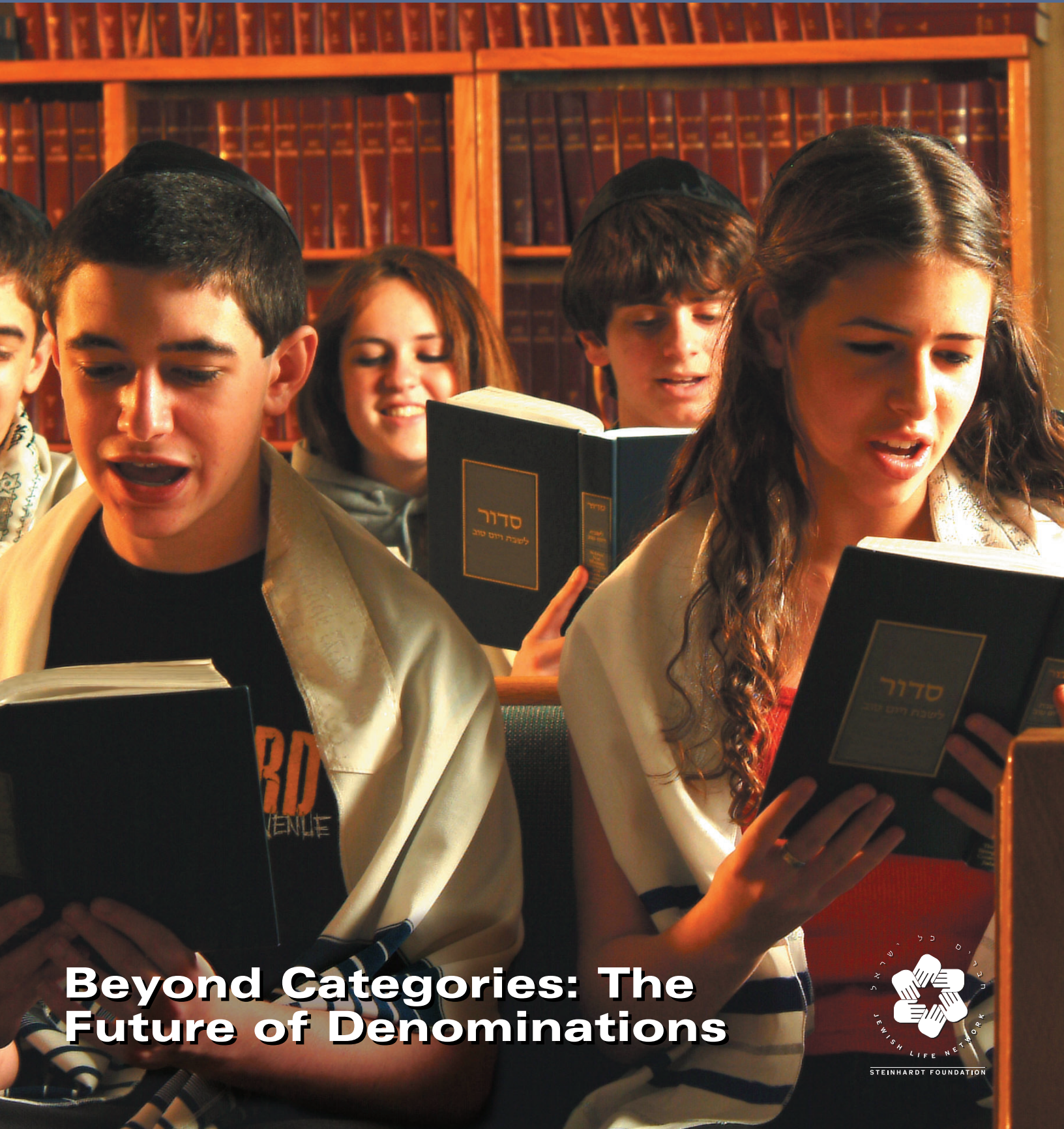


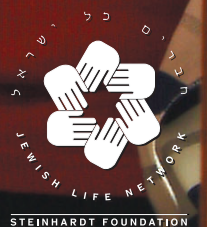
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Beyond Categories: The Future of Denominations



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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, Rabbinite; 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



Two Jews not only have three opinions, as they say, but are likely these days to have different races, educations, childhood Jewish memories, sexual orientations and lots more. A rabbi has to minister to *all* of them.

Rabbis Beyond Denomination

by RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

Several years ago, while visiting in Jerusalem, I got into a conversation with my friend and mentor Rabbi David Hartman. “The smartest thing we did in founding this institution,” he said, referring to the very impressive Shalom Hartman Institute for Advanced Jewish Studies, “was to build it on learning. As long as we are learning, we can all be together. As soon as we start *davening*, we go off into separate rooms.” Little did I know then that I would soon be carrying the principle that “learning draws us all together” into the very bastion of Jewish denominationalism, the training of rabbis.

Nothing so characterizes the change in Jewish life over the past two decades as does the new wave of desire for learning. Intelligent Jewish adults, highly educated and sophisticated in many ways but bereft of any Jewish knowledge beyond the most elementary, have sought out teachers, endowed chairs of Jewish studies, and created new formats for serious programs of adult learning. The best of these — Wexner, Florence Melton, and Me’ah are the most obvious examples — all take place in a transdenomi-

national context. This means that Jews who pray in a variety of synagogues — or in none at all — come together under neutral auspices to engage together in the most sacred of Jewish acts: that of learning, discussing, absorbing and reshaping our tradition. The same tendency is reflected in the growth of community day schools across the country.

But *rabbis*? How can such different types of future rabbis train together? Don’t rabbis have to *stand for* something, after all? And doesn’t that mean that my viewpoint is right and yours is wrong? What kind of rabbis will these be, those who have studied together with colleagues who will find their place in other denominations — or in none at all?

Here’s what we believe at Hebrew College, which has created the first full-time, trans-denominational rabbinical school in Jewish history. Rabbis will be better trained for having sat in classes alongside others who disagree with them on almost every issue imaginable. If one thing characterizes our Jewish community today, it is diversity. Two Jews not only have three opinions, as they say, but are likely these days to have different races, educations, childhood Jewish memories, sexual orientations and lots more. A rabbi has to minister to *all* of them. Where

Rabbi Arthur Green is Rector of the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College.



