

The Problem of Judaism in America

Charles S. Liebman

The more one considers the topic the more one is struck by the “snares of definitions” to quote Friedlander, and the semantic difficulties they raise. I am comfortable with Friedlander’s own attempt at definition, the reference to Judaism as the “soul” or ‘spirit” manifested in Jewish culture but this hardly avoids the problems which begins but hardly ends with the observation that there is no one American Judaism. Rather than burdening the reader with problems of definition I allow myself to use the term Judaism loosely in the expectation that it will be understood, in a general way, by most readers and that a few (but there are always that few) will challenge the use of terms regardless of how meticulously they are defined. I have written about the problems or pathologies of American Judaism in a number of previous publications and much of what I say repeats what I have written elsewhere.

Judaism’s problem in the United States is related to Judaism’s strength. I refer to its ability to adjust itself to the religious market; to the changing needs of its consumers. Of course there is no one American Judaism. But I do believe that a pragmatic approach to religious principles and values characterizes American Judaism across denominational, ideological, and regional lines and marks it as distinctive from Judaism in other societies, certainly from Israeli Judaism as understood by Israeli Jews and as defined by Israeli rabbis. (Israeli Judaism in practice is another story).

Religions in America, Catholicism less so, Protestantism and Judaism more so, are what Peter Berger has termed market place or consumer oriented religions. When compared to

churches and synagogues in Europe or Israel religious congregations in the U.S. are far more responsive to the religious market. They tend to accept and seek an accommodation with prevailing cultural norms rather than rejecting and seeking to restructure those norms. They take it for granted that their function is to provide a service of some kind to their members and to attract as many new members as they can by satisfying them more than some neighboring institution. American Judaism takes its physical as well as its cultural environment as a given. It is, as a rule, non-judgmental about broad social and cultural norms although it may be very judgmental about specific norms and values, especially if they bear an overt relationship to Jews and Judaism. In other words, Jews in general and their religious and communal elite in particular may have something to say about particular government policies or legislation, or about an antisemitic incident. But they will accept general social norms and values, for example rising intermarriage rates, or new sex codes, as facts of life which they must learn and perhaps to which they are eager to adjust. They do not adopt the radical stance that would argue that if the cultural environment is inimical to Jewish norms and values, Jews must either change that environment or withdraw from it. They don't even ask the kinds of questions which might lead to a radical posture. In other words, they do not seek to weigh the norms and values of contemporary American culture against the norms and values of their religious tradition. This characteristic of American Judaism is not a recent one. It merits attention because whereas it places Judaism in the mainstream of American culture and allows Jews to feel that their religion is totally compatible with their Americanism, it involves a transformation of Judaism that may not be in its long-term interests. Adaptationism seems to be the opposite of what one might expect from a "religious" point of view. Adaptationism means that Judaism is interpreted as malleable rather than fixed. The Jewish tradition is not something that compels; it is not a body of law or a set of

norms which one is obliged to observe. At least upon first reflection, one anticipates a religious perspective to dictate that the only given, the only norm or value that one must take for granted is God and God's commands. After all, it is He who must be obeyed. Therefore, a religious perspective, I would expect, would be quite judgmental about the cultural environment; measuring it by standards of religious propriety and impropriety. I think it reasonable to suggest that those who accept the values of their culture as a given are those who don't take religion as seriously as they sometimes pretend.

Market-place religion is, in the first instance, the result of the structure of religious denominations in the United States. The local church or synagogue is fairly autonomous in terms of choosing its clerical leader, formulating its policies, governing its finances, even in determining what is or is not religiously legitimate. It is entirely dependent upon its own resources in raising money, attracting members, making decisions. As a consequence it does not aggressively declare, "here I stand", but rather "where would you like me to stand?" It tends to be far more sensitive to its need for growth and survival than to any perceived vision of what it should be like or how its members and potential members should behave. This is less true of some denominations, more true of others, but characteristic of all of them, including American Orthodoxy in comparison to Israeli Orthodoxy.

Structural and economic factors may explain the presence of a market place mentality within American religious denominations, but we should also recall that the normative implications of the religious market place have been internalized. Responding to the religious consumer and judging one's success by the satisfaction of that consumer has become a desideratum quite independently of the fact that it is probably a necessary mode of survival. This is attributable in part to our democratic ethos and to our peculiar notion of the meaning of

pluralism. Pluralism has come to mean the right of every individual to interpret religion in any manner he sees fit and the obligation of the religious establishment to accept this interpretation as equally valid with all others. As a result, we tend to accept, unthinkingly and as a matter of course, that it is legitimate for a synagogue to respond to the needs of its members and it is legitimate for a synagogue to want to attract more members. This being the case synagogues ask what its constituents and potential constituents want from it. More and more synagogues are conducting self-surveys that ask members to report what it is they want the synagogue to be doing. Nobody, to the best of my knowledge, finds this remarkable.

