic* Jews have always kept a warm spot for the traditions of their fathers. How this transpired is an issue that deserves to be written about at length, but not here. One result of this process is the emergence of what is termed in Israel "the *Masortiyim*," (traditional Jews). Many in Israel and abroad confuse the term "traditional" with the sociological term that refers to those living in a pre-modern society. The term actually refers specifically to Jewish tradition, and holds those who are traditional in high esteem, regardless of their actual practice of the law. As a general rule, *Masortiyim* observe some form of religious tradition, to a widely varying degree and manner. The *Sephardic* rabbis have, over the years, succeeded in addressing the issues of modernity within the scope of Jewish law and traditions. As a result, a liberal and accepting culture has been the underlying premise of the *Sephardim* as they relate to religion and modernity, accepting both tradition and modernity as the underpinning of their everyday lives. This, as it happens, is also the premise of the Conservative movement.

Over the last 15 years, many Israeli *Sephardic* synagogues have come under the influence (and funding) of Shas, the ultra-Orthodox *Sephardic* party in Israel. This has brought a subtle though significant transformation to these congregations. Where once it was acceptable to be an active member of the congregation, regardless of the fact that following Shabbat services one took one's family to the beach in the family car, suddenly these nonobservant members may no longer receive honors or perform duties in the synagogue. For many, this has proved to be the last straw in a slow process of alienation, and they are abandoning the synagogues. Since the *Masortiyim* often do not send their children to the religious (i.e., Orthodox) schools, they are left with little or no source of transmitting their traditions. In the past, such traditions were passed on in the family. Today, grandparents are no longer easily available, since many families have moved away because of employment opportunities. Most *Masortiyim* have no wish to abandon their traditions, and they will

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take advantage of opportunities to pass them on, as long as they are assured of the authenticity of the traditions. It is the intention of the Masorti movement in Israel to provide *Masortiyim* with this important opportunity.

The particular needs and character of the *Masortiyim* in Israel should mesh well with the principles and practice of the Masorti movement in Israel. Certain allowances and adaptations will be required, and the Masorti movement is willing to address the challenge inherent in providing for the needs of a new group. A deep commitment to Jewish traditions and to *halakhah* (Jewish law), along with a liberal outlook that embraces the requisites of modernity and contemporary Israeli life, should herald a new vitality for both the Masorti movement and the *Masortiyim* in Israel.

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# What Is a Jew? The Meaning of Genetic Disease for Jewish Identity

REBECCA ALPERT

My Jewish friends used to tell me that it was surely some Cossack who gave me my blue eyes and small nose, so comfortable were they with the idea that Jews carry a genetic imprint that makes Jewish eyes brown and Jewish noses large. Or perhaps what caused them to joke was that they were uncomfortable with the possibility that we wear our Jewishness on and in our bodies and our genetic coding. We Jews have always experienced a certain tension and lack of clarity around how we define ourselves as a group. We understand ourselves to be a people, a religion, a nation, an ethnicity and/or some combination thereof.<sup>1</sup> This complex group definition has caused some confusion about how much who we are is about biology and how much it is about culture. And the relationship between our biological and cultural group identity raises some very interesting questions about how we see ourselves in relation to new scientific discoveries in the field of genetics. As science becomes more comfortable with the idea that “nature” and “nurture” interact to make us who we are, so we Jews are beginning to accommodate ourselves to understanding the ways in which our genetic and social identities interact to define who we are. Jewish geneticist Harry Ostrer described this tension well:

Jewishness is not determined by genetics. Nonetheless, genetic threads run through Jewish populations that [provide] them with a group identity. This genetic identity has been retained and modified, much as the religious and cultural identity of Jews has been retained and modified over more than two millennia (Ostrer, 897).

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*Rebecca Alpert is Chair of the Religion Department and Associate Professor of Religion and Women's Studies at Temple University.*

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## Defining Who Is a Jew

The standard halakhic definition allows for and seems to differentiate between a biological transmission of Jewishness (you are Jewish if you are born of a Jewish mother) and a religious transmission (you are Jewish if you convert to Judaism through a process, including both accepting Jewish beliefs and performing Jewish actions). But the convert also has Jewish lineage bestowed upon him or her in the process, since he or she is expected to take on the identity of a “son or daughter of Abraham and Sarah,” becoming a Jew not only by practice, but also by a fictive biology. Sue Kahn points out that, given new reproductive technologies, the transmission of Jewish identity through a Jewish mother has also been complicated by modern medical technology, since there is no clear halakhic stance on whether it is the egg or the womb that confers Jewish identity. Thus, according to some experts, a Jewish child can be born with non-Jewish genetic material if the womb in which the child is carried is in the body of a Jewish woman. Others argue that the genetic material is what counts, so a child created with an egg from a Jewish woman might be Jewish even if the woman who gestates the child is not Jewish (Kahn, 165).

The dominant majority of Jewish texts and traditions assume it to be impossible to stop being a Jew, welcoming back even those who have converted to other religions if they wish to return, or accepting as Jewish the matrilineal great-grandchild of a Jewish woman whose family has not practiced Judaism in generations. This underscores the notion that Jewish identity is based on a combination of both inheritable characteristics and religious practice. But the Law of Return in Israel is not inclusive of those who practice other religions, and the tradition of placing someone in *herem* (excommunication, still practiced by some Orthodox Jews for what is considered unacceptable behavior or ideas) also denies Jewish identity to people who are considered to be religiously outside the pale.

The complicated nature of Jewish identity is also reflected in more recent efforts to augment the definition of who is to be included as a Jew, both in Reform and Reconstructionist policies and in Israel’s Law of Return. Reform and Reconstructionist Jews now extend lineage to include those who have a Jewish father. But to confirm their status, patrilineal Jews are also required to participate in Jewish rituals, such as *b’nei mitzvah* or Confirmation ceremonies. And when the State of Israel created a Law of Return, giving automatic citizenship to Jews and their relatives and spouses, the original version did not define the term “Jew” at all and excluded those who had converted out. Difficult cases related to the Law

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of Return and claims on Jewish identity brought before the Israeli courts resulted in legislation that confirmed the halakhic concept of who is a Jew. But some of the magistrates and many of the commentators questioned whether Jewish identity in the state ought to reflect nationality and commitment rather than religion or lineage. The question of who is included in the Jewish people and nation is very much alive today.

### The Question of Election<sup>2</sup>

The element of Jewish textual tradition that most poignantly reflects the confusion about identity is the interpretation of the doctrine of election, or what it has meant for Jews to be identified as “the Chosen People.” Election is one of the central categories that define Jewish identity. It is the predominant way of explaining why God cares about this people, calls Israel into being and gives this group the inheritance of a land (Israel), a blueprint for living in that land (Torah) and a promise of future redemption. Yet traditional texts and commentaries differ significantly on the nature of that election. Did God choose this people because they were the descendants of Abraham? Did God continue to connect to them because of “the merit of the ancestors” or because the people assented to the covenant offered at Sinai? The answer given by Jewish traditional sources varies and reflects differing understandings of the nature of Jewish identity as primarily biological or cultural.

This debate runs throughout Jewish history. The Babylonian Talmud seems to favor the idea that election was based on acceptance of the covenant and observance of the law (BT, Avodah Zarah 2a–3b), and the rabbis certainly favored passing the tradition down through their students over their biological sons (Boyarin 197–225). Although status was transmitted based on knowledge of Torah and reputation among Torah scholars, rabbinic Judaism still maintained the value of biological lineage, passing the status of *Cohanut*, the priesthood, from father to son and honoring that lineage in liturgy and synagogue worship practices.

An examination of the traditional liturgy would suggest that Jewish difference from other peoples is based primarily on being chosen because we are the descendants of Abraham. Yehudah Halevi, in his medieval philosophical writings, supports this liturgical perspective, and it is also reflected in Lurianic Kabbalah and in the writings of philosophers like Chaim Luzzato. Moses Maimonides takes the opposite stance, suggesting that God called Abraham not because of any inherent

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quality in him, but because of his wisdom; Abraham was chosen not because of who he was, but because of what he believed.

The argument over why the Jews were chosen has been carried on throughout modern times, as well. Spinoza rejected the concept of election based on lineage. He argued that chosenness could only be reconceptualized when and if the Jews were reconstituted in a radically different kind of social organization, and therefore, the concept was totally inapplicable while the Jews were not self-governing. Secular Zionists and reformers were also opposed to election based on Jewish lineage, supporting notions of chosenness based on culture and religion, respectively. Secular Zionists like Ahad Ha'am suggested that election should be construed as national morality. The reformers based their concept of election on the prophetic notion that the Jews have a mission to be "a light unto the nations," bringing the values of ethical monotheism to others. The secular Zionists and reformers both argued that election was a moral concept, but differed about whether that morality was to be focused on building a nation or on spreading Jewish values among the host nations where Jews lived. But religious Zionists, like Rav Kook, and some other traditional thinkers, like Michael Wyschogrod, have continued to maintain a concept of election based on lineage.

