

Towards a Common Judaism

Though sharp differences of opinion among Jews are hardly a new phenomenon, Jewish public discourse has become preoccupied in recent years with the fear that mutual hostility among the competing streams of Judaism is spiraling out of control, and that the Jews, as a people, no longer possess a shared outlook capable of uniting them. Paving the way to what is fast becoming the conventional wisdom has been a wave of prominent books making the case that the life of Jewry is one of internal discord.

This point was made most tellingly in *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (2000), by Columbia University professor of journalism Samuel G. Freedman, which went so far as to insist that “civil war” was at hand. As he wrote:

From the suburban streets of Great Neck to the foot of the Western Wall, I have witnessed the struggle for the soul of American Jewry. It is a struggle that pits secularist against believer, denomination against denomination, gender against gender, liberal against conservative, traditionalist against modernist.... It is a struggle that has torn asunder families, communities, and congregations.... This civil war, while building for nearly a half-century, has reached its most furious pitch in the final years of the millennium.

The sense that Jews of different denominations hold irreconcilable worldviews was strengthened by the publication of *One People, Two Worlds: A Reform Rabbi and an Orthodox Rabbi Explore the Issues that Divide Them* (2002), an exchange of letters between Ammiel Hirsch, head of the Association of Reform Zionists of America, and Yosef Reinman, a talmudic scholar associated with the Lakewood Yeshiva. For more than eighteen months, the two rabbis tenaciously sought out the points of disagreement between them, in the process filling more than three hundred pages with disputes on the possibility of discovering truth, the nature of God, the competing claims of divine command and human autonomy, the authorship of the Bible, the extent of flexibility in Jewish law, and the proper role of women. Though the joint effort was intended to highlight the possibilities for dialogue, its effect was to overwhelm the reader with the degree to which these two men—and by extension, Reform and Orthodoxy more generally—hold opposing viewpoints on virtually every matter of significance. Reinman, who wrote of “the vast and unbridgeable ideological chasm that separates us,” drove this point home in his concluding letter: “On a personal note, Ammi, I feel that in you I have gained a friend, even though we disagree on just about all the basic tenets of Judaism.”

Even less optimistic was *What Shall I Do with This People? Jews and the Fractious Politics of Judaism* (2002), in which journalist and historian Milton Viorst set out to discover the roots of Jewish divisiveness. Reaching across more than three millennia, he produced a *tour de force* of internecine warfare, featuring accounts of clashes between Moses and the children of Israel, Maccabeans and Hellenizers, rabbinic pragmatists and supporters of Bar Kochba’s revolt, medieval rationalists and mystics, hasidim and mitnagdim, Reform and Orthodox, and Zionists and anti-Zionists. The book culminates with the contemporary struggle pitting religious backers of territorial expansion against secular advocates of peace, leading Viorst to conclude: “The Jewish people are today deeply riven. Not only do they attend different synagogues, dissimilar in fundamental ways...

they also hold violently hostile views, which they often claim to be divine commands, of how Jews should relate to one another and to their neighbors.” As a result, “Our present disputes may be apocalyptic, tearing apart the fabric of our four-thousand-year-old civilization.”

Most recently, Noah Efron’s *Real Jews: Secular vs. Ultra-Orthodox and the Struggle for Jewish Identity in Israel* (2003) posits that alongside Israel’s war with the Palestinians, “another battle has been declared. It is sometimes called a *Kulturkampf*, a culture war, sometimes a civil war, sometimes a war over the character of the state, sometimes, as one activist described it to me, the war of light against darkness.” Efron, a lecturer in history and philosophy at Bar-Ilan University, sought to understand the depths of secular hatred for haredi, or “ultra-Orthodox,” Jews. Writing after the 2003 elections, in which one-quarter of the seats in the Knesset were divided between the secularist Shinui party and the parties representing haredim, he averred that the die was cast: “However the politics play out this time, Israel’s *other* war is now irrevocably, probably tragically under way.”

These works faithfully reflect the fact that mutual animosity remains a feature of Jewish life, and strike a warning note that is worth heeding. Nonetheless, there is good reason to challenge the overly gloomy view they articulate: Though “fractious politics” continue to be a part of Jewish public life, the most significant developments of the last several years point to a narrowing, not a widening, of differences. Jews of different movements have begun to draw together on many of the central issues that have been sources of division for nearly two centuries. Taken as a whole, these developments offer an unprecedented opportunity for cooperation and for a renewed effort to forge a unified Jewish people.