The charge to write on the problems of American Judaism forecloses a description of the benefits of market place or adaptationist or pragmatic Judaism. But then our eyes and ears have become accustomed to hearing this from those who celebrate the current achievements of American Judaism. I am aware of the benefits. Would that the spokesmen for Israeli Judaism internalized some aspects of adaptationism. But writing for an American audience in a publication celebrating Jewish settlement in the United States it is too easy to become sanguine about the condition of Judaism in the United States or about its successes. So I devote the remainder of this essay to mentioning a few problematic aspects of the phenomenon reminding the reader once again that the topic invites criticism rather than praise. Nevertheless, one point needs to be made and it becomes all the more striking since this volume opens with Israel Friedlander's essay. The point of Friedlander's essay is the difficulty of Judaism in those societies where Jews enjoy the fruits of emancipation -- the difficulty in producing an indigenous and creative Jewish culture. In some respects, Friedlander's hopes have been fulfilled. Regardless of how weighty are our problems, American Jews have produced a third and even

fourth generation of committed, passionate, devoted Jews. They are a minority, probably a small minority, but they attest to the potential for the construction of a viable American Judaism.

Having acknowledged this fact, the first point to note is the limited success of American Judaism in attracting Jews. The actual number of Jews in the United States is a matter of current debate. One of the core issues in this debate rests on the question of whether those who were born and raised as Jews but who no longer consider themselves Jews should be counted as Jews. According to reliable estimates, there are over one million such Jews. I estimate that one-third to one-half of Americans Jews have no interest or affiliation with any Jewish activity. Some no longer call themselves Jewish and others are indifferent as to what they are called. One might argue that the success of American Judaism can be measured by the high repute in which it is held by non-Jews, by the fact that so many non-Jews are not only willing but welcome marriages to Jews. I find this argument facile.

The adaptationist nature of American Judaism, which has resulted in its market mentality and emphasis on the individual, has not surprisingly undermined ethnic concerns and obligations of American Jews. It is important to observe the changes in the manner in which American Jews have come to understand the nature of Judaism. It was Marshall Sklare who described in detail the ethnic nature of American Judaism. Indeed, the growth of Conservative Judaism, the largest Jewish denomination from the 1940's and until most recently, was attributable to its ability to cloak the essentially ethnic identity, sentiments and commitments of Jews in a religious aura; an aura which accommodated itself to American religious expectations. This ethnic identity and commitment which spoke to first, second and even third generation American Jews was reinforced by the existence of Jewish neighborhoods. Such neighborhoods rendered ethnic attachments and ethnic patterns of life natural. American Jews no longer cherish their ethnic ties.

Developments in the last two decades are characterized by the emergence of personal and privatized Judaism at the expense of ethnic Judaism. The rhetoric of ethnicity concentrates on themes such as peoplehood, community, and solidarity. Its message centers on slogans such as “We are One” and “Keep the Promise”. Its surpassing moments are Super-Sundays, collective mobilizations for Israel, and well orchestrated political campaigns for or against some specific public policy. Ethnic Judaism, however, has retreated before a form of privatized religion. The language of this religion speaks in the hushed, softer terms of individual meaning, journeys of discovery, spirituality and the search for fulfillment. It’s emphases are inter-personal rather than collective. Its favored qualities are authenticity and sincerity rather than achievement or efficiency. Typically it is consoling, non-judgmental, intuitive, and non-obligating.

There are distinct signs that privatized Jewishness is having a substantial impact, especially on Jews in the younger age brackets. Contributions to the Federations of Jewish Philanthropy -- a major form of public Jewish expression -- are stagnating if not actually declining. Mobilization for political causes of all kinds is reported to be more and more difficult to justify and sustain. The current intifada and the challenges to Israel’s legitimacy may have halted this development but there is no reason to doubt that this is anything other than a temporary respite. Jewish organizations are increasingly comprised of and supported by an aging membership.

In place of the declining public face of Jewishness, a burgeoning private sphere offering a new understanding of the Jewish tradition has begun to make itself felt. Affluence and security are implicit in all of its pronouncements. It is the voice of a distinctively American cohort whose initial inspiration can be traced back to the counter-culture of the Sixties. Since then it has lost

many of its rebellious qualities but it still presents a picture of creative diversity and moral enthusiasm.

Variety dominates. Weekend retreats, in which Jewishness is celebrated communally through prayer, learning, and ceremony, are a staple. Some are formed by individuals with a specific religious agenda, others are created almost bureaucratically by synagogues seeking to introduce a degree of informality into the facelessness of a large congregation. Nor has the profit motive been excluded: summer-camps and retreats promising all manner of religious experiences have proliferated.