Other Jewish thinkers, like Mordecai Kaplan, reject any notion of chosenness and remove any mention of election from the liturgy, including the differentiation among the categories of Cohen, Levi and Israel that support those who claim lineage from the ancient priests. Kaplan's concern about the latter was related not only to dispelling notions of hierarchy in the Jewish community, but also to repudiating any sense of hereditary Jewish privilege. Jewish geneticist Robert Pollack has echoed this argument in contemporary times, rejecting any hereditary notion of Jewish identity, primarily to avoid the inaccurate notion that there is a "Jewish gene."

Many contemporary religious Jews also reject the notion of a Jewish identity based on lineage, since they are uncomfortable with secular Jews claiming Jewish roots based either on nationality — as is the case in the State of Israel — or on ethnicity — as is the case in the United States and other countries. They rather believe that Judaism is a religion that is predicated on being in a covenantal relationship with God. This perspective also includes a rejection of "Jewish culture," which they see as vacuous. Feeling Jewish because you eat falafel or love Woody Allen is woefully misunderstood by religious Jews. They don't comprehend the importance of Jewish culture for Jews who have no interest in the religious dimensions of Jewish life.

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The problem of election raises complex ethical questions about the hierarchy that is built into issues related to defining who is a member of the Jewish community.

The question of Jewish election parallels the issues raised above about defining who is a Jew. In both cases, much of the argument boils down to whether the author emphasizes lineage or religion when thinking about these issues. Rather than decide which is more important, it makes sense to assume that some combination of biology and culture is critical to our understanding of inclusion in the Jewish community. The vast majority of Jews are Jewish because they were born of Jewish mothers. However, with an increase in conversion, the acceptance of patrilineal descent and the ongoing questioning of inclusive Jewish identity in the State of Israel, we are facing a much more complicated situation than ever before in defining who is a Jew. This leads us to think more about the relationship between the biological and cultural dimensions of identity. It is therefore important to find resources to support the idea that Jewish identity is a combination of the genetic and the religious or cultural, and not simply based on one dimension or the other. This perspective may be illustrated in two ways. First, it may be clarified through a reading of the biblical story of how God's covenant with Abraham relates to the Sinaitic covenant. Second, it is supported by current findings related to Jewish genetic disease.

### The Burning Bush

The traditional Jewish model of defining identity is based primarily on the covenant with Abraham. Although there is much debate over whether Abraham was selected by God arbitrarily or because of his qualities of intellect and morality, Jews understand Abraham to be our common ancestor. We may be descended from Abraham by birth, or we may choose to identify as Abraham's descendents through conversion, but our lineage begins with him. When God reveals himself<sup>3</sup> to Abraham, his promise is about the continuity of his descendents.

When God reveals himself to Moses in the desert at the Burning Bush (Exodus 3), he begins by announcing a connection through lineage. God identifies himself to Moses as the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But God also identifies Himself as "I am what I am/I will be what I will be." This identity, known to mystical tradition as "the 12-letter name" (an elaboration on *YHVH*, the four-letter name) implies that God is more than the God of Moses' ancestors. It is, as Martin Buber suggests, the revelation of a God of relationship, a God who will define a covenant not only based on ancestry, but also predicated on a set of beliefs

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and behaviors. The God of Abraham is a God of belonging. The God of Moses is a God of behaving and believing. But, of course, this God is one. And so the oneness of this God leads to the one God of two dimensions who revealed himself to Moses: the God of Abraham (the god of ancestors) and the God who is “what I am/what I will be.” This twofold nature of God parallels the twofold nature of Jewish identity. Just as God’s identity is described in terms of lineage (God of your fathers) and religion/culture (I will be what I will be), so the identity of the people of Israel is marked in this twofold way. In this way, we Jews can indeed understand ourselves as made in the image of God.

In the episode of the Golden Calf, we are given a further sense of what the biblical author had in mind in terms of portraying the twofold nature of God as it is expressed through Jewish identity. When the people make the calf, thus abandoning their identification with Moses, God makes Moses an offer. He will start this election process over again, making a new covenant with Moses and his progeny to replace the one made with Abraham. Moses talks God out of this idea, but the possibility itself is instructive. God’s suggestion that the children of Moses could take on this covenant as well (or better) than the children of Abraham reveals two key notions. First, it serves as an important reminder that from God’s perspective, the covenant is revocable, not only based on the behavior of the Jewish people, but also based on lineage. Second, and most important for our purposes, it reminds us that the covenant is indeed based on a combination of lineage and assent. God did not, for example, suggest that he might select righteous people for this covenant. He merely suggests a change in the point at which Jewish lineage would begin. There is no question that the biblical author understood a critical link between biological and cultural sources of Jewish identity. They would not exist apart from one another, no matter at which point in time the process is understood to start.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, I would like to argue that Jewish identity through Abraham, through the ancestors, is as important to Jewish self-understanding as is identity based on a connection to the religious and cultural tradition of the Jewish people, and that these two dimensions are inextricable. This understanding of “who is a Jew” provides a way of making the Jewish community inclusive, but not unbounded. It incorporates the halakhic definition, based on the idea that Jewishness is handed down through generations or received through the fictive adoption of Jewish lineage by converts, but it is not limited by it. It also recognizes that birth is not enough; there must also be some connection to Jewishness, as is understood in the Reform

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and Reconstructionist perspective on patrilineal descent, in which living a Jewish life is required in addition to biological heritage. Since this definition requires assent and engagement in the religious or cultural life of the Jewish people, it does exclude a Jew by birth who does not want to be associated with the group, but it would welcome them back in case they do.<sup>5</sup> By this definition, the assent can be either religious or cultural, therefore including both secular Jews in the United States and elsewhere who understand their connection to Judaism as ethnic, as well as secular Israelis who see their Jewishness as based on nationality. It would also make room for Brother Daniel, the priest who was born a Jew, fought to save Jews during the Holocaust and wanted to claim the right of return because he identified culturally as a Jew even though he was a priest. (The Israeli courts denied his claim.) And it would include Jews who see themselves as Buddhists or members of other religious groups, but who also want to remain faithful to their understanding of their ethnic heritage.

This definition does not solve the problem of those who are interested in becoming Jewish because of a connection to Jewish culture, but who have no connection to Jewish religion and so are uncomfortable with conversion rituals. These cases would require some kind of acknowledgement or ceremony different from conversion. There is not much support for this position in the official ranks of the Jewish community. But there are indeed many people, at least in North America, who would welcome such a possibility for becoming connected to the Jewish people—especially when that connection is based on academic study or on a relationship with a particular Jewish person to whom they wish to join their lives. The definition also does not solve the problem of connections with other groups who identify as Jews, like some Black Hebrews or the Messianic Jews, who reject the organized Jewish community's claim of exclusive authority in defining Jewish lineage or in limiting the boundaries of Jewish culture and heritage solely to the antecedents of rabbinic Judaism. However, as recent findings in genetics are now providing new information that enable us to ascertain lineage, we may have to reckon with the questions of Jewish identity that are raised by these other groups in new ways.

### The Chosen People and Ethical Dilemmas

I am not, however, trying to suggest that acknowledging Jewish difference based on lineage as well as assent is always, or even often, a good thing for the Jews, or for any group that claims that their difference has some meaning attached to it. It not only

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fails to remove the ethical problems faced by an exclusive community; it serves to underscore them. Many rabbis and teachers who throughout Jewish history have downplayed the importance of lineage have done so to avoid the problems of Jewish claims of special status based on heredity. What I would argue, however, is that removing the idea that our status is based in part on lineage, no matter how it is explained, has failed to successfully remove the problems encountered by being different. Claims of special status based on observing the law or even on the idea that Jews have a vocation (Mordecai Kaplan's answer to chosenness) or that our claim to chosenness is based on our social organization (as in Spinoza) or the moral mission suggested by reformers or the national mission supported by Zionists do not remove the essential quality of the claim of chosenness. It makes no difference if chosenness means belonging to a tribe or being the bearers of a mission; in any case, the Jews are marked as different. We cannot get away from the fact that viewing the group as different in any way is the very quality that defines a bounded community that includes and excludes. Experiencing Jewish identity simultaneously as both hereditary and by assent does not worsen this dimension of the problem.

