

# Integrity

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Our subject for this week is New York magazine's cover story of July 14, "Are American Jews Disappearing?" When Craig Horowitz, who wrote the story, called to interview me, I was mildly apprehensive: Often, writers who do stories on the Jews for popular magazines have a chip on their shoulder; if they're Jewish, there's often a whiff of self-hatred. But Mr. Horowitz's manner, intelligence, and seriousness of purpose became quickly manifest, and these are all reflected in his published piece.

But: The Horowitz article inappropriately gloomy in tone. And, more disturbingly, its clear inference is that America's Jews have two choices, and only two: Disappearance, or Orthodoxy. There's "bagels-and-Bloomingtondale's" Judaism, which can't last, and there's Esther Jungreis and her *Hineni* program; choose. There's Jewish ethnicity, rapidly fading, and there's Jewish religion, of which, from the weight given it in the article, Orthodoxy is the most powerful expression; choose. There's a Judaism that is comfortable with American pluralism, which is suicidal, and there's a cloistered Judaism; choose.

It is difficult to understand how a thoughtful observer in 1997 can scan the American Jewish community, so vibrant in so many of its aspects, and conclude that we have but two choices. If anything distinguishes us these days, it is precisely the extraordinary diversity of ways in which people are coming together to do Jewish. It is by no means a foregone conclusion that we will last, that all the familiar problems of the open society will not, eventually, do us in, but if we fail, it will not be for want of trying.

Orthodoxy works, for some number of us. That number may, indeed, as some claim, be growing, may be approaching, say, 10 percent of us. But put all of our eggs in Orthodoxy's basket? That is hardly a prescription for Jewish continuity. There is much to be praised about American Orthodoxy; principally, that it has had the courage to assert, and by now to demonstrate, that one

can stretch America's boundaries wide enough to include a quasi-separatist community, one that explicitly chooses to be out of step with the American mainstream. Orthodoxy is to be praised for its integrity.

But the mistake my Orthodox friends make when we talk of such things is to suggest that alternative understandings of Judaism and alternative expressions of such understandings lack integrity, that the other 90 percent or so of us are all about compromise.

Not so. Starting from a very different set of beliefs and assumptions, our job is precisely to demonstrate that there can be a thriving and purposeful and satisfying Jewish life that does not subvert *our* integrity, that does not compromise our beliefs. The heart of the difference between Orthodoxy and other understandings, bluntly put, goes to the issue of whether the Torah is literally God's word. Tell me that the only way for the Jews to survive is for us to accept that it is, and ask me then in the name of Jewish survival to opt for Orthodoxy, and you have asked me to shatter my authenticity, to stomp on my integrity. I cannot; I will not.

But I, along with some millions of other American Jews, are not a whit less determined than our Orthodox brothers and sisters to see our people thrive. And the current proliferation of approaches to ensuring that survival is profoundly exciting, is reassuring. All the grim prognostication notwithstanding, we're now looking through a window of opportunity at an unpredicted vigor and seriousness of purpose.

In the long run . . . who knows? Our efforts may come to naught, the Orthodox approach may prove wanting, we may both do well, we may both fail. We do what we can, and, as John Maynard Keynes put it, we live our lives in the short run. In that short run, the worst advice of all is that we must all march to the beat of the very same drummer, whether or not that beat resonates with our inner rhythms.