

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.

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.

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

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 *kofer* (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.

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.

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

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

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

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-

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

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

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.