It also does nothing to worsen the other problematic dimension of chosenness — the fact that our difference has also led to our being stigmatized and placed in danger. Surely, the biological dimension of our difference has led to heinous racism against us, from the horrendous eugenic programs that halted the immigration of Jews and other “undesirables” to the United States in the early 20th century (Kevles) to the ultimate degradation perpetrated through Nazi racial policies (Gilman). But we should not forget that Jewish exclusiveness and claims to being chosen by God to bring ethics to the world have also been the source of much hatred against us, and counterclaims by Christianity and Islam throughout history have also led to animosity, competition and bloodshed. Claiming that our difference has some meaning, whatever that meaning is, subjects us to the same problems that linking our identity to our lineage does. It is not for us to surrender our difference, no matter what its basis. The goal is to work toward a society that no longer sees difference as a mark of superiority or inferiority, but accepts difference as a normal part of what it means to be human. Then the foundation of our difference as Jews will no longer matter.

The other ethical dilemma we face when we accept our status as a separate group is a corollary to being labeled inferior or superior because of our difference. Seeing ourselves as a tribal community can also lead us to favor our own over

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others and to make ethical decisions based upon what is good for the Jews before we consider what is good for humanity or the planet. This has often been described as “concentric-circle” ethics, or the ethics of care, and many ethicists have argued that it makes sense to take care of those who are close to us before we attend to those who wish us harm or who are merely outside our circle. But it is important to question that ethical position. For example, what differentiates concentric-circle ethics from the argument that might be used by Vice President Dick Cheney when he gives contracts to Halliburton? He is, after all, only taking care of those who are close to him. Any time we are able to take care of our own, we are using our power to help someone else and deciding in favor of one cause or idea or one person or persons over others. We need to question the idea that it is always right to help those who are close to us before we consider helping others. What I want to argue here is that being a bounded community doesn’t mean we must inevitably assume that we should take care of our own before we care for others, and that we need to be alert to the possibility that this is indeed a pitfall that often confronts bounded communities, and an ethic we might wish to reconsider.

Despite the problems it raises, this twofold identity based on biology and culture is the situation in which we, as Jews, have lived in, both in the past and today. Thinking about the possible ethical problems we face when we acknowledge our status as a community linked by lineage as well as religion and culture is critical to the discussion about Jews and new developments in genetics that follows.

### The Case of “Jewish Genes”

The conversation about identity is important for many reasons, but one of the most crucial aspects is helping us to understand what the findings from the Human Genome Project mean to us. As biologist Robert Pollack points out, new discoveries in genetics do not in any way suggest a single “Jewish gene.” But they do open up new insights about the biological dimension of our identity to which we must attend. The findings of the Human Genome Project explain the genetic resemblances of Ashkenazi Jews, and that should not surprise us. But they also provide evidence to suggest that the people who have considered themselves inheritors of the status of *Cohane* (and many who have not thought of themselves in that way) have to a great extent passed on that heritage genetically for several thousand years, while more recent findings about descendants of the Levites suggest genetic connections that began only about 1,000 years ago in Central Asia (Behar, 2003). This genetic

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mapping provides links to groups in Africa, like the Lemba or the Khazars of Central Asia, who also claim Jewish ancestry, and it raises new questions about what we really do mean by lineage. It also raises questions about limiting our notions of Jewish culture and religion to those passed down exclusively by rabbinic Judaism (Egorova and Parfitt).

It is important to note that current thinking about the nature of the connection between biology and culture in general, or the so-called nature/nurture debate, has led to conclusions similar to those drawn by the discussion of the covenant. As we know now, it is the complex interaction between the biological and the cultural that creates the social phenomena of our world as we know it. We no longer need to ask whether nature or nurture is the root cause of depression, sexuality, laughter, aggression or spirituality, or even of many diseases. We have come to know that while there are genetic components to each of these, it is the interaction of the complex biological processes within an individual and within our environment that creates our individual selves and our social world. So, too, we must recognize that as Jews we inherit and pass on a number of genes that, in interaction with each other and our environment, produce many different possibilities for Jewish bodies, including physical characteristics, dimensions of personality and a propensity toward certain diseases. As it says in the Talmud, “all is foreordained and free will is given.” In other words, we live with the understanding that while much of what makes us human (and Jewish) already resides in our genes, the choices we make and the situations in which we find ourselves interact with random chance to create the outcomes that define our lives.

As the above discussion about lineage suggests, we Jews have always been conscious of a biological dimension to our identity. While it was often thought that we passed on our lineage through “blood,” there has also been an awareness of and interest in genetic connections.<sup>6</sup> Medical science has uncovered a list of about 20 single gene mutations that affect the Ashkenazi population, and some that affect the Sephardi Jewish population as well. Jews have responded to each of these diseases with great interest. They have established foundations that create educational campaigns to alert Jews to the potential threat, to finance further research and to encourage hospitals to create sites for genetic testing. Many of these foundations are involved in legislative campaigns to champion laws to provide resources for those with a particular genetic disease. They have also developed networks to provide care and support for people with these diseases. What differentiates some

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of these diseases from the commonly known example of Tay-Sachs disease (TSD) is that they are not fatal at an early age and do not have a clear trajectory. In certain of these diseases, the symptoms may be mild or severe, and the onset may occur after infancy. Caring for and providing social support for people with these diseases is a more complicated social issue, and one that raises an ethical dilemma regarding the concentric circles of care. Should Jews be more concerned with Jewish genetic diseases than with other social problems? Should the burden of care for people with these diseases fall only on the affected families and their extended networks, or do all Jews have a responsibility to be involved in the complex issues related to these diseases?

This issue became important to me 16 years ago, when a close friend of mine gave birth to a daughter who was soon diagnosed with familial dysautonomia (FD).<sup>7</sup> FD is an autosomal recessive disorder similar to TSD. The disease affects the autonomic nervous system, and those born with it cannot regulate breathing, swallowing, body temperature or blood pressure — many of the things we take for granted. Before doctors understood the disease, FD babies often died from choking. Had Sam been born a decade earlier, this disease would most likely have been fatal. But Sam was diagnosed early and at a time when we know more about how to manage the disease. Fed through a tube for many years and carefully monitored, she has grown into a delightful, witty, charming young woman whose *bat mitzvah* in the summer of 2002 was an event that made family and friends weep with joy. Sam continues with schooling, goes to a Jewish summer camp that accommodates kids with FD<sup>8</sup> and works on behalf of the Dysautonomia Foundation. Four years ago, with the support of the foundation, researchers developed a genetic test for carriers of FD. In the past few years, they have dedicated themselves to working for legislation to provide accommodations so that kids with FD can lead their lives with better support from social networks. Because of Sam, I am aware of this disease and I have given *tzedakah* to the foundation over the past several years. It is clear that being close to Sam and her parents has changed my life and my attitude about working for the rights of people with disabilities. I do not have the distance from this issue to discern the extent to which the fact that FD is a “Jewish disease” was part of my decision to be committed to and deeply concerned about the work of the foundation. But this situation did raise my awareness of how close relationships serve as a factor in prioritizing ethical concerns.

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## Conclusions

The persistence of these stereotypes should make us reflect about the larger ethical questions raised here about Jewish identity. Is it worth maintaining our status as distinctive if it means that we will be stigmatized? Of course, the answer to that question is simple; it is unimaginable to me that we would give up being Jewish because it has led to our being stigmatized and mistreated. If the Crusades and the Holocaust did not change our minds, why would a predisposition to certain cancers? But it also gives us an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of difference, and perhaps to make some suggestions for an ethic of justice that respects rather than ignores difference.

When Jews are being stigmatized, we do everything in our power to fight discrimination. It is my hope that this will lead us to a place where we do everything in our power to fight not only for ourselves, but also for others who are similarly stigmatized because they are thought to be different. This idea may prompt us to think about ways in which to respect the rights and humanity of Palestinian Arabs who live in Israel. Or it may remind us that African-Americans in this country have been stigmatized because of their physical and genetic characteristics — a circumstance similar to the ways in which Jews have been stigmatized and oppressed in other times and places. Or it may lead us to work for the rights of people with disabilities to equal access to the legal and social resources that will allow them to live fulfilling lives — lives free of the stigmatization they may have experienced because they, too, are different.

We find truths in often-repeated aphorisms; that is why they are repeated, even if the lesson is not always easily learned. And so I close with Hillel's questions:

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” We must accept ourselves as a people with a genetic heritage, both good and bad, and a cultural and religious tradition, also good and bad, but one that is ours.

“But if I am only for myself, what am I?” The heritage that makes us different must also make us conscious that difference is still not respected in the societies in which we live, and that we have an obligation to work not only on our own behalf, but also on behalf of every group's right to be different. We must consider whether or not it makes sense to give preferential treatment to our own causes, or to work for an end to preferential treatment for any cause.

