

Secularity Among Conservative Jews

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Jews in the United States and Canada show the highest level of secularity of any ethnic or religio-ethnic group of European origin. Jews are the least likely to attend religious services, to express belief in God and miracles, to believe in divine revelation. A few years ago, the Gallup poll asked a sample of North Americans, "How important would you say that religion is in your life?" Fifty-six percent of Roman Catholics, 37 percent of Episcopalians, 55 percent of Presbyterians, 72 percent of Southern Baptists and 25 percent of Jews replied that religion was very important to them.* The same question was posed to members of Conservative synagogues and 41 percent of that sample said that religion was very important to them. As one would expect, a much larger proportion of members of Conservative congregations expressed the view that religion was very important to them than was true of Jews generally. Yet it is surprising that the majority of the members of a religious organization report that religion is not very important to them. Would the majority of the subscribers to the local Philharmonic orchestra report that music was not very important to them?

While Jews as a group are not strongly committed to religious norms, they do show an incredibly high level of communal solidarity. Jews, far more than Protestants and Catholics, are likely to befriend co-religionists; Jews are very likely to live with fellow Jews forming Jewish neighborhoods. On a larger canvas, Jews feel responsible for one another. The struggle for the emancipation of Soviet Jews galvanized tens of thousands of North American Jews to protest, attend rallies, contribute funds.

Many Jews consider themselves and are considered by their fellow Jews to be good and loyal Jews without being religious. Indeed, over the past one hundred fifty years, there have been many important Jewish movements which were not religious. So too there were many Jewish leaders and heroes who were not religious.

To get at what we might call the "tribal" element in the Jewish experience we asked: *How important would you say that being Jewish is in your life?* We found that 78 percent of the members of Conservative synagogues felt that being Jewish was very important to them. This fraction is far greater than it is for the Jewish population as whole where only 55 percent say that

* In a national opinion survey of American Jews, 97 percent of those who identified as Orthodox, agreed that being Jewish is very important in their own lives, as compared with 73 percent of those who identified as Conservative and 53 percent of those who identified as Reform.

being Jewish is very important to them. Jewish peoplehood is important to a higher proportion of affiliated Conservative Jews than is Jewish religion. By cross tabulating responses to questions about the importance of religion and being Jewish, we find some interesting patterns: 40 percent of the sample reports that both religion and Jewishness are very important; 37 percent report that being Jewish is very important while religion is not very important; 21 percent report that neither being Jewish nor religion is very important; 1 percent tell us that being Jewish is not very important while religion is very important. We shall call the group that is committed to both religion and to Jewishness, "religionists"; the group that is committed to Jewishness and not religion, we shall term "secular," and the group that is committed neither to Jewishness nor to religion we shall term the "peripherals."

A cross tabulation tells us that in order to give priority to Jewish religion (Judaism) in one's life, one must give priority to being Jewish (Jewishness). That is, only a tiny minority of the sample of Conservative synagogue members (1 percent) tells us that religion is very important but that being Jewish is not. Though logically possible, it is extremely unusual for a person to express strong attachment to religion without strong attachment to the Jewish people. For Conservative Jews, religion is not embraced in the abstract but in the particularity of Jewish experience. Judaism without particularity floats in the air much like figures in a Chagall painting.

Jewishness is threatened by assimilation and Jewish religion by secularization. Both processes have been going on for the past one hundred fifty to two hundred and fifty years and they have wreaked havoc on Jews and Judaism. Secularization worked much more rapidly and pervasively among modern Jews than did assimilation. Jews remained Jews long after they stopped believing and practicing as Jews. While some Jews sought to disappear as Jews through conversion, the vast majority remained identified as Jews, though frequently with few of the markers of traditional Jews, whether the markers were religious or secular.**

** There are many dimensions of Jewishness/Judaism. Referring back to the national opinion survey cited above, we find that when asked for the most important element in the constellation of modes of Jewishness, Conservative Jews were the most likely to say that being part of the Jewish people is the most important while Orthodox Jews are more likely to say, "religious observance." The emphasis on peoplehood has characterized the Conservative movement since its beginning. However the movement also stressed religious observance. Clearly one message resonated with the rank and file far more than did the other.