How better to sharpen your own understanding, to hone your own point of view, than by looking at the sources in a mixed group, where opinions and readings diverge across a wide spectrum?

better to learn about how to respect someone different than by sitting across the table from one another in the *bet midrash* (study room)? How better to sharpen your own understanding, to hone your own point of view, than by looking at the sources in a mixed group, where opinions and readings diverge across a wide spectrum?

Yes, a program of rabbinic studies does



have to stand for something, and we clearly do. *Ahavat Torah*, the love of wisdom and the pursuit of Jewish learning, is the hallmark of our program. We find that it brings us together, even as we argue over the meaning of a passage. Our Talmudic sages used to speak about “doing battle” with one another over the meaning of Torah. But once the argument was over, the “warriors” again saw one another as friends and fellow-seekers. We need more

of that spirit in Jewish life today. We at Hebrew College offer and model for our students a love of Jewish texts and their interpretation. This love embraces the widest variety of Jewish sources, from the Bible and Talmud through mystical, literary and artistic sources, down to Jewish thought as it is being recreated in our own day. We read the sources critically, understand their historical settings, but then seek to re-embrace them as living Torah.

Beyond our shared love of learning, there are two more areas where denominational differences have little place. One is in the growth and development of the spiritual life, an important part of rabbinic training. Each rabbi needs to find his or her own way to an inner life of prayer, to communion with God, to hewing out a deep inner well of empathy and caring, on which he or she will draw daily throughout a rabbinic career. While these are deeply private matters, not discussed easily, rabbis know that having access to such a reservoir of faith is essential to finding and sharing the emotional strength required for the rabbinate. Techniques for developing these resources, a growing focus in rabbinic education, transcend all denominational lines.

The same is true of activism. There is little difference between Jews when it comes to what are called *mitzvot beyn adam le-havero*, the good deeds we do

toward our fellow humans. We all believe in reaching out to the poor, the sick and the needy. We care about the elderly and the disabled, and want to help. Rabbinical students of all types are attracted to programs of social and economic betterment, both those focused within the Jewish community and some that reach beyond its borders. Efforts of this sort have met with great success across seminary and denominational lines.

Learning, spiritual work and human kindness. (Might one call them *Torah*, *Avodah* and *Gemillut Hasadim*?) These are areas where our rabbinical students, for all their diverse viewpoints, can work together and build a single Jewish community. Yes, there will be points of divergence. Some keep a stricter *kashrut*, others are more lenient. Some drive on Shabbat, others do not. Sometimes we will even have to *daven* in separate rooms (though we try not to do that too often!). But having worked hard to build a community around those three pillars we all share, we have found that the differences between us have lost their sharp edge. Respect and affection for one another have come to outweigh the differences between our chosen prayerbooks.

We think it's a pretty good model for our community. If we can pull it off in a rabbinical school, Jews could learn to do it almost anywhere. Wouldn't it be worth a try? 🌸

Denominations and the Jewish Future: An Exchange



With the publication of “*All Quiet on the Religious Front? Jewish Unity, Denominationalism and Post-Denominationalism in the United States*” (American Jewish Committee, May 2005), **Dr. Jack Wertheimer** offered an analysis of the current state of post- or trans-denominationalism in American Jewish life. **Rabbi Yitz Greenberg** met with Professor Wertheimer to survey the current state of Jewish intra-faith relations.

Yitz Greenberg: I thought it would be interesting to discuss the implications of your recent study. Do we face a future of renewed denominationalism? Or will trans-denominationalism become the dominant mode? Or possibly, could post-denominationalism win out altogether in American Jewish life?

Jack Wertheimer: Before responding about the future, let us first review the past. In the 1980s you predicted that American Jewry was headed for a schism, with the community dividing into two peoples. This hasn't happened. Do you feel good or bad about that?

Dr. Jack Wertheimer is Provost and Professor of American Jewish History at the Jewish Theological Seminary. **Rabbi Yitz Greenberg** is President of Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation.

YG: Both. I feel bad because, although the final step was not taken, there has been a fundamental breach in the community. The Orthodox and the non-Orthodox are living in two different worlds; there is little serious contact between the denominational organizations, their youth movements or their religious authorities. There continues to be a great deal of hostility and rejection between the two worlds — and I would venture, little ‘intermarriage’ between them.

On the other hand, your excellent paper gave me some comfort about my life's work. Along with others, I started CLAL: the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership to advance Jewish learning among Jewish community leaders and create rabbinic dialogue to foster religious pluralism and the unity of *clal yisrael* (the whole community).

When people asked me how CLAL did, I

used to answer: CLAL is the classic case of the surgeon who reports that the operation was highly successful; but unfortunately, the patient died. CLAL reached hundreds of rabbis and an even greater number of lay people with models of positive pluralist interaction, cooperation and learning together. However, at the end of two decades of CLAL's work, the Jewish people was fundamentally more divided and hostile, reaching the level of being two peoples psychologically, i.e., the patient died. Now, in light of your paper, I believe that CLAL's programs (and others) played a constructive role in averting the evil decree of permanent separation — so my work was not totally wasted. But maybe you can share your analysis of why the worst did not happen.

JW: In my view, a number of broad factors are at work. One is the deliberate effort of philanthropists, federations and central educational agencies to bring together Jews of different backgrounds. A plethora of educational programs for young people, adults, rabbis and other Jewish professionals intentionally are designed to focus on issues of common concern and to downplay differences. Some allow for the airing of different perspectives, but the implicit message is: We all are addressing the same texts or issues; our common interests far exceed our areas of disagreement. In addition, major funding agencies have made it clear that they expect diverse Jewish groups to play nicely together. In its most aggressive form, this actually led to an explicit threat by several of the largest Jewish philanthropies to withhold funding from institutions whose leaders engage in divisive, highly partisan rhetoric.