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“And if not now, when?” Although we come from a tradition that cares deeply about the past and takes building for the future seriously, we must work for change in the present, even though we know that everything will continue to change.

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## Notes

1. I have excluded the term race from this description because of the complex and confusing ways in which the term has been used. When race was thought to be a biological category, Jews were thought to be part of the Semites, a category presumed to encompass the populations of the Middle East. Given the evils that have been perpetrated in the name of racial theory, we should be pleased that this notion of race has been thoroughly discredited — although it is important to note that it remains part of our consciousness because of the misuse of the term “anti-Semitism” to refer to all hatred of Jews, whether biologically, culturally or politically based. Race as a social construction, on the other hand, is a valuable tool in understanding social issues, but its application to the Jewish people is extremely complex, as well. In the United States, Jews have come to be seen as part of the socially constructed “white” race, complicating both their role in the racial politics of America and in understanding who is to be defined as Jewish. The assumption that Jews are white and European has serious ramifications for internal Jewish “racial” politics, since Jews of African and Middle Eastern descent (the original Semites, if you will) are often discounted or oppressed. For a thorough discussion of how 19th-century European anthropological racial categorization was applied to Jews, see Efron, 1994 and Hart, 2000.
2. I base much of the discussion on the question of election on traditional sources culled from Walzer (2003). Additionally, I thank Noam Zohar, co-editor of that volume, for his thoughtful comments on this section.
3. I refer to God with masculine pronouns when discussing texts that use them to portray God as an active character in anthropomorphic terms.
4. Maimonides understood this exchange to suggest the opposite — that beginning with Abraham would rather imply transcending the ethnic confines of the relationship with God (see his letter to Ovadya the Convert).
5. Dena Davis reminds us in her work that while a community can decide whom to include and whom not to include, individuals also have the right to decline participation or identification if they choose to do so.
6. For example, when secular Israeli women decide to have children by alternative insemination, they will most often choose a donor who is a Jew from the same ethnic background, if at all possible. Religious Israelis follow Jewish law and select donors who are not genetically Jewish, for fear of inadvertent adultery or incest that might be the result of mixing the sperm of those who are related, since Jewish law defines lineage through the maternal line (Kahn, 37).
7. For a thorough discussion of familial dysautonomia and its impact on this particular family, see Lindee, 2005 and Ginsburg and Rapp, 1999.
8. Chai Lifeline, a national service group, established Camp Simcha Special to serve Jewish children with life-threatening disorders. See [http://www.chailifeline.org/camp\\_simcha.asp](http://www.chailifeline.org/camp_simcha.asp).

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# The Israeli Constitutional Decision of 1950:<sup>1</sup> Real-time Reconstructionist Reactions

MICHAEL DICKERMAN

Philippa Strum called it “the road not taken.”<sup>1</sup> Dan Horowitz called it “the decision not to decide.”<sup>2</sup> Ilan Peleg sees it as both a cause and a reflection of Israel’s current and potentially debilitating *Kulturkampf*.<sup>3</sup> Whatever else might be said of it, Israel’s decision in 1950 not to establish a formal constitution was surprising — and yet, as we shall see, in many ways inevitable. In any case, it was a critical and far-reaching decision by the then-young state. That almost 60 years later the state still has no formal constitution suggests that the conditions that drove the original decision were not unique to the state’s initial years.

This article will briefly explore the development of Israel’s constitutional position. Next, noting the decidedly Reconstructionist nature of the solution that Israel’s First Knesset adopted regarding its constitution, it will focus on the real-time views and debates within the Reconstructionist movement as seen in the relevant editorials and articles in *The Reconstructionist* journals of 1949 and 1950. In many ways, those editorials and articles mirrored the developments, arguments and solutions then taking place in the Knesset itself.

## Israel’s Constitutional Decision

Israel’s decision not to adopt a formal constitution is surprising for two reasons. First, at the time of its establishment in 1948, Israel was the only nation that had not

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*Michael Dickerman is a Mekhina year student at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. He retired in March 2005 from a 30-year career teaching pension plan rules to HR and benefit professionals at major companies around the U.S.*

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adopted a constitution<sup>4</sup> among those that had achieved independence after World War II. Second, the drafting of a constitution — and much of its substance — was mandated as a “step preparatory to independence” by the United Nations in its key resolution providing for the establishment of the State of Israel,<sup>5</sup> even as Israel — in its very own Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel — committed itself to a “Constitution which shall be adopted by the Elected Constituent Assembly not later than the 1st October 1948.”

Various explanations were given about the factors that drove the decision: For one thing, David Ben-Gurion was reluctant to have his power in the fledgling state restricted or subject to judicial review.<sup>6</sup> For another, there was concern that a constitutional document drawn up at such an early point in the state’s existence — at a time when the great influx of expected immigrants from the Diaspora Jewish community had not yet occurred — would not necessarily reflect the views of those future citizens and, thus, it would be premature to draft a binding document.<sup>7</sup>

Often cited as the most compelling reason for Ben-Gurion’s position was his belief that the constitutional process — the drafting and adoption of a single document of fundamental truths applicable to all — would greatly exacerbate the already-dramatic level of tension between the religious element and the secularists in Israeli society. Specifically, he was concerned that the resulting debate regarding the role and power of religion in the political and social structure of the country would be so divisive as to potentially bring the country to the point of civil war or, at the very least, prevent it from achieving the extraordinary level of unity that would be absolutely vital if it were going to survive the war about to be launched against it by its numerically superior Arab neighbors.<sup>8</sup>

## The Reconstructionist Compromise

For all of Ben-Gurion’s opposition to a formal written constitutional document at the time, it should be noted that neither the Knesset nor Ben-Gurion himself rejected the concept of a constitution per se. Rather, they confirmed the need for a constitution but revised its timing, structure and the methods by which it would be written. On June 13, 1950, the Knesset adopted a resolution presented by Yizhar Harari, a member of the Progressive Party, stating that

the First Knesset assigns to the Constitution, Law and Justice Committee the preparation of a proposed constitution for the state. The constitution

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will be made up of chapters, each of which will constitute a separate basic law. The chapters will be brought to the Knesset, as the Committee completes its work, and all the chapters together will constitute the constitution of the state.

The essence of the Harari Resolution (still binding to this day) was to establish a developing constitutional process through the accumulation of “basic laws,” rather than a static, one-time proclamation with the possibility of occasional amendments thereafter. This process addressed many of Ben-Gurion’s concerns about a formal document, especially by its avoidance of an immediate showdown between the religious and secular factions.

Whatever else the Harari Resolution represented substantively, philosophically it reflected a decidedly Reconstructionist approach. It established an evolving process by which the Israeli constitution would develop over time, with future “generations” (i.e., future Knessets) being responsible for continuing that evolutionary process by contributing new “chapters” in the form of “basic laws,” that would engage the times in which they were conceived and applied. It was this evolutionary process that allowed the Knesset to avoid what otherwise might have been a constitutional deadlock.<sup>9</sup> While there is no reason to believe this was a consciously Reconstructionist decision, it nonetheless represented an approach entirely consistent with Reconstructionism’s means of engagement in the world.

## The Real-time Reconstructionist Reaction to Israel’s Constitutional Decision

The connection between Reconstructionist philosophy and the First Knesset’s solution to one of its most important conflicts raises the question of what Reconstructionism had to say at the time about the Israeli constitution and the decision by the Knesset to proceed down the Harari Resolution path. In an attempt to answer those questions, I examined *The Reconstructionist*, the then-biweekly journal published by the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, for the relevant years. During those years, Mordecai Kaplan was the chairman of the editorial board, thus ensuring that, at least regarding the editorials included in each of the journals in those years, *The Reconstructionist* represented the views of not only the foundation but also the founder of the movement. Perhaps of greatest interest, the editorials reflected the views of Kaplan and the foundation at the time the events were unfolding in Israel. As such, they provide a unique, real-time insight into Reconstructionist leaders’

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thinking on the issues discussed above, mirroring, as we shall see, the developments, arguments and solutions being considered contemporaneously in the Knesset.

As might be expected, the relevant years in terms of editorials and articles regarding Israel's constitutional decision making were 1949 and 1950. In those years, we find two editorials — one in January 1949<sup>10</sup> and one in March 1950<sup>11</sup> — with four related articles sandwiched in between, during the months of February, March and April 1949.<sup>12</sup> To put these in their chronological context:

- The first editorial, dated January 7, 1949, came just 2½ weeks before Israel's first elections as a sovereign state.
- The first of the four articles was published on February 14, 1949, the date the Constituent Assembly (resulting from the January elections) convened (and two days before it changed its name to the Knesset, a not insignificant name change), with the three subsequent articles following immediately thereafter, on March 4, March 18 and April 1, 1949.
- The final editorial was published on March 10, 1950, about six weeks after the Knesset had begun a series of nine debates that culminated in the passage of the Harari Resolution on June 13, 1950.