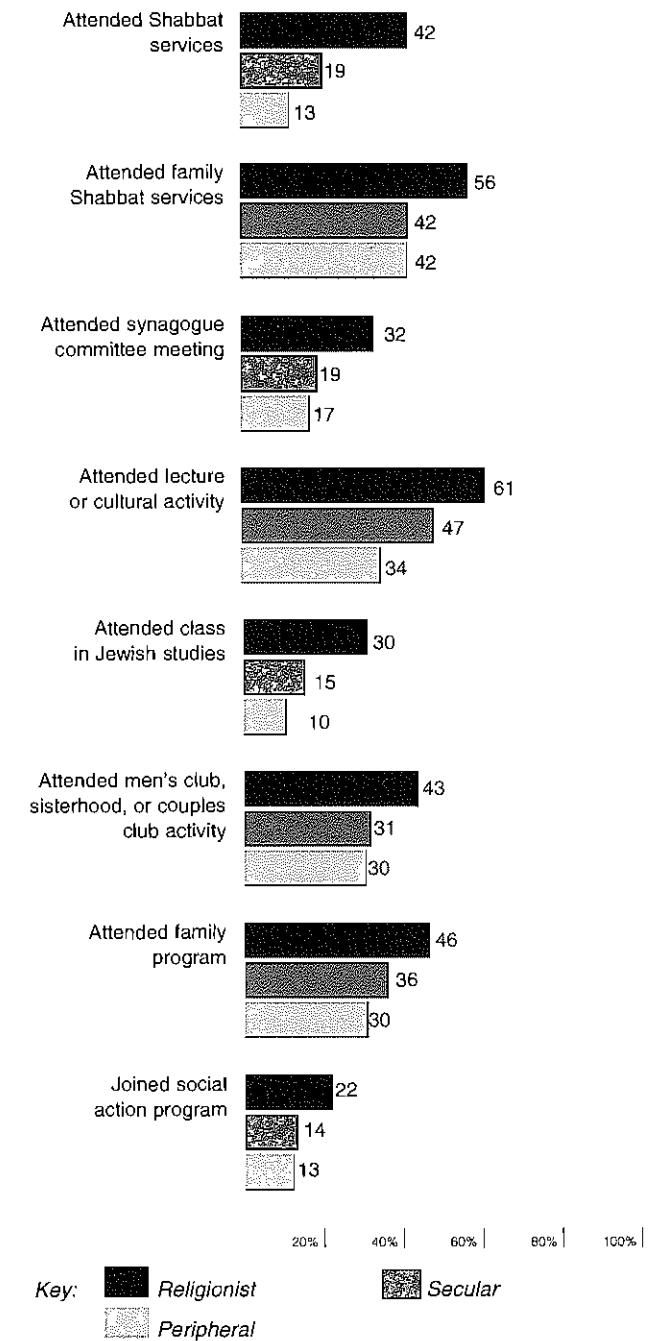
How did it come to pass that people with little interest in religion became affiliated with the synagogue? The answer lies in the fact that the synagogue became the major address of the Jews in the diaspora. By the time that North American Jews moved in large numbers to the suburbs, where the Conservative congregation flourished, religion had almost entirely displaced ethnicity or nationality as a focus of communal organization, while for the individual member of the congregation, the Jewish people was the anchor of his Jewish life. The generations of the immigrants and their children could lead rich Jewish lives through their commitment to Yiddishism, socialism, and a host of other Jewish secular "isms." This is no longer possible. For the most part, Jews, whether we classify them as religious or secular, are now homeless except for the synagogue. To meet the needs of secular Jews, the synagogue has taken on a wide variety of "worldly" functions such as sports, social gatherings, and the like.

