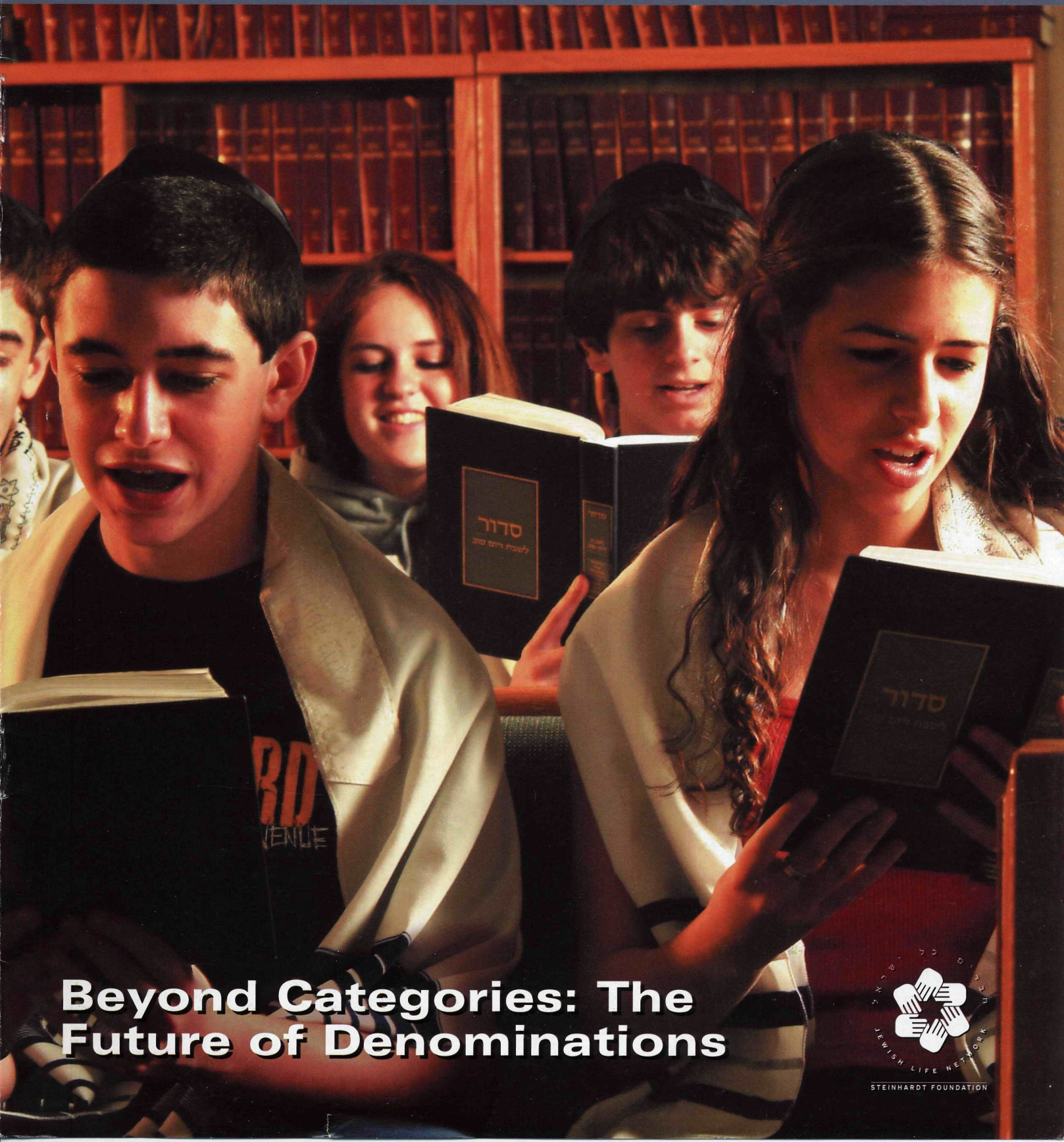


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**Beyond Categories: The
Future of Denominations**



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Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational, religious and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

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Beyond Categories: The Future of Denominations

Pharisee, Sadducee, Essene; Karaite, Rabbinate; Kabbalist, Philosopher; Hasid, Mitnaged; Zionist, Bundist. Throughout history, the Jewish people has been demarcated by precise, mutually exclusive categories. With the advent of denominations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jewish identification stratified still further. "Just Jewish" was never enough. There was always an adjective waiting in the wings.