But this is only part of the story. Each of the movements has its own internal reasons to tend to its own garden at this point, rather than engage in polemics. Furthermore, the movements are all facing a common challenge: How to respond to the argument of post-denominationalists who regard all the religious movements as *passé*; who claim the trouble is caused by out-of-touch, elite denominational leaders who insist on drawing boundaries between Jews when *amcha* is not interested in such boundaries; and who cast the denominations as selfishly absorbed with their own institutional survival to the detriment of the true interests of *clal yisrael*. These are powerful critiques and the movements don't know quite how to respond.

Finally, the larger environment seems to be reinforcing tendencies to mute tensions: Protestant denominations are also weaker today than they were a few decades ago. As is the case in the Jewish community today, the divisions are not between denominations but cutting across them as people line up on the liberal/conservative sides of the “culture wars” divide. There is also no denying that

the greatest irritant to Jewish denominational relations in the United States has been the periodic eruption of the “Who is a Jew?” debate in Israel. Given the weakness of the so-called religious parties in Israel over the past five years, that source of friction has lessened in intensity, with the result that Jews in the U.S. could focus on other matters. Needless to say, our preoccupation with Israel’s welfare during the so-called Second Intifada has also directed attention away from disagreements between the denominations.

YG: Let me add one more factor. In retrospect, the 1960s introduced a period of acceptance for American Jewry and a collapse of the barriers against Jews; anti-Semitism plummeted. With the threat of Gentile hostility removed, carried away with the new sense of freedom, American Jewish denominations responded with an outburst of self-assertive, self-centered policies. The Orthodox became more Orthodox (wearing *kippot* in public; rejecting the legitimacy of liberal movements in the name of *halacha*; bypassing the community consensus for separation of Church and State; etc.). Reform became more Reform (embracing egalitarianism, accepting the intermarried, and advocating for gay rights as morally superior American-Jewish values, etc.). Each group essentially said: “Do it my way.”

This reaction to freedom is comparable to the generation of the desert in the Bible. The initial response to being liberated was: freedom means I have the right to do whatever I want to, no one else can constrain my behavior. All of the community groups failed to ask the question: Now that we are free to choose, what choices will it take to live together in one community? Upon further reflection, the second generation comes to recognize that freedom means the right to choose and to act *within a community* based on my own commitments and dignified choice. I get to choose what I stand and work for, but that implies a responsibility toward others if I am to live with them in the same community. That second generation maturing in the second stage of freedom acts with more restraint. This leads to modulation of behavior and a willingness to try to stick together. That is what is happening right now.

JW: I view this question somewhat differently and focus on the political reality in the United States as compared to Israel. Precisely because we in the U.S. do not function as a polity, we can each go our own way when it suits us. Israeli Jews *must* find a way to work things out because they form a single polity. The consequence for U.S. Jewry is that we disengage from one another—and only connect when there is a tangible benefit to do so. We call this pluralism, but I encounter

ever fewer genuine pluralists—a term that to me denotes people with strong personal views of what is right and wrong but still believe that others of different views must be heard and respected. I’ve grown more skeptical of all the talk about pluralism because we have not found a way to listen to each other and also challenge one another respectfully. Too often, we play a game of “I’m okay, you’re okay”/anything goes. And so, problems are swept under the rug. More worrisome to me is that we thereby convey the message that there is nothing worth fighting over. The communal position all too often today is that we should not uphold “unreasonable” standards, which, in practice, turns out to mean, we should have no standards—other than those approved by liberal sectors of American culture. This renders American Jewry more vulnerable to the continuing pull of the general culture because we stand for nothing distinctive.

YG: In this atmosphere of increasing polarization, the Conservative and the Modern Orthodox Movements have suffered the greatest attrition. Do you think Conservative Judaism can renew itself?

JW: It is too early to say how the Conservative Movement will resolve these challenges. Some of its rabbis are suffering a crisis of confidence. My impression is that quite a few find there is little payoff in speaking the language of *halacha* and expectations in an age when Jews want community, music and dance, and celebration. There is also a fatigue with walking a centrist road when stark options seem more appealing. This certainly poses great challenges to Conservative Judaism itself, but also deprives the American Jewish community of a bridging movement. Yitz, what do you think is the future of Modern Orthodoxy?

YG: In the past three decades, Modern Orthodoxy lost its inner gyroscope as it let *haredi* tendencies set the tone of Orthodox education and policy; as a result it was pulled toward separatism. Now the establishment of the Edah Organization (“The courage to be Modern and Orthodox”) and JOFA (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance) as well as the creation of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah by Avi Weiss (with his commitment to open Orthodoxy reaching out to the non-Orthodox) signals an incipient renaissance. The new President, Richard Joel, brings openness and dynamism to Yeshiva University. Israeli yeshivot, like Maaleh Gilboa and Bat Ayin, project an unapologetic, more embracing Modern Orthodoxy. Maybe the bridge can be rebuilt.

Let us turn to our original question. In your paper, you speak both of the development of trans-denominationalism and of post-denominationalism. You even speak of

the development of anti-denominational thinking and behavior. “Just Jewish” is the fastest growing category of measuring Jewish identity in the National Jewish Population Survey. Which tendencies do you think will win out? Will the denominations regain relevance? Will they lose ground to the post-denominational institutions and streams?

JW: I’m not terribly impressed with the arguments of those who pronounce that the “Just Jewish” are outpacing other groups. For the most part, the “Just Jewish” are unaffiliated Jews on their way out. We’ve been speaking for decades now of the bi-polar tendencies of the Jewish population, which is either gravitating to greater engagement or to virtually none—i.e. “The more, the more; the less, the less.” To say that the “Just Jewish” label is growing in popularity means that we have fewer Jews committed to serious engagement.

On the other hand, we should pay heed to those Jews, especially of the Gen X and Y cohorts, who are telling us that they do not identify with the denominations and are seeking a post-denominational religious setting for worship and study. These young Jews, after all, are our future. And they are clearly dissatisfied with the options. I am heartened by the growing numbers of *minyanim* sprouting up in Manhattan, LA and Chicago established by these non-denominational young people. They are a healthy phenomenon. The big question is whether this cohort will find its way to conventional, multi-generational *shuls* and transform them, whether it will remain in its own generational ghetto, or whether it will become alienated and drift away from Judaism. I’m betting on the former—and I look forward to a transition from the boomer sensibility of our existing institutions to a new configuration of American Judaism shaped by the Gen Xers and Yers.