The personalist "life-style" is indeed a "style", that is, a form of life given to sharp episodic and exceptional experiences that light up the workaday and lackluster rather than out of a fixed position that encourages disciplined regularity or patterned coherence. Traditional Judaism sanctified the mundane, the everyday, and the banal. Personalism detaches individuals from the larger social collectives of whom they are a part, releases them from the binding duties these collectives impose, and leads them toward self-directed lives that pursue rare moments of meaning and growth.

This emphasis on the self and its realization, which have oddly enough been interpreted as "religious" quests, rather than on obligations transcending the individual person, entails a turning away from the kinds of commonplace commitments that lack the special cachet of personal authenticity or inner growth. Responsibilities toward abstract collectivities such as the Jewish people, therefore, decline in significance. From the personalist perspectives, true love, the ultimate personal experience, far outweighs it. Indeed, to the degree that love needs to overcome obstacles (ethnic or religious) in order to be realized, it is considered the more authentic and marvelous. Understood in terms of personal meaning, Jewishness becomes -- even for Jews -- an

acquired taste, a take it or leave it affair. Moreover, experience-based religiosity has no intrinsic justification for exclusion or boundaries; it necessarily includes all who are partner to the inspirational moment.

We have all heard of the 1990 National the Jewish Population Study. Less well known is that a significant number of respondents who identified themselves as Jewish in the 1990 Survey denied such an identity when re-surveyed in 1993. In this, the Jews are not exceptional. Research on other ethnic groups, especially among those with heavy rates of intermarriage demonstrates that group identity in the United States is fluid and situational. Ethnic identity may peak and plummet depending on the needs of the moment, the specific social context in which one finds oneself, or even according to rhythms of the calendar and the holiday seasons.

One could, as I have suggested, be strongly ethnic without being religious. This was characteristic of the second generation of American Jews. However, ethnicity, in addition to its intrinsic importance in Judaism, rendered religion credible. To borrow a formulation of Durkehim, ethnic Judaism posed an ineffable and transcendent presence, that of the collective Jewish people, which imposed itself on the lives of individuals. In this manner it made the core notion of the religion, the notion of a transcendent God, meaningful and real. The traditionally religious Jew is, by definition, an ethnic Jew as well. One need not be religious in order to be an ethnic Jew, but to move from strong ethnic to strong religious commitments is a natural one. Moving from the privatized religion, which I have just described to ethnicity, is less natural and less likely. On the contrary, the more likely move is from privatized Judaism to Christianity or some other form of new age religion; the point being that all are forms of spirituality which uplift the individual. As I suggested, this has changed somewhat in the last two years. The intifada has strengthened the bounds of ethnicity among American Jews. But this is especially true of older Jews; less true of college age students. And the threats to Israel or antisemitism on the college campuses, I would like to hope, are not a permanent part of our landscape.

This brings us to a second problem emerging from adaptationist Judaism. The emergence of a form of religious syncretism that erases boundaries between Judaism and Christianity. Signs of syncretism include the flourishing of kabala institutes, the reservations that some Jews have about circumcision and the support this receives from within the Jewish community, the growth in the Jews for Jesus movement, and the popularity of new rituals adopted from a variety of religious traditions. Most of the

syncretism today, takes place outside denominational boundaries. But, it is worth remembering that no more than an estimated forty percent of American Jews belong to a synagogue. And some of them belong to congregations served by rabbis like Roger Ross, who, according to the New York Times is executive director of the Rabbinical Fellowship of American International, an organization of unaffiliated rabbis. Rabbi Ross was ordained by the American International Rabbinical Seminary. I learned about him by virtue of his interfaith marriage to Reverend Deborah Susan Steen in a ceremony performed by Reverend Diane Berke and Rabbi Marcia Rappaport. For those interested, the wedding took place in a restaurant in Rye N.Y.

A magazine called Dovetail advertises itself as “by and for Jewish-Christian families” (the term Jewish-Christian is hyphenated in the magazine logo). One article titled “Intermarried Clergy: A special Example of Jewish-Christian Harmony” cites other examples of interfaith marriages of Jewish and non-Jewish clergy. New York magazine devoted its front page cover on February 28, 2000 to Rabbi Shmuley Boteach. The story begins by telling us that Rabbi Shmuley Boteach is proud that some of his best friends are not Jewish. He is quoted as saying, “Lots of non-Jews are great. They’re going to save Judaism” The inside front cover quotes him as saying, “Madonna, Michael [meaning Michael Jackson], Deepak – they’ll bring Jews back into the faith”. And the subheading reads:

“Rabbi Shmuley Boteach thinks Michael Jackson can help rebuild his religion. The Kabala Center sells Hebrew holy water. Makor, on the Upper West Side, offers talks on finding “The Jewish Buddha Within.” Welcome to the new –not strictly kosher— world of Judaism”