But recently, things have changed. Whether it's due to the declining draw of organized spiritual movements or a more proactive search for that which unites rather than divides, Jews today are less likely to align themselves with a specific denomination. One in four Jews today disregards denominations altogether. Critics argue that this is due to rampant assimilation or a departure from "authentic" tradition. But this fails to acknowledge the wide array of non-denominational movements, both prayer-based and otherwise, that have formed in recent years. It is possible that there are far fewer social and pragmatic reasons today for people to align their Jewish destinies with single denominations.

Of course, it might be as simple as generational drift. Recent studies show that Americans, particularly young adults, defy pat categorization in all areas of contemporary life, whether it is politically, spiritually or culturally. It is unlikely, then, that contemporary Jews will seek out strict categorization in their Jewish lives. With this in mind, to try to neatly fit the Jewish experience into yesterday's categories doesn't take into account future trends.

The purpose of this issue of CONTACT is not to announce the passing of denominations, which clearly continue to inform and inspire vast segments of Jewish life. Rather, we seek to examine developments in the extra-denominational world so that we might recognize opportunities for further enrichment. From reflections on trans-denominational day schools to explorations of organized prayer communities, from a discussion of Conservative and Modern Orthodox Judaism to reflections on what "Just Jewish" really means, this issue of CONTACT explores the challenges and potentials of Jewish life beyond the categories.

Eli Valley

Eli Valley



— Non-denominational & Post-denominational: — — Two tendencies in American Jewry

by STEVEN M. COHEN

In the last few years, two trends, distinctive but often conflated, have come to characterize the denominational identity patterns of American Jews.

One we may call “non-denominationalism,” in which Jews decline to see themselves as aligned with Orthodoxy, Conservatism, Reform or Reconstructionism (the major denominational choices available to American Jews). On social surveys, when asked for their denominational identity, they answer, or are classified as, “Just Jewish,” “Secular” or “Something else Jewish.”

In contrast, we have a relatively new

phenomenon that embraces only a very small number of Jews, many of whom, it seems, are in their twenties and thirties. This contrasting trend we may call “post-denominationalism.” It refers to committed Jews, congregations and educational institutions that abjure a conventional denominational label for one reason or another. As individuals, they experience ideological and stylistic differences with the available denominational options. As institutions, their leaders seek to appeal to a multi-denominational constituency, be it of congregants, students or donors.

Evidence for the rise of simple “non-denominationalism” comes from the 1990 and 2000 National Jewish Population Surveys, where we find that the number of adult Jews who decline to identify with

a major denomination rose from 20 percent to 27 percent over the ten-year period. Both surveys testify to the lack of Jewish engagement of this group, that they are “non-denominational” rather than “post-denominational” (or, as some others might say, “trans-denominational”). Relative to Jews who affirm a denominational identity, non-denominational Jews disproportionately share the following characteristics:

- they were raised by intermarried parents;
- they are married to non-Jews; and
- they are unaffiliated with synagogues (12-15 percent vs. 50 percent of the denominationally identified).

It is no surprise that non-denominational Jews score far lower on all measures of conventional Jewish engagement than do

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any of the denominationally identified, be they Orthodox, Conservative, Reform or Reconstructionist. (Of the four denominations, self-declared adherents of the latter two denominations report the lowest average levels of ritual observance, communal affiliation and subjective importance of being Jewish, but even they substantially out-score the non-denominational).

Those we may call the post-denominational, however, represent quite a healthy phenomenon in Jewish life. Their institutions come in several varieties. Some are educational endeavors seeking to attract students beyond what may be regarded as their natural constituency. Thus, Pardes and Hartman Institutes in Jerusalem, or Boston's Hebrew College, consciously transcend denominational labels in their promotion and marketing, even though their leadership and faculty hail from decidedly denominational origins (in the first two instances from Orthodoxy, in the third instance from Conservatism). Another example is offered by Hadar, on Manhattan's Upper West Side, one of a dozen or more recently established congregations around the world characterized by gender-egalitarianism, traditional davening, Hebraic proficiency and eschewal of rabbinic leadership. Led by young-adult graduates of the finest Conservative educational institutions (Schechter schools, Camp Ramah, USY, Nativ), along with a sprinkling of Orthodox-raised and identified compatriots, Hadar intentionally resists a denominational affiliation, in part to remain attractive and acceptable to its Orthodox minority and to its many disaffected Conservative Jews. (One senior Conservative leader referred to Hadar as a "Conservative congregation flying a Liberian flag.") Nearby, we find Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, once-Conservative and now independent of any movement affiliation, in part owing to its liberal stance on homosexuality and other issues.