Thus, these editorials and articles were conceived, drafted, edited and published during the height of the Knesset's decision-making process. And their substance tracks the arc of discussion and debate taking place in the Knesset: The first editorial enthusiastically praises the draft constitution that the Knesset was considering; the four articles represent a vigorous debate regarding the pros and cons of the draft; and the closing editorial concludes that a formal written constitution is inadvisable at the time, lest there occur a potentially irreparable rift in Israeli society.

Y. Leo Kohn wrote the draft constitution that was the focus of these editorials and articles.<sup>13</sup> Although his was not the only draft being considered by the Knesset, it was the one that formed the basis for much of the Knesset's debate<sup>14</sup> and, appropriately, was the subject of the editorials and articles in *The Reconstructionist*.

Just as the new government initially seemed to embrace the idea of a written constitution, so, too, the first editorial in *The Reconstructionist* strongly — some might say, effusively<sup>15</sup> — supported not only the idea but also the Kohn draft itself. Referring to the draft as “a remarkable historical document,” “an extraordinary document” and “one of the most advanced social texts of our time,” *The Reconstruction-*

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*ist's* editorial of January 7, 1949, extolled the Kohn draft. It offered no reservations save a concern for the seeming inconsistency in the draft between proclaiming, on the one hand, the absolute equality of the sexes while vesting the religious courts, on the other, with responsibility for adjudicating matters of personal status. But the editorial board minimized even this concern as a “reservation one may entertain in regard to one or another particular.” I would argue, however, that this “reservation” identified the most critical constitutional divide that ultimately would confront the Knesset — namely, the tension between Israel as a liberal, democratic government that declares the absolute equality of the sexes, and Israel as a Jewish state that subjects personal matters, including marriage and divorce, to the androcentrism of halakhic law. Failing to appreciate the seriousness of the problem it had uncovered, the editorial board went on to praise the draft as “a document worthy not only of the valiant idealism of the citizens of Israel but of the prophetic tradition of social justice of the people of Israel.”

Given the board's initial enthusiasm, one is struck by the difference in tone and substance between that editorial and the second one some 14 months later. Entitled “Must Israel Have a Written Constitution?” — as compared to the first editorial's title, “Torah From Zion” — *The Reconstructionist* noted Ben-Gurion's newly stated position “in opposition to the adoption by Israel of a written constitution” and agreed with him that “there is no such need (for a constitution) in Israel today.” Why the dramatic change? The editorial tells us that

[a]ny attempt to lay down a complete frame of government at the present time would lead to a bitter *Kulturkampf* between the Orthodox and non-conformist elements of the population, who have radically different conceptions of the character of a truly Jewish state . . . . No constitution that could be drafted could command the enthusiastic support of these two radically different cultural elements . . . . To adopt a complete frame of government now would be . . . to invite explosions of violent passions . . . .

Having all too casually dismissed the symptom in their first editorial — namely, the inconsistency inherent in declaring the sexes equal while authorizing the rabbinic courts to adjudicate matters of personal status — the editorial board seems now to have realized the full and potentially fatal implications of its inconsistency. Thus, the editorials — like Ben-Gurion and the Knesset themselves — went full circle, from conviction that a constitution would and should be adopted at the present time, to

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concern that efforts to arrive at an acceptable document would prove impossible and destructive.

During the 14 months that separated these two editorials, *The Reconstructionist* published a series of four articles that robustly debated key provisions of Kohn's draft. That debate scrutinized a number of the issues that might well have been "deal breakers" if the Knesset had continued to demand the adoption of a formal document. Written by Dr. Milton R. Konvitz<sup>16</sup> and Rabbi Howard Singer,<sup>17</sup> the point/counterpoint exchange was so substantive and insightful that it was cited a number of times in the extensive analysis given the constitutional issue by Emanuel Rackman.<sup>18</sup> Whether the exchange influenced the editorial board in their shift of position from January 1949 to March 1950 cannot be determined with any certainty, although one might cautiously infer that the importance of the issues Konvitz and Singer debated, and the seemingly unbridgeable nature of some of their positions, could not help but have impressed the board members as they convened in March 1950 to write their editorial.

The debate consisted of a two-part analysis of the Kohn draft by Konvitz, a response/rebuttal to Konvitz's analysis by Singer, and a response to Singer by Konvitz. Some of the issues discussed in this colloquy, such as a worker's right to strike, do not appear to be the kind on which the viability of a new state may turn, while others were confined to the interpretation of particular words or phrases in Kohn's draft. Some points, however, were so central to an articulation of the state's purpose and character that, absent at least some basic agreement on these issues, it would seem unlikely that a nation could realistically be expected to reach consensus regarding a constitutional document.

Perhaps the most far-reaching disagreement between the two men — and the one whose implications were most emblematic of the difficulties the Knesset encountered as it considered a constitutional document — concerned the proclamation within the draft that the State of Israel is "designed to be the National Home of the Jewish People, and shall admit every Jew who desires to settle within its territory ...." Despite the fact that this simply confirmed the credo set forth in the state's declaration,<sup>19</sup> Konvitz questioned the wisdom of this provision and urged its elimination from the draft. He was very concerned that once Israel had resettled displaced persons (who should have priority claim),

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the question may be raised seriously whether ... an immigration policy which will suggest racial exclusion laws, or immigration laws which embody racial and religious discriminations, could possibly be justified.

Referring to the State of Israel as “a political entity within the family of nations,” Konvitz said that

it may be difficult to explain ... that a policy of Israel for Jews is justifiable by the tests of a broad democratic philosophy, while a policy of America for Protestants is not justifiable.

Further, Konvitz considered “the provision a danger to Jews living outside of Israel .... It invites charges of divided loyalties.”

Singer responded aggressively to Konvitz’s position. After noting that “the provision does not keep other groups out; it merely guarantees that Jews may come in,” he went on to say that

Dr. Konvitz casually ignores the fact that this provision is the very heart of the reason for having a Jewish state ... It is less than five years since Dachau gave forth its victims .... How ephemeral is Dr. Konvitz’s memory!

As if that were not enough, he argued that the absence of such a provision would have a devastating effect on Jews, and closed with the accusation that Konvitz’s position reflects his misunderstanding of the entire nature of the Zionist enterprise. Thus, this sharp exchange between Konvitz and Singer reveals a profound disagreement regarding the very purpose of the state. A more fundamental issue for an emerging state can hardly be imagined; a more difficult issue to resolve in a constitutional draft can hardly be conceived.

Closely associated with this issue of democracy-and/or-Jewish homeland — and in many ways the concrete manifestation of that conceptual issue — was the question of the separation of church and state and, more specifically, the role of religious courts in the new state. If Israel was to be, first and foremost, a Western democracy, then surely all of its laws — including those of personal status — would necessarily have to be determined by a government of elected representatives, not a clerical authority. If its primary defining characteristic was that of a Jewish homeland, then an argument could be made that religious courts would have a legitimate claim to lawmaking, especially on matters of personal status.

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Despite their radically different positions as to whether Israel should first be a Western-style democracy or a Jewish homeland, Konvitz and Singer took similar positions with regard to the basic issue of whether religious courts should be the only venue for adjudication of issues of personal status. They both agreed that religious courts should have authority for such issues — but only for those citizens who chose to accept the authority of such courts, while others should be allowed to pursue those issues in secular courts, if they wished. Reflecting on Kohn’s draft, Konvitz said that this “issue is of greatest consequence to the future development of Jewish culture ...,” while Singer said that “of all the provisions in the draft constitution, those concerning the religious courts will most need clarification.”

The significance of Konvitz’s and Singer’s agreement on this issue cannot be overstated. The fact that these two men — who opposed one another on virtually all other constitutional matters — nonetheless agreed that religious courts must not be the exclusive legal recourse for issues of personal status in the new state, made the likelihood of successful negotiations between like-minded individuals and the religious parties — who believed with absolute certainty that such must be the case — slim indeed. And given the fact that Ben-Gurion had already conceded authority on such matters to the religious parties as early as 1947,<sup>20</sup> the chances for success, such as they were, were surely reduced to nil.

Thus, in this exchange between Konvitz and Singer, we see questions so fundamental in their nature as to threaten any constitutional negotiations, if not the very existence of the state itself. These questions were noted in passing in the first editorial in *The Reconstructionist*, but, in the blush of enthusiasm with which the editorial board greeted Kohn’s draft, were not at that time accorded their full significance. They included the following:

- Is the State of Israel to be a Western democracy or the Jewish national homeland?
- Whatever the state’s ultimate role, are the legislative and judicial processes regarding matters of personal status to be vested in a religious authority and, if so, what does that say about the status of democratic principles in such a society?
- Can such matters be resolved as part of the process of drafting and adopting a constitutional document, with all of its attendant qualities of universality, longevity and judicial authority?

