

SHMA.COM

Patrick Aleph is co-founder, CEO, and executive director of PunkTorah.org as well as cofounder of PunkTorah family, 3xDaily.org, NewKosher.org, and OneShul.org, an online, community-run synagogue.

Michael Sabani, currently studying for the rabbinate, is the chief creative officer, creative director, and co-founder of the PunkTorah family.

Caryn Aviv is the Posen Senior
Instructor in Secular Jewish
Society and Civilization in the
program in Jewish studies at the
University of Colorado at Boulder.
A co-author and editor of three
books, she writes and teaches in
the areas of contemporary Jewish
cultures, gender/sexualities in
Judaism, and Israel studies. She
also directs Storahtelling
Colorado.

Rabbi Jason Miller is a CLAL
"Rabbi Without Borders" who
serves as rabbi of Tamarack
Camps. He is the founder and
director of Kosher Michigan, a
kosher certification agency,
and the president of Access
Computer Technology, an IT and
social media consulting
company. He blogs at
http://blog.rabbijason.com.

Rabbi Juan Mejía is the first descendant of Anusim (Conversos, Marranos) to be ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary. He is the southwestern coordinator for Be'chol Lashon, an organization that advocates for the growth and diversity of the Jewish people. His Torah can be found at www.koltuvsefarad.com.

SKYPE Interviews

Check out **shma.com** to view Patrick Aleph and Michael Sabani interviewing Caryn Aviv, Juan Mejía, and Jason Miller about their responses. What claims do Patrick Aleph and Michael Sabani make? First, people's anxieties about Jewish life are misplaced. Jews are overly (and perhaps incorrectly) concerned about Jewish culture. The authors suggest that theists

should come out of the closet and help secular Jews connect to the divine. Second, Jews worry too much about conforming to some unnamed tribal standard (not halakhah?), or being iconoclastic in a given community, at the risk of losing their own individual identities.

I'm not thoroughly convinced by either of these claims. Is the argument here a diagnosis? Is it a description of contemporary Jewish life or a prescription for how to save the Jews (from themselves)?

There are many recent studies that disclose significant reasons and root causes as to why people's identification with Judaism, or God, or Israel is waning. Judaism includes a set of varied

practices and beliefs that are distinct from halakhah. Both belief and practice provide structure to individual and collective Jewish lives, but how people interpret both Judaism and halakhah varies widely. That tension — of belief and practice — is not new; in fact, it is healthy (indeed, necessary) for the continued flourishing of contemporary Jewish life.

-Caryn Aviv

Jewish identity is a tricky subject. We have no consensus on how to define it, what it should feel like, or to what extent it should be particularistic. I find that Judaism has much wisdom to offer, both to adherents of the faith and to the rest of the world. I'm often, therefore, baffled by our numbers — that we account for such a small fraction of the population.

Should we worry more about monotheism, as Michael Sabani and Patrick Aleph suggest? Should we worry less about the cultural components of our peoplehood? These are decisions

that each individual "member of the tribe" must make. Some Jews will be enthralled with bagels and lox on Sunday mornings, federation meetings, Seinfeld reruns, and B'nai Brith softball. Other Jews will recharge their spiritual bat-

If I try to be like him, who will be like me?

Yiddish Proverb

No study has ever been done to discover the root cause of why people stop identifying with Judaism. If we worry less about Judaism as a culture and more about monotheism, we might find that — suddenly — people have something more to believe in. Jewish identity is more than matzah ball soup and Young Professionals mixers.

God, Israel (the people), and the Torah are essential for Jewish identity. Without God, we sit on a stool with only two legs. Theists need to summon up the courage to put God first in Jewish life in spite of the urge to keep our heads down so we don't look crazy.

We often place a lot of importance on not standing out, especially in a "tribal" sense. It gives us a sense of being a part of something larger than ourselves. The flip side is that if we all try to be like someone else, we lose who we really are.

Judaism is a path (halakhah) that allows us to walk together, even if we walk at our own pace. When we try to be like another, we are giving up our God-given individuality.

-Patrick Aleph & Michael Sabani

teries in traditional synagogue life. Some will look to Jewish summer camp as their source of Jewishness, and for other people it will be the connection to the State of Israel. We are a club, but we're not sure who is included and who decides our boundaries. It is good for us to stand out as tribally different, but we should also count our blessings that we are included in the larger fabric as well.

-Jason Miller

Let's turn the original question on its head. Let's stop focusing, for a moment, on what pushes Jews away from Judaism and start focusing on what compels Jewsby-choice, or converts, to choose Judaism. Why are non-Jews drawn to

Judaism? How do they fashion a new Jewish identity where there was not one before? If we uncover what so compels non-Jews to choose Judaism, then we might also understand what we could do to help those already Jewish identify more strongly with Judaism.

Abraham and Sarah did not follow a grandiose concept into the desert; they did not follow "the God of Israel." Rather, they followed "the God who calls to me"! Ruth the Moabite — often considered the first convert — did not say, "Whither thou goest..." to "the people Israel," but rather sought to deepen her relationship with particular Jews.

Our institutions of outreach must also become institutions of in-reach, with more attention to personally inviting Jews back into Judaism: classes that teach and inspire Judaism, spiritual counseling, and personal welcome in the synagogue. We just might, then, help more Jews and non-Jewish seekers experience a calling — a "lekh-lekha" moment.

-Juan Mejía