As to the movements: I believe there will be an ongoing role for them. Leaving aside the fact that they continue to organize much of the programming for young Jews—schools, summer camps, youth movements, Israel trips, etc.—they also have served historically as the incubators of religious ideas for the Jewish community. Currently, the movements have few if any powerful exponents of new religious thinking; for the most part, they are living off the ideas of the last generation—of Soloveitchik, Heschel, Kaplan and others. Ideology has given way to a big-tent approach that stresses emotional connection, individual seeking, and communal engagement. These are valuable correctives to win the hearts of our people. I’m convinced, though, that our highly educated Jewish community will once again ask the big questions, and that the movements will rise to the challenge by offering content and direction. 🌸



— 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.

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.

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. 🌸



Building New Kinds of Day Schools for New Kinds of Jews

by DR. BRUCE POWELL

Community high schools are about ideas, not ideology. They are about an honest and open dialogue on Jewish practice, philosophy and history.



Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg once quipped, “It doesn’t matter which denomination you belong to, as long as you are ashamed of it.”

Perhaps this humorous assessment poses the core challenge for Jewish day schools that call themselves non-denominational, community and/or pluralistic. What challenges do these schools face? What are the advantages and disadvantages? Indeed, what is there to be proud of?

Over the course of the past twenty years, the emergence of the community school movement has been a result of many complex variables related, in varying degrees, to the respective communities, context, resources, Jewish population and philosophy. In Los Angeles, for example, community high schools were a result of the failure of two previous Jewish high schools that had strong denominational ties. The non-Orthodox community wanted and needed a more expansive and all-inclusive concept. Population and resources were not an issue; philosophy of community won the day.

In Boston, similarly, the community wanted a self-consciously pluralistic high school. In smaller Jewish communities such as Detroit, Phoenix and Houston, building a denominational high school would have fractured the community’s resources, split an already small high school population and may have resulted in failure.

Elementary schools, however, tell a

different story. Since the population of an elementary school need not have the enrollment of a high school in order to be viable, the lower schools tend to be denominational in both large and medium sized communities. Smaller Jewish populations still lean toward the community concept simply to conserve resources.

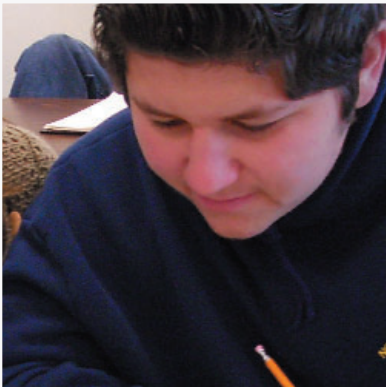
Overall, I believe community schools emerged mostly out of practical concerns rather than out of an unhappiness with denominational schools or a burning need to create post-denominational Jews. In some larger communities such as Los Angeles and New York, we might indulge philosophical nuances. In all, the driving force seems to be parents and community visionaries who believe that the Jewish day school is the key to the Jewish future in America and must be supported in every way possible.

Creating a non-denominational school is rife with challenge. Among the first questions we must ask ourselves is, “Upon what do we agree?” Creating a single track for prayer is hopeless; setting standard policies for the wearing of *kippot*, Shabbat observance, *kashruth*, student attire and modesty, and holiday celebrations stretches the notion of inclusivity often to a point of vagueness and uselessness. Board agreement on admission policies, especially regarding “who is a Jew” and whether or not non-Jews (whoever they may be) ought to be admitted, breeds tension, at best, and dissolution in the worst cases. Perhaps the biggest challenge is developing adequate funding without institutional support.

And yet, the community elementary and

Dr. Bruce Powell is Head of School at the New Community Jewish High School in the Greater Los Angeles area.

This Jewish community school challenge is, from my view, the single most invigorating and transformational moment in recent Jewish memory.



the community high schools, in particular, appear to be thriving in every major city in America. Jewish community high schools host several thousand students and continue to grow in cities as diverse as Boston, Boca Raton, Detroit, Denver, Atlanta, San Francisco, Palo Alto, Phoenix, Houston, New York, Washington DC, Philadelphia, Kansas City, Irvine, San Diego and Los Angeles (where there are two). Most important, each seems to have settled on a vision that suits its constituency and engenders loyalty from students and parents.

What are the advantages of these schools and what makes them so compelling for their respective communities? I will focus on high schools since that is my greatest area of expertise.

First, community high schools are about ideas, not ideology. They are about an honest and open dialogue on Jewish practice, philosophy and history. For example, in Detroit, students were allowed to challenge the school's policy on the wearing of *kippot*. Instead of simply mandating the practice, the administration encouraged and empowered students to research this practice using the internet on school computers. The results of the process are unimportant; what stands out is that students cared enough to ask, to do the work and to respect each other's positions.

Second, whereas a denominational school might mandate a particular mode of prayer, a community school, especially at the high school level, might offer multiple minyan options where students can explore a plurality of spiritual modalities. In Boston, for example, where daily prayer is required (which is not always the case), the school hosts twelve or more different options, often student-led and supervised by faculty.

Third, in many respects the independent Jewish community school is the most "American" of our Jewish school options. Built into the fabric of the curriculum and culture is the notion of freedom of choice. Individuals may select various paths, yet all are part of the greater community of *clal Yisrael*. Participation in this Jewish democracy demands, however, a very high level of Jewish knowledge.

Certainly, denominational settings encourage debate; yet, for many, the

answers are already established. In the non-denominational setting, students are given tools to find and often to create their own answers. They are being prepared for an unknown Jewish future, one which they may create from the foundation of deep Jewish knowledge unattached to denominational bias.

Fourth, perhaps the greatest advantage of a Jewish community school is also its greatest challenge: how to avoid trying to be everything to all and ending up with nothing — no strong views, weak knowledge base, vagueness of purpose and mission, blandness of identity, and graduates without a place to go. The movement schools are usually sharp and clear. Reform schools want to make Reform Jews; Conservative schools want graduates who participate in Conservative Jewish life.

The community school faces a tough order. It needs to establish clear goals and missions across a broad fabric. It needs to have a sharp and clear identity without alienating its constituents, yet be true to its pluralistic macro purpose. It needs to create trans-denominational Jews who are comfortable in their own Jewish skins and who can move with comfort and competence throughout the rich diversity of Jewish secular and denominational life.