Perhaps the most striking example is the shift towards traditionalism undertaken by the Reform movement, which culminated in 1999 with the approval by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR)

of a new set of principles intended to express the fundamental beliefs of Reform Jews. Such comprehensive programs had been adopted on only three previous occasions in the history of American Reform: The Pittsburgh Platform in 1885, the Columbus Platform in 1937, and the Centenary Perspective in 1976. Best known was the first of these, which announced a radical departure from the tenets of traditional Judaism, and the CCAR's decision to return to Pittsburgh in 1999 was therefore symbolic: As the official commentary on the new principles explained, this step was taken "in the hopes that the name 'Pittsburgh' would now be permanently associated with a document that showed how much the movement had changed since 1885."

To understand the significance of this statement, it is important to recall that the original Pittsburgh Platform, which Reform leader Isaac Mayer Wise termed a "Declaration of Independence" for liberal Judaism in America, had gone remarkably far in breaking with Jewish particularism and embracing a cosmopolitan, rational universalism. Its key provisions abandoned the traditional Jewish concept of God and replaced it with an abstracted "God-idea"; accepted "only the moral laws" of Judaism and rejected on principle practices such as *kashrut*, whose "observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation"; asserted that Reform Jews "recognize in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect the approaching of the realization of Israel's great messianic hope"; and declared that "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and, therefore, expect neither a return to Palestine... nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state."

Over the next century, Reform would moderate some of these positions, but none of the movement's subsequent statements came close to the tectonic shift registered in 1999. Most significantly, the new platform replaced Reform's commitment to personal autonomy, which had accorded the individual free rein to choose among Jewish beliefs and practices, with the affirmation that "the Jewish people is bound to God by an

eternal covenant (*brit*).” The importance of this shift was explained in the official commentary:

If “autonomy” was the key word of the Centenary Perspective, “dialogue” is the key word of the Pittsburgh Principles. While Pittsburgh 1885 relied on the language of... Kant (exalting a “God-idea” and the binding nature only of the moral laws), the Pittsburgh Principles uses the language of dialogue (inspired by the early-twentieth-century German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig).

The embrace of Rosenzweig’s philosophy led to new conclusions about Torah study and observance, for as the commentary continues, “if God is in dialogue with us, perhaps we hear God’s commands as though God were calling out to us... awaiting our response.” Hence, the rabbis declared on behalf of their movement that:

Through Torah study we are called to *mitzvot*, the means by which we make our lives holy. We are committed to the ongoing study of the whole array of *mitzvot* and to the fulfillment of those that address us as individuals and as a community. Some of these *mitzvot*, sacred obligations, have long been observed by Reform Jews; others, both ancient and modern, demand renewed attention as the result of the unique context of our own times.

In embracing the study of all *mitzvot*, the Pittsburgh Principles opened up the possibility of a far more traditional form of Jewish observance, and the official commentary specifically mentions *kashrut*, *talit*, *teflin*, and *mikveh* (ritual immersion) “to demonstrate the principle that there is no *mitzva* barred to Reform Jews...” Lest there be any error regarding the magnitude of this change, the commentary declares: “This paragraph reflects the most significant break from the Pittsburgh Platform. By committing ourselves to study the whole array of *mitzvot*, Reform Jews affirm that all the *mitzvot* of the Tora can call to us as they call to all Jews...”

While the shift in the Reform movement has principally affected the diaspora, Israeli Jews of differing religious outlooks have also begun coming together in ways that seemed unimaginable only a decade ago. None of the changes in the Jewish state has been as fundamental as the philosophical transformation within Reform, but the steps that have been taken, viewed collectively, are quite significant. In January 1999, the Israeli army received the tacit support of leading rabbis from the yeshiva community to establish the Nahal Haredi, a military unit that caters to the needs of ultra-Orthodox inductees; more than a thousand young men have already served in this unit, and the numbers continue to grow. In the spring of 2000, the Tal Commission, appointed by then Prime Minister Ehud Barak, received the backing of prominent haredi rabbis for its recommendation to ease the path of yeshiva students into the work force by granting them a “year of decision,” during which they could leave their studies and get jobs without immediately being drafted into the army; significantly, those former yeshiva students choosing to continue working after that year were to be drafted into the army or national service. Coupled with diminished government subsidies for yeshiva study, this has led growing numbers of haredi men to join the work force in areas ranging from law and accounting to high tech. Since the haredi community has long been resented in mainstream Israeli society for carrying too small a share of the country’s military and economic burdens, these steps have the potential to bring the Jews of Israel closer together.