As one would expect, the volume and pattern of participation of the "religionists," "secularists" and "peripherals" differ significantly, one from the other. Taking Sabbath service attendance as our first concern we find that there is a vast difference between the "religionist" members on the one hand, and the "secularists" and "peripherals" on the other, while the differences between "secularists" and "peripherals" is small. (See Chart 1.) This finding is almost embarrassingly obvious but its implications are not. In the absence of religious commitment, congregations have substituted "special occasions" as pretexts for conducting services. While this may work for any given Shabbat, it will not create a Shabbat community around which a larger Jewish community can be built.

Sabbath services aside, we have a list of nine congregational activities and the fraction of each of the three groups ("religionists," "secularists" and "peripherals") that participate frequently in each of the activities. In every instance, the "religionists" are more involved in the life of the congregation than either the "secularists" or the "peripherals." This pattern holds true for each individual item on the list. It is clear that differences among the three groups are not restricted to religious activities but are reflected strongly in intellectual activities such as classes and lectures as well. The probability of participating in Jewish learning is enhanced by commitment to the Jewish people and to Jewish religion. Even committee and board meetings, which are heavily involved in administration and finance, are also the beneficiaries of ethnic and religious commitments.

Given the importance of this powerful and highly generalized measure of Jewish commitment, it would be highly desirable to know its source. That is, why do some Jews affiliated with a Conservative synagogue assert that being Jewish is important to them but religion is not? Why do some claim that both religion and being Jewish are important or that neither is important? We begin with some important non-

Chart 1 Percentage Participating Regularly in Congregational Life Among Sectors of Conservative Congregational Membership



Source: Conservative Membership Study, 1995

findings, that is, some instances where we might expect to find a source for this central measure but did not.

Generational membership in North America makes no difference. Our collective imagery is of pious ancestors and fallen children. The former were pious, learned, loyal Jews while the latter are clearly lesser Jews. While this is undoubtedly true for some of us individually, it is not true collectively. In the main, age makes no difference—with the following qualification: the youngest group, those under 35 years old, is significantly more likely to assert the importance of both Jewishness and religion; once we consider those above 35, age makes no difference. Perhaps, the more powerful commitment of the under 35 group presages a new day for the Conservative movement or simply reflects the fact that most people joining Conservative congregations hold off affiliating until they have children of school age. Those who do affiliate when they are young are not a random sample of their age cohort. At any rate, our image of the pious "old folks" needs updating.

So too our image of the "corrosive" effect of education. "Religionists" in the synagogue are no less intellectually sophisticated than are "secularists," nor are "peripherals" less committed to Judaism and Jewishness because they "know better."

If the variation in the sort of Jewish commitment we are discussing does not come from broad social and demographic forces, what is its source? No one source explains everything neatly—there is no magic solution. But the explanations that do work are connected with the influence of significant others. That is, parents and spouses are the most effective agents of Jewish socialization. If a parent wants his/her child to be a concerned Jew then the parent must include the child in his or her world of Jewish concern. If a parent wants his/her child to be a believing Jew, then the parent dare not depend upon the Jewish school to do the job alone. Schools transmit knowledge and skills; loved ones shape life commitments.

We have seen some of the consequences of the marginalization of Jewish religion even within the precincts of the synagogue. Those who do not express a religious commitment participate less in the life of the synagogue. They also demand less from the leadership of the congregation. It is less important to the "secularists" and the "peripherals" that their rabbi be a model of Jewish piety and scholarship. From a cynical perspective, they are ideal members. They demand little and pay their dues. However, Jewish consciousness, Jewish collective memory and Jewish community, are embedded in Jewish religion. Without Jewish religion, Jews quickly become amnesiacs and ultimately cease functioning as Jews.

Until modern times, Jewishness and Judaism were linked together such that it was impossible to affirm one without affirming the other. The religion of the Jewish people is a response to the history of the Jewish people. In the traditional

Jewish imagination, the Jew exists on two levels, which coexisted easily with one another. Jews gave their children the names of heroes and heroines from Jewish history. Thus, there was *Avraham Avinu*, our Father Abraham, and *Avremele*, little Abraham, who lived down the street. They were equally real. Somewhere along the way to westernization and modernization, a large fraction of the Jewish people lost touch with its ancestors and the ancient family saga, though they maintained contact and concern for and with the Jews of their own time. In the foreshortening of their time horizon and their turn away from the past, many Jews became "secularists" and some became "peripherals."