This Jewish community school challenge is, from my view, the single most invigorating and transformational moment in recent Jewish memory. It forces those of us dedicated to this awesome business of "touching the future" to once again become "God wrestlers," grapplers, idea entrepreneurs. It causes us all to sharpen our visions, to ask if and how we ought to disturb the universe.

I believe that our community schools set the foundation for young Jews to create their own futures while remaining very much inside the universal and seamless Jewish conversation. They may, after all, choose to strengthen and lead the movements in which they have grown up, they may choose to form their own, or they may choose a path not yet conceived. But in all things, their minds and souls will be guided by timeless Jewish values and by Judaism's invaluable moral and material contributions to our nation and to the world. ✨

Moving Beyond the Labels: A Conversation With Rabbi Sharon Brous



In 2004, Rabbi Sharon Brous started the non-denominational Ikar community in Los Angeles. Since then, Ikar has grown

to hundreds of participants each week, the vast majority of whom were hitherto unaffiliated with the Jewish community. Eli Valley, Editor of CONTACT, sat down with Rabbi Brous to talk about Ikar, movement affiliation and the future of the denominations.

ELI VALLEY: Starting on a personal note, why did you create Ikar?

SHARON BROUS: Ikar was born at the intersection of two trends: First, the serious alienation of so many young Jews from Jewish life. Several years ago I began speaking with smart, creative, interesting young Jews, most of whom find themselves totally outside of the Jewish conversation. These are people who long for a meaningful spiritual life, who want to connect with other Jews, who would love to study Torah relevant to what's happening in the world. Yet they perceive synagogue as a defunct institution, one that won't speak to them intellectually, spiritually, socially or politically. And even though many synagogues in America are doing interesting, compelling things, the reality is that many of these young Jews won't even venture through the door.

Second, this sense of alienation is happening at the same moment that we stand at the threshold of a terrifying global reality. With the spread of terror, AIDS, hunger and poverty, I believe our community has a mandate to begin to take seriously our role

in the global drama. We started Ikar because we felt the profound need to respond to the communal trend toward attrition and apathy and to the global trend toward violence and hatred with a vigorous search within our tradition for voices of dignity, justice and peace. My sense was that if we were able to spark this conversation in the Jewish world, the young, alienated, unaffiliated Jews might just show up.

EV: You graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary. Couldn't you have accomplished Ikar through a "regular" Conservative synagogue?

SB: I was once told by the rabbi of a huge Conservative synagogue, "This synagogue is about learning Torah. You keep talking about social justice. If you want to do coat drives, go to the Reform synagogue down the street. They're all about social action." This was a painful moment of awakening. I realized that this synagogue, like so many others, had created a schism between the Jewish heart, the Jewish mind and the Jewish obligation in the world. My immediate thought was: what kind of Torah are you studying if it's not a Torah that will catalyze people to give coats to the homeless? And what is the core of the social engagement in the "social action" synagogues? Is it not a serious encounter with Torah and God? If not, what makes it Jewish?

I realized that we needed to be asking different questions. I wanted to create a community poised to answer: "What do we actually believe in?" "What is our role in the world, as Jews and as human beings?" "How can we communicate meaning and purpose to Jews who are no longer looking for sustenance or community in a traditional Jewish framework?"

EV: Do you feel denominational labels are vestiges of another era?

SB: My halachic and theological approach is well within the framework of the Conserva-

Sharon Brous is the rabbi of IKAR, a vibrant new spiritual community in Los Angeles (www.ikar-la.org).





I would challenge every movement professional — every rabbi, cantor and administrator — to omit the movement label from our lexicon for an entire year, just to see what happens when we're forced to express what we actually believe in instead of which movement we affiliate with.

tive Movement, but Ikar touches people from a wide range of denominational backgrounds. There is obviously great value in different articulations of theological and behavioral commitment voiced by the various movements. Movement identity can help Jews understand what a coherent Jewish life can look like. But rather than focus on the confines of denominational affiliation, we are looking to create a Jewish community of passion, integrity and authenticity, one that takes the tradition as seriously as it does the mandate to innovate and progress, and vice versa. Moving beyond the labels forces a more careful articulation of what a community is really about.

In general, I find the denominational question uninteresting. The movement professionals ask “How can we hold on to our population? We're losing ground!” I think that a better question is “How can we share a Judaism that is compelling enough that people will want to identify with it?” The real question is not are you Conservative or Reform, but are you feeding the hungry? Does your *davening* help make manifest God's presence in the world? Does your community's *Shabbos* reinforce the belief that it's possible for the world to look different than it does?

EV: Technically speaking, you're not doing anything un-Conservative at Ikar.

SB: That's right. I was trained at Jewish Theological Seminary by Conservative rabbis and scholars. But I would challenge every movement professional — every rabbi, cantor and administrator — to omit the movement label from our lexicon for an entire year, just to see what happens when we're forced to express what we actually believe in instead of which movement we affiliate with. My suspicion is that the language of denominational affiliation is a great distraction from the holy work of the Jewish community.

EV: What kinds of people are attracted to Ikar gatherings? What is their background, and what are they seeking?

SB: The vast majority, about 75 percent, are in their 20s and 30s, all previously unaffiliated, but most have had some positive Jewish experience in their childhood such as camp, a childhood trip to Israel, or a relationship with a rabbi who debated them in high school. They want to connect, but they're not looking in the traditional structures. When we began to build Ikar, we asked ourselves how we could create a Jewish experience that would open avenues of spiritual expression and serious engagement with Torah, but would not feel like a synagogue.

EV: How have you made Ikar non-typical?

SB: First, our intention is not to create a synagogue. So many pulpit rabbis complain that they feel stuck, that they're compelled to do things the way they've always been done, despite the fact that the old way is no longer working. From the outset, our *kavana* has been to “unstick ourselves” — to think seriously about creating new models of Jewish encounter with God, with one another and with the world.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that the synagogue is a graveyard where prayer is buried — a brutal critique of *shul* prayer life. There's no adventure of the soul in the synagogue, no surprise. I want people to be surprised, to wake up when they walk into Ikar. It's not about shtick, but about infusing a spirit of creativity, of life. Innovation is a sign of success, not failure.