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By tracking and understanding the shifting positions of *The Reconstructionist* editorials in light of the debate between Konvitz and Singer, we can track and understand the decisions made by Ben-Gurion and the First Knesset. We can see the initial embrace of a constitutional enterprise, the enormity of the divisions and dangers inherent in such an undertaking, and the need to find an alternative solution. We might also view the innately Reconstructionist approach of the Harari Resolution as being the only truly viable approach available to a country that was in profound danger of imploding in infancy.

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## Notes

1. Philippa Strum. "The Road Not Taken: Constitutional Non-Decision Making in 1948–1950 and Its Impact on Civil Liberties in the Israeli Political Culture. *Israel: The First Decade of Independence*. Ed. S. Ilan Troen and Noah Lucas (New York, 1955): 83–104.
2. Strum, 83.
3. Ilan Peleg, "Israel's Constitutional Order and *Kulturkampf*: The Role of Ben-Gurion," *Israel Studies* 3.1.
4. Strum, 83.
5. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181. 29 November 1947.
6. Peleg, 236. Strum, 92, states that Claude Klein felt that Ben-Gurion saw a direct line between a constitutional system and a strong judiciary, "and Ben-Gurion was afraid of the creation of an independent legal center capable of striking down the acts taken by him and the central committee of Mapai."
7. Strum, 89; Emanuel Rackman, *Israel's Emerging Constitution, 1948–1951* (Columbia University Press, 1955): 113.
8. See Peleg, 237: "He [Ben-Gurion] seemed to have thought that the nation-building project at this time would be jeopardized by a confrontation with the religious parties." See also Strum, 84: "When the specific issues that would have to be resolved in the writing of a constitution were raised in the First Knesset ... it quickly became apparent that forcing them to a conclusion was potentially explosive and divisive. The treatment of religion in the proposed constitution was the main dilemma." See also Peter Y. Medding, *The Founding of Israeli Democracy, 1948–1967* (1990 Oxford University Press, New York): 40: "Mapai MKs argued that to engage in a *Kulturkampf* about matters of conscience would weaken national resolve and threaten national unity at a time when the country already faced major problems of security"....
9. Strum, 96, says "Dan Horowitz may have been correct in arguing that the decision to substitute occasional basic laws that eventually could be codified into a constitution enabled avoidance of matters that could have crippled the young state."
10. *The Reconstructionist*, 7 January 1949 XIV. 18: 3–4.
11. *The Reconstructionist*, 10 March 1950 XVI. 2: 3–5.
12. *The Reconstructionist*, 14 February 1949 XIV. 20: 10–16; *The Reconstructionist*, 4 March 1949 XV. 2: 9–13; *The Reconstructionist*, 18 March 1949 XV. 3: 12–19; *The Reconstructionist*, 1 April 1949 XV. 4: 17–21. There was one other article about the Israeli constitution in *The Reconstructionist* during these years, a relatively short "Dear Friend" letter by Immanuel Lewy on 4 February 1949, but it adds little to the editorials and articles already noted.
13. Kohn was described in an article that he wrote in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, in July 1959, as the Weizmann Professor of International Relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the head of the Israeli delegation to the United Nations mediator on Palestine in June 1948 and the author of "various articles on constitutional and political subjects."
14. Rackman, 38.

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15. My characterization of the editorial board's praise as "effusive" is reflective of the statements of Dr. Milton Konvitz (introduced later in the text of this paper): "The editorial accords the draft constitution excessive and over-reaching praise ... Reconstructionists do not believe that Jews are the Chosen People. Nor ought we to claim that the Israeli draft constitution is the Chosen Constitution." *The Reconstructionist* 14 February 14 1949 XIV. 20: 10.

16. Konvitz was described in the 4 February 1949, issue of *The Reconstructionist* as "professor of Cornell University, editor of 'Industrial and Labor Relations Review,' author of several books dealing with constitutional rights and contributing editor to *The Reconstructionist*."

17. Singer was described in the 18 March 1949, issue of *The Reconstructionist* as "assistant leader of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, New York City."

18. Rackman et al, 89.

19. "[W]e ... declare the establishment of a Jewish state ... [that] will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles ..."

20. Strum, 84–85. Reference is made here to a series of letters from Ben-Gurion to the religious party Agudat Israel, asking for its help in presenting a unified front to the British commission that was deciding whether to recommend a Jewish state. In exchange for that support, Ben-Gurion ceded control to the religious parties on matters of personal status, and, among other things, agreed to the requirement that the laws of *kashrut* would be followed in all government kitchens and, further, that the religious school system would have full autonomy.

# *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*

by Menahem Kellner (Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), 364 pp.

REVIEWED BY JOEL HECKER

The early 21st century has witnessed a spate of books, such as Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* and Daniel C. Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, each of which strives to "naturalize" religion. By demonstrating the anthropological, physiological or evolutionary causes of religion, these authors seek to free us from religion's burdens, delusions, oppression and violence. In their (sometimes vehement) polemicizing against religion, they echo some of the Enlightenment's harshest critics of religion: those who thought that humanity could easily dispense with the superstitions, magical beliefs and chauvinisms of religion. In a certain sense, these works are reminiscent of the battles undertaken by Maimonides — a theist and religious devotee, to be sure — in his assertions about the centrality of rationality in Judaism and his vociferous derision of practices and beliefs he deemed intellectually corrupt. Menachem Kellner's most recent book,

*Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*, guides us through Maimonides' aggressive engineering of a rationalistic Judaism.

*Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* is one of those rare combinations of erudite scholarship and accessible style, treating an issue that is not only perennially meaningful, but also particularly salient today — features that characterize a number of his works. The present book depicts Maimonides holding down one side of the deep divide — a divide he forges in Judaism almost single-handedly — between rationalism and mysticism, universalism and parochialism, elitism and populism. Kellner repeatedly illuminates Maimonides' rigorous efforts to banish the supernatural God from this world by extirpating from this domain any essential attributes of God or religious properties that might be derivative of divinity. To use Kellner's technical terminology, Maimonides seeks to "de-hyostasize" holiness, the Hebrew language, the land of Israel, the people of Israel, the divine presence,

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*Joel Hecker is Chair of the Department of Modern Jewish Civilization and Associate Professor of Jewish Mysticism at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.*

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angels and sin (2). In other words, he seeks to deprive them of many of the supernatural properties that medieval and ancient thought ascribed to them. Kellner demonstrates that these efforts occur not only in Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, the latter's philosophical magnum opus, but throughout his legal corpus as well. The following review will briefly summarize Kellner's efforts and conclude with some reflections on the relevance of this book for contemporary theology.

Throughout the book, Kellner devises a series of easy-to-follow dualities to structure his argument. For example, with regard to language, he follows the historian Brian Vickers, who contends that one of the ways of distinguishing between the occult and the scientific is in terms of the "relationship between language and reality. In the scientific tradition . . . a clear distinction is made between words and things and between literal and metaphorical language. The occult tradition does not recognize this distinction: Words are treated as if they are equivalent to things and can be substituted for them. Manipulate the one, and you manipulate the other" (as cited in Kellner, 21). In Kellner's work, the "mystic" — the figure that seeks God's immanence in components of the Jewish world as well as in the natural world — holds one pole. Historically, he ascribes this position, with some justice, to Yehudah Halevi (1075–1141), the great poet and thinker whose thought mediates philosophical and mystical modes of thought, and to Nahmanides (1194–ca. 1270), the religious leader, halakhist and kabbalist who negotiated these different

intellectual streams, as well. Maimonides, "the Great Eagle," holds the other pole. In the second chapter, "The Institutional Character of *Halakhah*," Kellner articulates one of these polarities: "Maimonides, in stark if unstated opposition to the world of 'proto-kabbalah,' as found in [ancient Jewish mysticism] and in equally stark if rather clear opposition to the worlds of Halevi before him and of Nahmanides after him . . . viewed halakhic distinctions and entities as devices ordained by God for organizing our lives, not as elements of God's universe with some sort of independent existence" (26). In undermining the notion of a supernatural significance to *halakhah*, Kellner offers a series of halakhic questions that will frame his analysis: "Does *halakhah* reflect an antecedently existing ontological reality, or does it constitute a social, institutional reality? If the former, *halakhah* could not be other than it is; if the latter, *halakhah* could have been different. If the former, the this-worldly consequences of sin can be seen as objective and actual; if the latter, the this-worldly consequences of sin can only be in the social realm." To further elucidate these contrasts, Kellner usefully compares the polarity between Maimonides and Halevi/Nahmanides to the opposition between Emile Durkheim, the sociologist, and Rudolf Otto, the philosopher of religion: "For Durkheim religion expresses and satisfies social needs, while for Otto it reflects metaphysical realities" (39–40). Applying this to the Maimonidean program, he says that "for Maimonides, the commandments of the Torah are historically conditioned[;] they do not reflect an

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antecedent metaphysical reality but, rather, constitute a new institutional, social reality” (35). As a result, *halakhah* is instrumental, serving the purposes of refining people’s ethical, emotional, political and intellectual capacities to help form an ideal community and, ultimately, to cultivate an approach to life that is understanding of the natural world and its ideal relationship to a transcendent God. And, while Maimonides would assert that the Torah has a divine source, it is constructed and constituted on behalf of, and in the lived historical context of, a historical community. Consequently, traditional laws are restrictive only because they are part of the law, not because they bear good or evil inherently. It follows then that, for Maimonides, sinning *per se* does not affect one’s soul. By way of contrast, for Nahmanides, “sinning diminishes the soul of the sinner, even when done inadvertently” (51).