A consensus has also begun to emerge on the public character of the Jewish state, a source of conflict since the founding of Israel. One sign of the change was the Kineret Declaration, which was promulgated in October 2001 after being ratified by prominent representatives of Israel’s humanist Left, the Israeli branch of Reform, traditionalists, the “national-religious” camp, and the haredim. They united behind a ten-point document that explicitly recognized the contributions of the various groups

to a common Jewish cause, and pointed the way to a peaceable resolution of central issues under contention:

We, secular, traditional, and religious Jews, each recognize the contribution of the others to the physical and spiritual existence of the Jewish people. We believe that the Jewish tradition has an important place in the public sphere and in the public aspects of the life of the state, but that the state must not impose religious norms on the private life of the individual.... We are one people. We share one past and one destiny.

In 2002, a more detailed covenant was drafted by religious-Zionist educator Ya'akov Medan and liberal legal scholar Ruth Gavison, setting forth agreed-upon principles and proposed arrangements for the most contentious issues of religion and state, including public observance of the Sabbath, the role of the Orthodox rabbinate in marriage and divorce, the government's relationship to Reform and Conservative institutions, and the definition of who is a Jew. Such initiatives have gone a long way to debunking the claim that Israeli Jews are so deeply divided that no meaningful platform can unite them.

None of these developments, whether in the Jewish state or the diaspora, erase the sharp differences that remain on issues such as patrilineal descent or the granting of legitimacy to gay marriages. Likewise, the growing convergence on the level of ideas does not automatically reduce tensions. But what the recent changes suggest is that far from auguring the dissolution of the Jewish people, the last several years have seen a bridging of differences on some of the most significant issues—and with it, the creation of new opportunities for unity.

What, then, can be done to build on these trends? First and foremost, it is essential to recognize that the Jewish tradition is not only about shared culture and customs, but is based on a distinctive set of Jewish *ideas*—including belief in one God, the possibility of discovering

moral truth, individual dignity, the centrality of the family, private initiative, communal responsibility, the rule of law, national independence, and the ideal of universal peace. Such ideas, which find their origin in the Hebrew Bible, have served to hold the Jewish people together through history, even as they exercised a decisive influence on the civilizations around us. And it is these same ideas that are reflected in various ways in all the leading Jewish streams today, giving them a strong “family resemblance” despite differences of opinion in major areas of doctrine and practice.

These ideas are our common heritage, and the time has come to set about defining for ourselves a *common Judaism*, which can serve as a core of ideas upon which the great majority of Jews can and do agree. By focusing on this core, it is possible for scholars, rabbis, and laymen to strengthen the widely-felt intuition that Jewish unity reflects a reality that goes well beyond a tribal sense of brotherhood.

This kind of approach will, of necessity, mean a diminished focus on denominationalism. For several generations now, Jews have become accustomed to defining themselves primarily with reference to the issues on which they disagree: The *mebitza* separating men from women in synagogue, the ordination of gays and lesbians as rabbis, the use of guitars on the Sabbath, and so on. Such issues will continue to provoke debate, and a focus on ideas that unite Jews does not require anyone to give up his or her beliefs on such matters, nor does it suggest the demise of the existing denominations. What is needed, though, is a change in paradigm along the lines suggested a century ago by the scholar and educator Solomon Schechter, who in “His Majesty’s Opposition” called on Jews holding different viewpoints to see themselves as belonging to competing political parties within a single, great republic: Though opposed to one another on some issues, they should regard themselves first as *citizens of the Jewish people*, advancing the interests of the nation and the common creed for which it stands; and only secondarily as partisans seeking to move the nation towards a particular understanding of that creed.

Such an approach does not negate the role of comparison, but shifts its focus. Instead of highlighting differences among the movements of Judaism, it suggests that it is more revealing to consider *how Judaism as a whole differs from the leading civilizations, philosophies, and religions with which it is in competition*, whether these be Christianity, Buddhism, or the main streams of Enlightenment thought. This is not a kind of discourse that is very familiar these days, but this does not mean that there are no models for it. One can consider, for example, *The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion* (1955), edited by Louis Finkelstein, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary; *Where Judaism Differs* (1956), by Abba Hillel Silver, a leading Reform thinker and activist; or *Radical Then, Radical Now* (1991) by Jonathan Sacks, the Orthodox Chief Rabbi of Britain.

Such comparisons must be made fairly and honestly, with humility and a respect for the truths contained in the teachings and practices of other peoples. At the same time, however, a great deal can be gained by considering the real differences between Judaism and its competitors in the realm of ideas, demonstrating with balanced scholarship where our tradition has made a major contribution, and showcasing areas in which it has the potential to make further contributions to humanity.

Indeed, at the heart of a common Judaism is the belief that the ideas that unite Jews can benefit mankind as a whole, and that the age-old vision of improving the world is one in which all Jews can share. Though uniting Jews around the great ideas of our tradition is no small task, the prospects for success are greater today than at any time in recent memory.

Daniel Polisar, for the Editors
March 15, 2004