EV: Despite the non-denominational buzz, Ikar is considering affiliation with the Conservative Movement. Why?

SB: For us, affiliation would be a strong statement that it's possible to build a young, vibrant, purposeful community within the traditional movement structure, while at the same time redefining what the relationship looks like.

EV: So if you do become Conservative, it's not with the intention of serving an exclusively Conservative constituency.

SB: Right. Ikar is not a community of Conservative Jews. It is a community of serious, passionate, creative, traditional and progressive Jews. Everything that we do functions within the framework of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, but my purpose in creating Ikar was not to support and sustain the Conservative Movement. My work is to bring Jews to an experience of God and Torah that motivates them to transform the way the world looks. My priorities are the Jewish people, the world and God — not the movement.

EV: Do you feel these *minyanim* will eventually replace the denominational congregations or augment them? Or might the denominations borrow from these *minyanim*?

SB: I have no doubt that traditional synagogues and institutions will be influenced by what is happening in the more alternative *minyanim* and communities, because the passion in these *minyanim* is just not present in many of the preexisting institutions.

At IKAR's first Board meeting, I said: “LA doesn't need another synagogue. If in five years, Ikar has grown into a sweet, inspiring, healthy Conservative *minyan*, I will help you find another rabbi.” That is part of the vision of Ikar, but only a small part. We want the impact of a soulful, traditional, unapologetically progressive and politically active community to reverberate throughout the Jewish world. 🌱

My So-Called Post-Denominational Life

by JILL EISNER

I am not Reform, Conservative, Orthodox or any other denomination. I am “Just Jewish.” My post-denominational identity is more positive than negative. I’m not so much put off by aspects of the various denominations as attracted to them and unwilling to forsake one for another. I believe, I pray, I observe. But I am a modern woman, and I want it all. I want enlightenment and obligations. I want to live with rules, but not without the ability to interpret some of them my own way.

There are several reasons for my reluctance to pick a denomination and stick with it. Most important is that none is a perfect fit. In many ways I am too modern for traditional Orthodoxy, but I want a life shaped by Judaism to an extent beyond what is demanded by much of Reform and Conservative thought.

Choosing to live more Jewishly means accepting the concept of divine obligations. But I, like many young Jews, have beliefs and practices not easily reconcilable with some traditional teachings. I first studied Torah while on a program in Israel, and I was immediately captivated by what I learned. But while I admired the lifestyles of the religious women who taught Jewish wisdom to my group, I wanted nothing to do with their long sleeves and hats under the blazing Jerusalem sun. A fellow participant was equally enraptured with what she was learning, but dismayed to be told that fully embracing Judaism would obligate her to have children, something she was sure she’d never want to do.

This is a crucial point for me as a committed and tradition-oriented Jew. While there are aspects of Orthodoxy without which I could not live a Jewish life, there are others that, like the friend from my Israel program, I do not or cannot live with. I don’t mean long sleeves and hats in the summer; those no longer bother me. Far more troubling is the idea that a traditional Jewish life could mean rejection of modern notions of human dignity. I cannot imagine being happy in a community that treated women as if we’re of lesser value or that shunned gays. Others who agree with me on this have their own ideas about how it plays out, and our needs are too diverse

to be reconciled by a single ambitious denomination. For instance, many young women are insulted by *mechitzas*, while I am not interested in a prayer space that contains the distraction of men.

In a similar vein, there are some aspects of the non-Orthodox denominations that I’m drawn to, and others that put me off. Having grown up secular, I came to Judaism on my own with a head already full of ideas, seeking Jewish guidance. My secular practices were largely indistinguishable from

those of my Reform friends, so I needed something more demanding. But, at the same time, I wasn’t willing to leave behind Reform’s adaptiveness. To me, Jewish wisdom is not just about rules, and applying what I’ve learned is not a habit I’m ready to give up. For example, on the question of whether Shabbat is about respite or about memorizing a list of restraints, I’m with the Reform. Like many so-called liberal Jews, I don’t believe that every religious custom has a divine demand behind it. I think a devoted Jew can decide for his or herself whether penning poetry after a long week in the office constitutes rest sufficient to honor the Sabbath. So I have never been able to choose between denominations. My personal theological prescription straddles the line between denominational poles. Like Conservatism, but with separate seating.

My beliefs and lifestyle may discourage identification with one denomination, but it also helps to feel that such identification is not necessary. After all, my position is not a lonely one; I know many others who are “Just Jewish.” Since I’m among a growing population, I’ll always have a community. And, again, I am “Just Jewish” in a positive sense. I’m as comfortable among Reform Jews as with the Orthodox. I generally don’t know what denomination others adhere to, and I never ask. I don’t look down on *haredim*, or stone co-ed congregations. Being “Just Jewish” opens up the Jewish world; any community can be mine.

My “Just Jewish” contemporaries have various reasons for identifying as such. Some didn’t join traditional *shuls* because of the cost, and then liked what they found in alternative post-denominational *davening* circles. Many have a strong Jewish identity based not on religion, but on a commitment to Israel, a sense of historical obligation or even a perceived Jewish basis for political activism. Although I’m not sure how Judaism *sans* God can work, it seems to do so for at least many in the current generation.

For me, what works is a mixture of the traditions with modern insight. I don’t want to live as if the past few centuries never happened, but traditional Judaism does have limitless wisdom in matters mundane as well as divine. For example, I grew up in New York and have always lived

near devout religious communities that walked en masse to *shul*. The proscription against driving on holy days seems an ingenious way to keep a community together, since everyone has to live near the *shul* and thus near one another. But several years ago, I attended Reform services with a friend in her native Milwaukee, and we went by car. I remarked on the novelty of driving, and my friend blinked and said indignantly, “How else are we supposed to get there?”