To what can we attribute the rise of post-denominationalism? As with most Jewish social phenomena, to find the answers, we need to look both to the larger society and to an inner Jewish social dynamic.

Over the last decade and more, social scientists of American life have been writing

about the decline of long-standing attachments to political parties, commercial brands, and religious denominations. People detach from their families, neighborhoods, countries, jobs, friendship circles, consumer products, political parties, sources of information and houses of worship with far greater ease and rapidity than they (or their

parents) did in the past. The party label with the healthiest growth over the last few decades has been "Independent," at the cost of both the Democratic and Republican labels. In the religious sphere, more than a generation ago, Americans engaged in denominational switching, religious innovation, and the construction of idiosyncratic religious lifestyles that often drew upon several religious traditions. As for the larger society, so for the Jews.

With respect to explanations internal to the Jewish world, one factor critical to the growth of the post-denominational category is, quite simply (and quite regrettably), the shrinking appeal of the Conservative Movement, the "grayest" denomination in American Jewry. This is not the place for a balanced, serious and sympathetic discourse on the many reasons for this long-term trend, one that extends at least back to the mid-1950s, when the Conservative affiliation rates were arguably at their peak. However, one phenomenon does deserve special mention here: The Conservative Movement may be victim to its own (partial) success. Over the last two decades, as Conservative educational institutions matured and expanded, the movement has managed to convince some of its most committed youngsters of the virtues of a modern, *halakhic* Jewish life, one marked by learning and observance, piety and community. Unfortunately, this achievement encompassed only a minority of Conservative Jews (albeit a critical leadership group), leaving them often frustrated or disappointed with Conservative congregations that had failed to move down the same path. On the one hand, it is remarkable that about 30 percent of Conservative parents now send their children to day school; on the other hand, many of them must be frustrated to be in congregations where most of their fellow members have, in effect, "rejected" the day school option.

Not surprisingly, signs point to the outflow of some of the most committed and capable Conservative Jews, be they to Orthodoxy or, in a few cases, to post-denominational institutions. In 1990, among those affiliated with synagogues, just 5 percent of Conservative-raised Jews identified with Orthodoxy as adults. In 2000, the comparable number had doubled to 10 percent, representing the loss of some of the most capable potential leadership for Conservative congregations. At the same time, the movement from Orthodoxy to Conservatism declined sharply. In 1990, as many as 46 percent of those raised Orthodox who were synagogue-affiliated identified as Conservative. By 2000, the comparable proportion dropped to 26 percent. Thus, over the ten-year span, Orthodoxy strengthened relative to Conservatism in three respects. First, Orthodox affiliation grew, while Conservative affiliation declined. Second, Conservative "defections" to Orthodoxy doubled, and third, "acquisitions" from Orthodoxy by Conservatism declined.

In the Jewish communal world, Federations have favored so-called community schools over Solomon Shechter schools, even though the former still appeal to largely Conservative constituencies, and even as the lack of a denominational label may impede the adoption of a clear and effective religious persona. In the long run, this policy, like others, may well enlarge the post-denominational segment at the expense of the dwindling Conservative population.

Like most phenomena in Jewish life, the emergence of more Jews who resist denominational labels carries with it both positive and negative implications, both opportunities and dangers. In most circumstances, the non-denominationally identified speak to weaker aspects of Jewish life today, as they emerge from the growing number of the intermarried or children of the intermarried, with commensurate lack of affiliation with congregations.

But, alongside (and often confused with) these non-denominational Jews, we find clusters of highly engaged Jews who may be labeled trans-denominational, post-denominational or, as I have argued, often post-Conservative. These Jews and the several innovative and vibrant institutions they have founded of late speak to new signs of vitality and creativity in Jewish life, albeit often at the expense of the Conservative Movement. In this, the post-denominational represent both a genuine opportunity for development and flowering, as well as a call to Conservative leadership to think deeply and seriously about the implications of the departure from their ranks of so many of their finest young adults. ✿

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