Late Twentieth Century Conservative Synagogues: An Ethnographic View

Riv- Ellen Prell

Thirty years ago, the new suburban synagogue was the source of important insight into the postwar American Jewish community. Burgeoning membership, sparse synagogue attendance, women in leadership roles and a focus on children's education revealed the eagerness of Jews to join mainstream American culture but not to abandon their Jewish identity. Community and the importance of transmitting Jewish identity to the next generation were at the core of a Jewish life for young families that distinguished them from their suburban neighbors.

My study of two suburban Minnesota synagogues suggests that synagogue life has something different to tell us about the American-Jewish world of the late twentieth century. While children are still the crucial factor in a family's decision to join a synagogue, and attendance continues to decline, community is no longer the synagogue's primary draw. The adults who join and count themselves among the active members seem far more interested in learning than in other activities. Jews have greater access to social clubs and mainstream activities today than just after World War II when anti-Semitism was still widespread. The synagogue now plays a narrower but more religious role in its members' lives, although what constitutes a religious life is negotiated by individuals and families.

Family Life

Families today are fundamentally different from those in that earlier era. They are far more likely to be headed by two working parents, both facing heavier demands on their time than when mothers were expected to meet all family needs. There are more divorced parents and reconstituted families; intermarriage has increased. Conservative synagogues of the late 1990s respond to members, whatever their level of observance, who must integrate Judaism into the same limited non-work hours that are reserved for children, family responsibilities, leisure and volunteer activities. Synagogues therefore must transmit Jewish practice within the social realities of their own time.

The Synagogues

I have compared two synagogues that are remarkably alike in certain ways. Beth El Synagogue and Beth Jacob Synagogue are both centrist Conservative congregations, committed to the full equality of men and women in every aspect of Jewish life.

Their rabbis are traditional Jews with young families whose own lives model scrupulous observance of Jewish law. Beth Jacob's congregants are more observant than Beth El's, but congregants in both synagogues are more observant than the national average for Conservative Jews. Their Shabbat morning services are virtually identical liturgically. They have active youth programs, their Shabbat skills training and preparation for *b'nai mitzvah* are highly regarded and impressive numbers of their teenagers go on to become Torah readers and teachers in the programs that produced them. Although the synagogues do not provide Jewish education, all their youth are required either to attend a community supplementary school or a day school.

Beth El and Beth Jacob are, nevertheless, dramatically different congregations. Even more than their difference in size—Beth El has about thirteen hundred households and Beth Jacob has about three hundred fifty—and the fact that Beth El has a cantor whose leadership is critical, are the synagogues' ages. Beth El was not quite seventy-five years old at the time of this study, while Beth Jacob was celebrating its tenth anniversary. Both congregations have had rabbis with remarkably stable tenures. Beth El has had three distinguished senior rabbis for more than seventy years, although during 1995-96, the position of senior rabbi was being held on an interim basis by the congregation's junior rabbi while the community conducted its search. Beth Jacob's rabbi has served the congregation for nine years and the community anticipates that he will remain with the congregation until his retirement.

Community and Religious Life

In creating Jewish community and religious life, the congregations share some but not all of the same goals. They envision different types of communities, and to some extent, they serve different types of Jews. The contrasts between them are evident in examining what happened when, in 1995, during their Yom Kippur sermons, the rabbis of both synagogues initiated a year of programming dedicated to *mitzvot*. The idea was to increase congregants' personal observance within the home and private life.

Shabbat Observance at Beth El

At Beth El, Rabbi Kahn, Cantor Newman, the staff and a lay committee developed "Celebrate Shabbat" to encourage congregants to increase their religious observance of Shabbat at home on Friday night in conjunction with the synagogues'