Indeed. I was uncomfortable driving, but I don’t care how my friend gets to *shul*. I’m just glad she goes. I don’t mean to minimize the obligations of a religious life. Being a Jew is not supposed to be easy, and I don’t expect it to be dumbed down for me. But I’d rather fall short at a challenge than give up on a way of life that’s kept the Jewish people alive in exile for 2000 years. As Oscar Wilde said, “We are all in the gutters, but some of us are looking at the stars.” While I believe that all devout people are in the latter category, the modern world can make it difficult to keep one’s eyes on the skies. If I’m going to be successful, I need to pick out my own star. 🌟

My beliefs and lifestyle may discourage identification with one denomination, but it also helps to feel that such identification is not necessary. After all, my position is not a lonely one; I know many others who are “Just Jewish.”

Jill Eisner is an attorney living in Washington, DC.



My Challenge: Towards a Post- Denominational Common Judaism

by MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT

In nineteenth-century Europe, as traditional Judaism was overwhelmed by modernity, the emergence of denominations helped Jews maintain their community cohesiveness once they had gained admittance into larger society. In the twentieth century, denominationalism abounded. The Jewish world became comfortably segmented into movements that transcended national borders. Denominational schools, synagogues and institutions formed the bedrock of the Western Jewish world.

But somewhere along the way, things changed. Whether it was due to the liturgy, the practices, the synagogues, the communities, or the allures of the secular world, denominations ceased to resonate. Many of those who grew up in the movements are now adrift, particularly the younger generation. Statistics back up the fears. Just 40 percent of American Jewish households belong to synagogues. In 1990, according to the National Jewish Population Survey, 13 percent of Jews did not identify with a denomination or referred to themselves as “Just Jewish.” Ten years later, that number had increased to 25 percent. For most of these individuals, the denominations are simply not relevant. As a result, many have ceased to be active participants in religious observance.

We should be clear that the

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denominations were once wellsprings of creative spiritual innovation. But like many other movements, the denominations have come to be more concerned with institutional survival than with innovation. The period when Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaism were vibrant, growing, intellectually exciting movements has all but ended.

One might argue that even the ultra-Orthodox Movement, with its aversion to change and its fear of the secular world, lacks the capacity to attract all but those who were born into its branches. For *Haredi* and Modern Orthodox alike, the much-touted *ba'al teshuvah* phenomenon, which at its peak was never more than a few thousand per year, remains a statistical dud. The last two National Jewish Population Surveys show that of all the denominations, the Orthodox has the lowest percentage of members who were not born and bred in the movement itself.

The denominational falloff is only the symptom of a wider spiritual malaise. Whether it is expressed through lower levels of philanthropy or waning generational support for Israel, the majority of contemporary American Jews are detached from Judaism. In the non-Orthodox world, we have seen a great attenuation in tradition and in past modes of Jewish identification. For this reason, if we are to have any hope of reversing the drift from Jewish life, we must envision a new set of ideas that will provide the same cohesive force that

A key component of Common Judaism will be Jewish joy, so that all Jews, regardless of background, will infuse communal festivals such as Shabbat, Passover and Sukkot with *simcha* and revelry.

denominations provided in their heyday.

My nascent attempt to capture this is what I call “Common Judaism” — an articulation of shared values, rooted in tradition but resonant with contemporary life, that speaks to all Jews, that merges secular Jewish pride with Jewish values, and that offers Jews a new spiritual joy. It should appeal to all, regardless of geography, ideology, background or levels of observance. The objective is to attract the non-Orthodox back to Jewish life by emphasizing those elements in our history and tradition that are the most enduring, that are consistent with the values of the open society, and that are most capable of nurturing a lifelong attachment to Judaism. After all, Jews in the future will no longer determine Jewishness by lineality but by *choice*. Whether they lay *tefillin* or keep kosher will matter less than whether they throw their lot in with the Jewish people in an age of competing cultures and religious fads. For this reason, in order to engage and inspire future generations, Jewish offerings will have to be far more resonant than they are today.

A cynic might ask, What if nothing resonates anymore? This is the challenge — but it should not keep us from the attempt to articulate a new, holistic vision of Judaism. As of now, I cannot claim to have all the answers as to what Common Judaism will comprise. This is one reason I have sought out rabbis and intellectuals to explore the issue together. However, it is possible to identify several key concepts that can form the basis of Common Judaism: the preeminence of Jewish peoplehood as a unifying value; the centrality of Israel to the Jewish soul; the imperative of Jewish education to maintain and reinforce Jewish life; and *tzedakah* as the life-spring of our community.

When most non-Orthodox Jews today think about religious experience, joy is not likely the first word that comes to mind, and indeed their synagogue memories are anything but joyful. For this reason, a key component of Common Judaism will be Jewish joy, so that all Jews, regardless of background, will infuse communal festivals such as Shabbat, Passover and Sukkot with *simcha* and revelry.

In addition, Common Judaism will be distinctive in that it will allow the non-

Orthodox Jew who leads a “secular” life to understand how one can be both *proudly* Jewish while participating fully in secular society. Common Judaism will emphasize secular Jewish achievements throughout the centuries — from the development of Capitalism to the cure for Polio — and relate them inexorably to Jewish values. This, too, will reinforce Jewish pride. After all, the miracles of secular Jewish achievement are not random. They are the intrinsic products of Jewish education, aspiration and values. None of the three thinkers who had arguably the greatest influence on the twentieth century — Freud, Marx and Einstein — were observant Jews. But one doesn’t have to stretch very far to see how their world-altering ideas were inspired by a uniquely Jewish sensibility.

What has become clear in the 21st century is that most Jews cannot easily revert to the philosophical, spiritual and behavioral demands of Orthodoxy. Nonetheless, the non-Orthodox Jew gains sustenance from association with the contemporary state of Israel and with the world of Jewish achievements, both historic and contemporary. Common Judaism will clear the path between the individual Jew and these aspects of his or her identity.

How we hope to accomplish Common Judaism is itself complex. We will begin by assembling a narrative that will compare the Jew with other peoples with whom Jews have lived at various historical moments. By contrasting, for example, Jewish and Greek literature in the ancient world, we hope to arrive at a greater appreciation for the qualities that make the Jewish people unique, and indeed to appreciate how contemporary Jewish values were formed in ancient times. Similarly, we will try to understand how Jews were different during the period of early Christianity, the emergence of Islam, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. In each period, the emphasis will be to generate clear understandings of how Jewish ideas were created and evolved, and how they remain singular to this day. Ultimately, the goal is to create a portrait of distinct Jewish values that the contemporary Jew will see as a mirror of himself — perhaps not the clearest mirror, but a mirror nonetheless. Hopefully, the narrative will succeed in creating a compos-

ite picture of historical Jewish values that will allow today’s secular Jew to say, “Ah hah! Now I see why even though I am not observant, I still have a unique Jewish sensibility.”