As I noted, much of what I see and hear takes place outside Jewish denominational life. But at least one Reform synagogue holds joint Thanksgiving services with a neighboring church. In a Reform synagogue in Chicago, when the rabbi was away the weekly Torah study group, which meets one hour before services, was led by a Christian seminarian. The increased number of mixed married families in Conservative but especially in Reform and Reconstructionist synagogues has raised the question of whether non-Jews may participate in synagogue ritual. The question has increasingly troubled the Reform movement and has raised fears among such prominent Reform figures as Michael Meyer. In the late eighties, the Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach of the UAHC published a booklet on the topic. A major article, by an HUC faculty member not only legitimated the participation of non-Jews but encouraged changes in the blessings to accommodate them. Other changes -- and the booklet itself describes some of them -- have been instituted in many Reform synagogues. For example when a non-Jew is called to the Torah he or she can not be expected to bless "Our God" ...who has chosen us from all the nations ". Appropriate changes must be made. Indeed, the issue in some synagogues is whether it would not be best to institute this change for all those called to the Torah. As the number of mixed marrieds increases, and the pressure for conversion is increasingly relaxed, I can anticipate more watering down of traditional Judaism and more religious syncretism. Given the unwillingness of the organized Jewish community to label anything as "authentically Jewish" or "more Jewish" it has no basis to exclude this growing syncretism. But to quote from the late Rabbi Joseph Glaser, former executive vice-president of the CCAR.

If we are to survive...we must have some kind of a base, some sort of sure footing. For this to be provided, we have to know who is committed to the basics of Judaism, so that when they speak and serve and vote in our highly democratic institutional structures, when they represent us, we will know that they are doing so Jewishly. To allow for less is to eliminate authenticity and put integrity at severe risk. There is a line. Its name is Commitment

Finally I wish to turn to a particular problem that plagues the Conservative movement. In so doing I will borrow from the section of a paper which I wrote and which was endorsed by a small group in a position paper prepared for JTS on the establishment of a leadership institute.¹ What we argued was that community is especially important for the Conservative movement since the Conservative movement, unlike Reconstructionism and Reform, affirms the *halakhic* norms of Judaism. In many instances, its interpretation of these norms differs from that prevalent among Orthodox Jews. But the obligation of every Jew to observe Jewish law, the obligation that Chancellor Schorsch calls “the governance of Jewish life by halakha” is a core value of Conservative Judaism. For example, observing the Sabbath or maintaining dietary restrictions or daily prayers, or for that matter ethical behavior toward all others, non-Jews as well as Jews, are not matters of choice or, in the larger sense, subject to individual interpretation. Insofar as the Conservative movement is concerned, these are *laws*. In addition, at the heart of *halakha* rest assumptions about the atmosphere or the environment in which these laws are to be observed. However, survey upon survey, as well as anecdotal evidence indicates that the majority of members in Conservative synagogues and the majority of parents whose children attend Conservative schools do not observe Jewish law. Some are unaware of the requirements of the law and how one goes about observing this or that ritual. But in a large sense the problem is that for many Conservative Jews the environment and

atmosphere in which observance of Jewish law becomes meaningful in one's life, is absent. Jewish law is divorced from the routine affairs of the individual. Hence, the observance seems peculiar, strange, and irrelevant. Finally, although I employ the term *law*, there are no sanctions connected to the violation of Jewish law within the Conservative movement. The community is the ideal mechanism to meet this challenge.

First, the community (whether school or synagogue) should be teaching community. It engages its members in ritual activity. In addition to prayer services, the community undertakes activities such as *shabbatonim*, breakfasts, dinners, etc. that involve individuals and families in ritual activities that awaken the members to the existence of rituals of which they may not have been aware and demonstrates the proper manner in which these rituals are observed.

Second, the community makes the ritual real and meaningful. Ritual is central to the life of the community. The participation of the members in ritual is what they share with other members of the community. As the community assumes greater and greater importance in the lives of its members, the rituals, which govern the life of the community and dictate its rhythms become more important but also more real. They become a taken for granted part of one's life. Observing Jewish law is how one lives one's life within the community.

Finally, the community becomes the guardian of Jewish law by virtue of the informal sanctions that it can impose, although this may be done quite unselfconsciously. Violating Jewish law becomes something which "isn't done". Something, which will offend the sensibilities of others, something for which one is embarrassed, something, which ultimately leads to exclusion from the warmth and the caring which a community

offers. All of this suggests that one surrenders at least part of one's individual autonomy for membership in the community. Ideally, community members will no more resent the surrender of individual autonomy to the community than do family members resent the surrender of individual autonomy to the family.

The Conservative movement may have succeeded in building synagogue centers but it has for the most part failed in building synagogue communities. Without doing so it will not remain faithful to its own vision.

¹ I am especially grateful to Riv-Ellen Prell and Steven Cohen who co-authored this material with me.