In the third chapter, Kellner develops a schematic sketch of several approaches to holiness. Two are associated with the mystical strand: a) holiness is hard-wired into parts of the universe (86); and b) the universe is homogeneous at the outset, but then God can decide to make some things holy (87). According to both of these positions, sanctity is real and inheres in the objects; this is called the ontological or essentialist view. Maimonides holds a third position: “Holiness is the *name* given to a certain class of people, objects, times and places which the Torah marks off. According to this view, holiness is a status, not a quality of existence. It is a challenge, not a given; normative, not descriptive. It is institutional (in the sense of being part

of a system of laws and hence contingent). This sort of holiness does not reflect objective reality; it helps constitute social reality” (88). This approach has dramatic ramifications for the ways in which Maimonides thinks about the people of Israel, the land of Israel and religious objects.

For Halevi, holiness is built into the universe from creation, whereas for Maimonides it is historically contingent (107). In considering the Maimonidean perspective on religious articles, Kellner considers the following teaching about tefillin: This position then entails that their “holiness consists in their impact upon the wearer” (MT, “Laws of Tefillin,” 4:13; K, 120). Similarly, with regard to a Torah scroll, Maimonides writes in a legal responsum that one can make a blessing over an invalid Torah scroll because, “It is the study of the Torah which is the commandment over which we make the blessing” (*Responsa*, ed. Blau, no.294; cited K 118). As a result, from Maimonides’ perspective, holiness is “a challenge, not a given; normative, not descriptive. It is institutional (in the sense of being part of a system of laws and determined by those laws) and hence contingent. This sort of holiness does not reflect objective reality, it helps constitute social reality” (28).

As with holiness, Maimonides presents ritual purity and impurity as moral categories, not ontological ones (138) and gives unusual, repeated emphasis to the idea that there is nothing wrong with being ritually impure in and of itself (138, n.33). He lays out his position quite clearly in his legal writings about the mikvah: “Just as one who sets his heart

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on becoming ritually pure becomes so as soon as he has immersed himself, although nothing new has befallen his body, so, too, one who sets his heart on purifying himself from the impurity that besets men's souls — namely, evil thought and wicked moral qualities — becomes pure as soon as he consents in his heart to shun those counsels and brings his soul into the waters of pure reason" (MT, "Laws Concerning Immersion Pools," 11:12; K, 150).

Chapter Seven of the book deals with the question of Jews and non-Jews, and it is here that Kellner makes one of his most original and startling assertions about Maimonides. Before presenting Maimonides's position, however, he brings his ready foil, Halevi, to bear on the issue. Halevi was one of the first Jewish thinkers to emphasize that the distinction between Jews and non-Jews resides in a property shared by Jews and lacking in non-Jews called the *amr al-ilahi* (in Hebrew: *inyan ha-elohi*), "the divine order" (217). Halevi is not referring to a biological difference, or saying that Jews have special souls or that Jews are a different species (n.2), nor does he hold that non-Jews are less created in the image of God than Jews. According to his doctrine, Jews have a special property that gives them the potential to become prophets, a property that is somehow transmitted through lineage.

Not surprisingly, Maimonides rejects Halevi's position; indeed, Kellner declares that Maimonides was "perhaps, the most consistent universalist in medieval Judaism" (220). For Maimonides, human beings are human beings and, while they may not all have the same

inborn potential, there is no criterion based on race, ethnicity or sex that can be applied to determine one's rank among humanity. According to Maimonides's doctrine of the acquired intellect, it is only through developing one's rational faculty that one can truly be human. Kellner notes, however, that from a contemporary perspective, this universalism is bought at a high price: profound intellectual elitism" (220). For Maimonides, that which makes us human is what we know; as a result, in Kellner's words, "the human subject counts for nothing, the objects of knowledge, for everything" (220–221). Intellectual attainment becomes the sole criterion that can distinguish the quality of human beings — effectively excluding ethnicity, confessional status and gender. Thus, it is in regard to the status of the Jewish people that Kellner makes his most radical claim, arguing that Maimonides distinguishes among Jews who are descendants of the patriarchs and Israel, constituted by a narrower circle, which can also include non-Jews who aim to satisfy the demands of God as laid out in the Torah (104).

Kellner's afterword, "Contemporary Resistance to the Maimonidean Reform," addresses the medieval philosophical issues that underlie contemporary battles in modern orthodoxy, specifically those regarding the nature and scope of rabbinic authority. In his second chapter, he delineates two opposing philosophies of *halakhah*: one, based on Halevi and emphasizing the importance of prophecy in determining *halakhah*, tends toward expansion of rabbinic authority into political spheres. The position of Mai-

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monides, in contrast, considers prophecy irrelevant to the procedures of jurisprudence and limits the authority of rabbis to technical matters of *halakhah* (290). The deeper question, Kellner points out, is the nature of God's relationship to the created cosmos, with the God of Halevi being more present in the world than the God of Maimonides (291).

While Kellner is interested in the ramifications of this debate for the role of the rabbis in Israel's contemporary political environment, to my mind, the questions of God's closeness and the dilemma of mysticism are much broader than the question of rabbinic authority. The ramifications of the choices of a populated heavens *vs.* a deracinated one, of angelic mediators *vs.* radical divine transcendence, of palpable holiness *vs.* normative religion, are vast for all streams of Jewish thought and practice. I will suggest three areas in which the polarities that Kellner has outlined continue to play definitive roles in Jewish theology: The essentializing of the land of Israel by the religious Zionist community is fueled, to a certain extent, by a mystical understanding of its organic connection to the Jewish people and to divinity. This line of thinking runs from Halevi through the *Zohar*, reaching its modern apex with Rav Abraham Isaac Kook and his son Zvi Yehudah Kook.

"Liberal" thinkers from Maimonides to Mordecai Kaplan recognized that interpreting Israel's chosenness in an essentialist manner can lead to chauvinism, prompting them to reinterpret the concept (admittedly in broad-ranging ways). Angelification and even apotheosis have long been features of Jewish mystical and esoteric thinking, though they have often been couched in conservative formulations. Contemporary spiritual or neo-Hasidic approaches that tend toward pantheism or that emphasize the divinity that resides in the individual pick up this strand in their attempts to make divinity palpable, embodied and even incarnate. When other voices in the Jewish community charge these approaches with grandiosity and narcissism, they march in the proud footsteps of Maimonides.

As noted by Moshe Idel in his foreword to the book, many books have been written about Maimonides. What Menachem Kellner's book does uniquely is to isolate the ways in which Maimonides bumps up against the mystical and mythical strains that run through ancient and medieval Jewish thought like a river. While any educated Jew knows that Maimonides stands out as a leading rationalist, Kellner presents us with a compelling portrait of the multifaceted ways in which Maimonides

# *New God or No God?*

*Waiting for God: The Spiritual Explorations of a Reluctant Atheist*  
by Lawrence Bush (Ben Yehuda Press, 2007), 208 pp.

*A Plausible God: Secular Reflections on Liberal Jewish Theology*  
by Mitchell Silver (Fordham University Press, 2006), 200 pp.

REVIEWED BY RICHARD HIRSH

The polarization of religious discourse in North America often leaves Jews who identify as Reconstructionists in a lonely, isolated and increasingly constricted space between increasingly strident extremes. On one side are the religious fundamentalists, for whom Scripture, its inerrancy, its literal truth and the God who stands behind it are non-negotiable. On the other are the often equally fundamentalist and shrill atheists, for whom Scripture and the God who allegedly stands behind it are fictitious, subversive and little more than drivel.

What is a Reconstructionist to do? We reject both of these poles. For us, Scripture is sacred as a part of the legacy of the Jewish people, but it is humanly created literature, not inerrant revelation. We can embrace the Bible as what Mordecai Kaplan once called the earliest diary of the Jewish people, while not feeling beholden to endorse or accept everything recorded there. We can

embrace religion as a valuable and even indispensable way for debating and articulating values, beliefs and ideas, while accepting that, like all other parts of life, religion is a fluid and not a fixed category. And, we can choose to use the word “God” in any number of alternative ways, rather than ceding it to one supernatural interpretation or dismissing it as a word too dangerous to be invoked.

Lawrence Bush and Mitchell Silver share this sort of perplexity, but they do so as puzzled observers from the outside, striving to understand how contemporary intelligent, mature and secular people can yet persist in the practice of prayer, in discussions of spirituality and in debates about liberal theology. Bush and Silver come at these questions in slightly different but related ways. Bush analyzes the shared cultural, political and historical experiences of Baby Boomers (those he refers to as “Woodstockers”) in an attempt to discern what

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*Richard Hirsh is Executive Director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and an Adjunct Instructor at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.*

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influences have left so many of them enamored of spiritual practice when so much of the rest of their experience should point them in the other direction. Silver chooses to narrow his analysis to contemporary Jewish attempts to redefine “God” by examining the writings of Arthur Green, Mordecai Kaplan and Michael Lerner, each of whom, in Silver’s language, chooses “new God” over “no God” while rejecting the “old God.”

Bush’s analysis is thoughtful and provocative, with a tendency to prod Boomers toward reason rather than to protest their persistence in indulging their spirituality. He examines in detail certain shared generational experiences, such as growing up under the threat of nuclear destruction, with its implicit existential message of death and catastrophe — notwithstanding the requisite “duck and cover” elementary school exercises in which we prepared to ward off nuclear radiation by pulling our coats over our heads as we huddled beneath our desks.

Bush also probes the impact of psychedelic drugs on those who consumed them and experienced the evaporation of boundaries of “self” and “world” — an experience he later links to the embrace by so many of his contemporaries of Eastern theologies of “oneness.” He also examines the rejection by so many Boomers of “the scientific method” and rational disciplines of scientific thinking, linking these to contemporary approaches that infuse creation with divine spirit and implicitly and explicitly see “Western science” as politically oppressive and environmentally destructive.

In a particularly poignant passage, Bush uses his brother’s embrace of ortho-

dox Christianity as a prism through which to view the shift toward fundamentalism and orthodoxies that often occurs among his contemporaries. He identifies the anxiety often generated by the multiplicity of cultural options and the loss of certainty created by modernity. As he notes, it is often not even important which orthodoxy the seeker chooses; those seeking answers are as likely to find them in Chabad Judaism as in born-again Christianity.

The rise of feminism and its impact on the Boomer generation generated yet another slice of Boomer belief, the embrace of “the Goddess.” Bush admires many of the accomplishments of feminist theology, especially its dethroning of the patriarchal deity of Western faith and its challenge to the male hegemony of our inherited culture. But he despairs over the absence of a rational critique of such activities as witchcraft and also over the almost inescapable drift into the magical thinking that anything is possible in some Goddess communities. (“No, no, no, no,” replies Bush).

Reconstructionists will be particularly challenged by Bush’s chapter on the religious thought of Mordecai Kaplan — “the one and only invitation to faith to which I feel compelled to RSVP” (135). While admitting that his personal rejection of Kaplan’s alternative theology may in large part be idiosyncratic to his rebellious personality, Bush also asks why so many who believe in “the new God,” the “*ruah haolam*” (“spirit of creation”) instead of the “*melekh haolam*” (“king of the universe”), can so blithely dismiss the question of evil, both individual and communal. And, despite Reconstruction-

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ism's vaunted embrace of Jewish "civilization," Bush correctly indicts us for narrowing ourselves into one more religious denomination.

My favorite passage in the book occurs at the end, when Bush challenges the various faiths of Baby Boomers:

My fellow Woodstockers, why do you cling to metaphors of pre-scientific centuries of superstition, suffering and oppression ... why do you romanticize the past ... why do you imagine the "old ways of knowing" are somehow superior ... why do you spend your precious time with astrology instead of psychology ... with studying kabbalah instead of studying mathematics, with pre-life regression instead of future-life activism ... why do you prefer getting high to getting real? (172-173)

Bush concludes with an interesting observation that can serve as a segue into a discussion of Silver's book: "There is, in fact, no way that I can intellectually 'defeat' the God of my Woodstocker friends, for they have indeed created what philosopher Mitchell Silver calls 'a plausible God.'" (173)

Silver's book begins with the observation that, insofar as contemporary spirituality ventures into a discussion of theology, it does so having already dispatched the Western conception of God as patriarch-creator-redeemer-monarch in favor of forms of faith that share much more with Eastern systems such as Buddhism. To examine what this "new God" is that so many have chosen in place of

the "old God" and against "no God," Silver turns to the writings of three nontraditional Jewish writers, seeking to find in their work some sort of synthesis that would be intellectually defensible and religiously viable.

But Silver's book suffers from a fundamental flaw — that of placing Arthur Green, Mordecai Kaplan and Michael Lerner on an equal level as theologians.

Kaplan's long career allowed him to say many different things about God, many of which were inconsistent. To name a few of these different concepts, Kaplan talks about "the God-idea," the "Power that makes for salvation," "trans-naturalism" and "cosmic polarity." For all his creativity as a social engineer of contemporary Jewish life, and for all his iconoclastic insights into the human origins of religion, Kaplan was not a systematic theologian or even a very precise philosopher. Even if we take Kaplan's theology with utmost seriousness, the fact that he produced it in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s in response to an entirely different set of questions than might be asked now, and without the benefits of feminist, postmodern and other contemporary disciplines, makes it suspect as a definition of a "new God." (As a rejection of the "old God," yes.)

If Kaplan is a questionable choice for the purposes of Silver's discussion, Michael Lerner is an even odder selection for inclusion in his trio of theologians. By choosing Lerner, Silver bestows an undeserved quality of seriousness and respectability on the thought of someone better known for public activism and ideological dogma than for serious and rigorous religious thinking. Lerner's

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religious discourse is almost a caricature of the inconsistent amalgamation of trendy ideas that Bush so sharply lampoons. Despite Lerner's earnestness, his work can hardly stand beside the work of Kaplan or Arthur Green.

Of the three thinkers, it is Green whose academic, intellectual and spiritual background qualify him as an authentically serious expositor of a new (or, perhaps, a renewed) Jewish theology. Green's career has been devoted to the study of Hasidism and *Kabbalah*, and to the potential application of their insights for a contemporary Jewish theology. His attempts to integrate a worldview/theology of unity and Oneness over against the separateness and dualism of most of traditional Jewish theology represent the most sophisticated and intellectually defensible approaches to a "new God."

As Silver notes, Green's thought — as is the case with all such monisms — aligns more closely with Eastern traditions. But Green's claim that Jewish mysticism, especially as refracted through the various Hasidic schools, is authentically Jewish despite such parallels, helps to legitimate what other Jewish thinkers might dismiss.

Silver appreciates and applauds the end of the era of the "old God," with all of the intellectual and cultural and social divisions and distresses he associates with that concept. He strives to appreciate what contemporary Jewish thinkers are offering in its place. Unlike Bush, Silver's perplexity is more oriented toward the rational critiques applicable to "oneness theology." He acknowledges that it is difficult to prove both that "God is everything" and that it makes any

practical difference even if that is true. Like Bush, who at the end of his analysis stands outside the circle of Boomer spirituality, Silver stands outside those who embrace "the new God," seeing in it a mere baseline for a tepid affirmation that "goodness is not ruled out."

One of the challenges facing Reconstructionism is the task of retooling its approach for the time in which we find ourselves. "Judaism without supernaturalism" may have been a vital slogan for second-generation American Jews, but it hardly speaks to those of the fifth and sixth generations. Bush's critique of the casual and often sloppy way Boomers drift into vague religious ideas or endorse incoherent theological affirmations is a caution Reconstructionists would do well to heed. Silver's implicit question of whether in nonsupernatural and/or quasi-mystical religious discourse the word "God" actually stands for anything real is an equally challenging one for Reconstructionists.

In fact, Bush may have identified the problem: "The fact is that Woodstocker religion is more about achieving a certain state of consciousness than believing in a particular dogma" ... (173). He is pointing to those who embrace any and all ideas, beliefs and practices — however intellectually indefensible or morally problematic or theologically disturbing — for the sake of the immediacy of an unreflective spiritual experience. If Reconstructionism and other forms of progressive Judaism settle for such a course, challenges such as those so well articulated by Bush and Silver will go unanswered.