In addition to this historical narrative, we also hope to articulate a compendium of religious observances that will bring spiritual satisfaction to Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews in ways that are not easily obtained in today’s world. By giving contemporary Jews resources to participate selectively in Jewish tradition, we hope to create a sense of fullness, community, joy and spiritual satisfaction for all Jews, regardless of denominational origin. Common Judaism does not mean to be ritually restrictive, but at the same time we hope to offer most Jews a sense of fullness through these offerings.

I call this “Common Judaism” because I believe that it will have the potential to be available intellectually, spiritually and emotionally, in a truly fulfilling way, to the largest number of contemporary Jews who do not wish to give up their secular lives. By necessity, Common Judaism will not be all-inclusive in terms of the totality of the liturgy and tradition that might be included. However, the selected components will hopefully create the basis for an enthusiastic, broad-based participation in Jewish life that is nowhere found today.

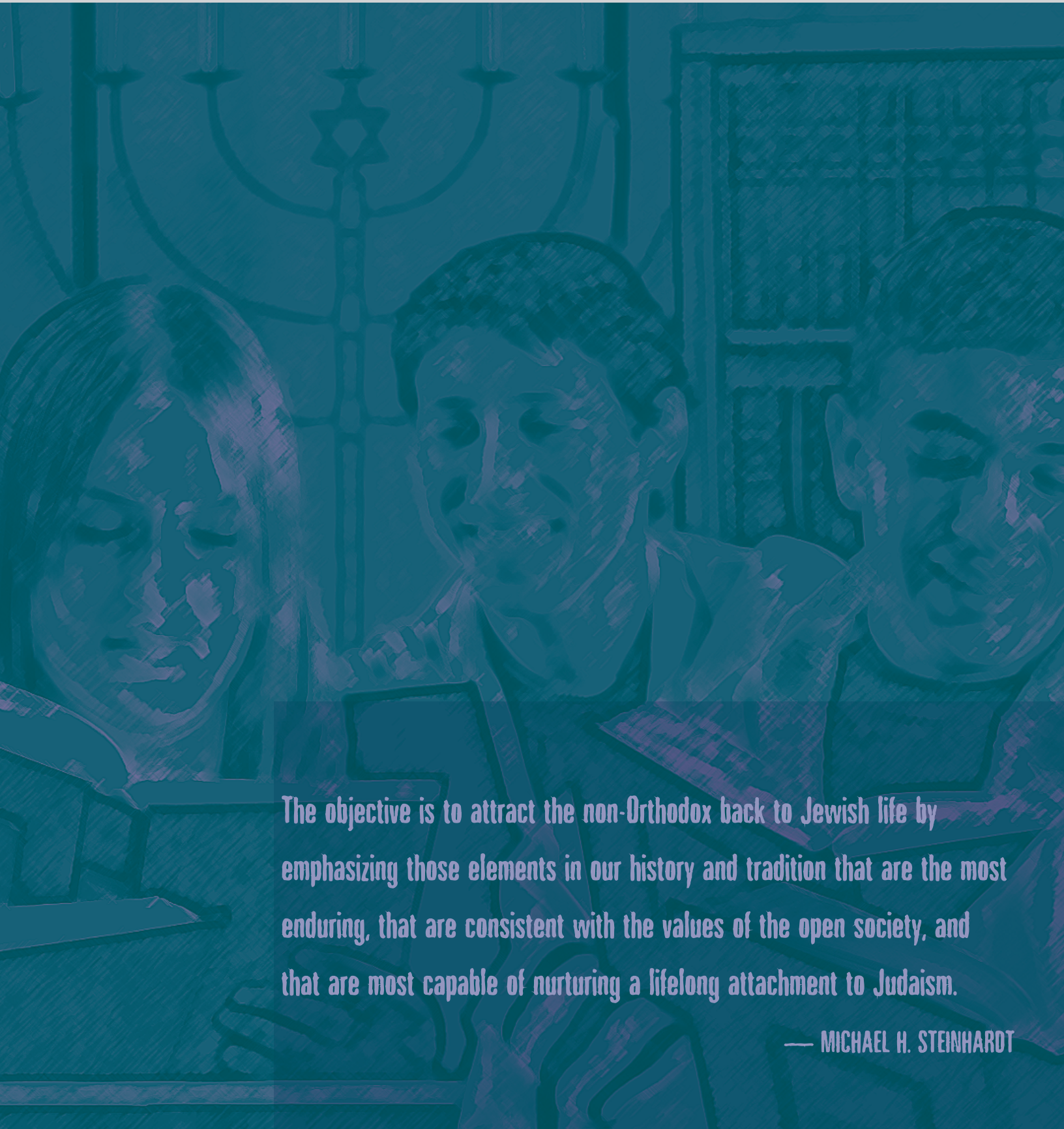
To use one example: each of the major denominations suffuses its *siddurim* with references to God and the Almighty, as if the core of contemporary Jewish experience begins and ends with a supernatural being. But if you ask the average Jew to identify the dominant characteristic of his or her Jewish identity, chances are it won’t be a belief in a Biblical God. It is not that Common Judaism will refuse to accept the existence of God, but it won’t be written in such a way that makes us feel like we are reading and experiencing a dead mythology.

This is, I concede, a mighty task. And yet, I am afraid we have no other choice if we wish to secure the Jewish future. In an age of diminishing affiliation and seemingly superfluous denominations, we need a new source of sustenance that is not overwhelmed with archaic language and concepts. Common Judaism will express the soul and the passion of the vast, and hitherto unheard, Jewish majority. 🌸



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The objective is to attract the non-Orthodox back to Jewish life by emphasizing those elements in our history and tradition that are the most enduring, that are consistent with the values of the open society, and that are most capable of nurturing a lifelong attachment to Judaism.

— MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT