

Ritual, Ceremony and the Reconstruction of Judaism in the United States

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Until very recently, observers of American Jewish life have noted a steady decline in ritual observance. This observation has been challenged in recent years¹ and was one of the points of contention in two recently published papers on the quality of Jewish life in the United States.² Each author assumed that the question of whether Jews were observing more, the same or less Jewish ritual than they had in the recent past was a critical dimension in assessing the quality of Jewish life in the United States. I wish to argue that the issue was improperly formulated. In the first place, insufficient account was taken of the distinction between ceremony and ritual. Second, too much emphasis was given to whether a particular ritual (or ceremony) was performed and inadequate attention was paid to the context in which it was performed and, therefore, the manner in which it is understood.

Ceremony and Ritual

Although the terms “ceremony” and “ritual” are used interchangeably in popular discourse, many students of religion distinguish between them.³ Such a distinction is very relevant for understanding the religious behavior of American Jews. For our purposes, the comment by Zuesse in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* is especially appropriate. He notes that “some social anthropologists distinguish between ‘ritual’—stylized repetitious behavior that is explicitly religious—and ceremony, which “is merely social even in explicit meaning.” Ritual not only involves “intentional bodily engagement,”⁴ which is necessarily more stylized than ceremonial behavior, but it is also believed to be efficacious. It is directed toward a particular goal and becomes, among other things, a mechanism for achieving those goals. Religious ritual connects the participant to some transcendent presence. It provides a bridge to God by engaging the participant in an act that God has commanded. At the very least, it is efficacious in the sense that it is pleasing to God or avoids God’s displeasure. But it only produces the desired results when performed correctly.

In ceremony, aspects of the social and cosmological order find representation. Participation in the ceremony affirms the individual's membership in this order. But since the ceremony is not deemed to be commanded by God, it need not be performed in as precise or stylized a manner as ritual. Because it is a consciously social act and a representation of a social order, it is more amenable to change than ritual. Precisely because it is not perceived as preordained, those in charge are held responsible for its suitability and appropriateness.

Ceremony is symbol. It, too, may be cloaked in an aura of mystery—participants may derive a variety of meanings from the ceremony, and the specific connections between the ceremony and the social order it represents may be sensed rather than articulated. But even the “sense” of the participants allows them to judge the content of a ceremony as unsuitable or inappropriate or poorly done. Ritual is both more resistant to change (though by no means invulnerable), and less amenable to criticism of its content.

In Judaism, it seems to me, most *mitzvot* (sing.: *mitzvah*: commandment), fit the definition of ritual. They are believed to be commands, ordained by God, that the Jew must perform in a prescribed manner. For example, before Jews eat bread, they must recite a blessing. Before reciting this blessing they must wash their hands and recite a blessing over this act. Even the manner in which the hands are to be washed is prescribed—the kind of utensil to be used, the order in which the hands are to be washed and the number of times each hand is to be washed are clearly spelled out. Within the Jewish tradition, questions are raised about whether the individual who performs a ritual in an improper manner has fulfilled his obligations. But indifference to the manner in which the ritual is performed is certainly inappropriate. It may render the blessing one recites prior to performing the *mitzvah* a “superfluous blessing,” which itself is sinful. Ritualism, as Mary Douglas has observed, therefore, is the opposite of ethicism, which attributes primary importance to intention and devalues the precise manner in which an act is performed. “The move away from ritual is accompanied by a strong movement towards greater ethical sensitivity,” she observes,⁵ although her own study indicates how ultimately self-defeating this may become. If we understand ritual in this respect, there can be little question that there is an increase in ritual behavior among Orthodox Jews in the United States⁶ and a decline among the non-Orthodox. The latter comprise close to ninety percent of American Jews.

On the other hand, ceremonial behavior flourishes. This is most noticeable within the Reform movement, which has embraced Jewish symbols and encourages its members to partake of ceremonial activity that it often (mistakenly in our terms) calls ritual. Its synagogues are far richer in Jewish ceremony than they were in the past. But this, too, should not be confused with ritual. The Sabbath service in a Reform synagogue may not include reading from the Torah (the central point of the traditional Sabbath service) or may include reading only a few lines rather than the entire weekly portion, but it will include a rather elaborate ceremony in which the Torah scrolls are taken out of and returned to the highly ornamented ark in which they are kept. A bar mitzvah ceremony in a Reform synagogue might have the rabbi removing the Torah scroll from the ark and handing it to the parents of the youngster whose bar mitzvah is being celebrated. The parents, in turn, hand the Torah, in this

case a symbol of the Jewish tradition, to the bar mitzvah celebrant. In traditional Judaism, the only purpose for taking the Torah scrolls out of the ark is to read from them. Indeed, Jewish law is rather strict in proscribing other uses of the scrolls because of their sanctity. Hence the elaboration of the ceremonial in which the Torah scrolls are handled is certainly "ritually" inappropriate. But we are dealing with ceremony rather than ritual. The congregants do not believe that what they are doing was commanded by God, that it must only be performed in a prescribed manner or that its proper performance is efficacious. They are partaking of ceremonial behavior, that is, symbolic behavior, whose social nature in this case seems fairly explicit. The ceremony symbolizes the ties between parent and child in a Jewish context; the centrality of generational continuity and the special role of the parent-child relationship in transmitting the Torah (i.e., tradition); the almost proprietary rights Jews have with respect to the Torah; and the central role of the rabbi. The ceremony clearly projects a certain representation of the Jewish social order and affirms the participants' membership in this order.

The ceremonial service need not necessarily be contrary to ritual in order for us to appreciate what is and what is not being celebrated. A good example is the recent flourishing of *havdalah* services. At the close of the Sabbath, but as late as midweek if he forgets to do so, a Jew is commanded to recite three blessings that distinguish the Sabbath from the rest of the week. The *havdalah* service, as performed by most Orthodox Jews, is recited immediately on conclusion of the Saturday evening prayers. Its recital takes no more than two or three minutes. There is hardly a Jewish meeting, conference, seminar or event of any kind that has taken place during the last decade and held on the Sabbath that has not included the *havdalah* ceremony. Indeed, among the non-Orthodox this ceremony tends to be far more elaborate than among the Orthodox. The ceremony may conclude with all those present forming a large circle, holding hands, singing together and, quite often, kissing one another. While most of the participants are unlikely to perform *havdalah* in their own homes, they seem to look forward to the ceremony when performed under organizational auspices. The ceremony may be performed in a ritually correct manner, but from the point of view of Orthodox Judaism, it is not acceptable to conduct a *havdalah* service while omitting the evening prayers that precede it. It seems reasonable to suggest that the *havdalah* service described here is more appropriately defined as ceremony than as ritual.

The popularity of *havdalah*, along with other ceremonials we have mentioned, suggests a ceremonial renaissance among American Jews. Even this would not have been anticipated by students of Jewish religious life in the United States a generation ago. Those observers suggested that the steady decline in ritual and ceremonial behavior among American Jews (the two forms of behavior were not distinguished) foretold their approaching assimilation. That may or may not be true. But the situation is more complex than was suggested. American Jews are not abandoning Jewish ceremonials, nor are they substituting non-Jewish for Jewish ritual. Instead, they are transforming Jewish patterns of behavior into American ones. The very emphasis on ceremony and de-emphasis of ritual illustrates this pattern. Ceremony, in addition, lends itself—far more than ritual—to reconstruction, and it is this reconstruction that is so critical to understanding contemporary developments in the religious life of American Jews.

Religious Reconstruction

In his study of Jewish life in a wealthy suburban community first published in 1967, Marshall Sklare detected a development that is now identifiable as a major trend in American Jewish life. "I feel Judaism is changing," says one of Sklare's suburban respondents. "Some people only think of religion in terms of ritual. I don't."⁷ How then do Jews think of Judaism? I suggest four central components, really two sets of two components each, that distinguish the manner in which American Jews conceive of their religious tradition and represent the tools for reconstructing that tradition. These are: personalism and voluntarism as one set of components; universalism and moralism as the other. They are all interrelated but, for heuristic purposes, are best discussed separately.

Personalism and Voluntarism

Personalism is a philosophical perspective in which "person is the ontological ultimate and for which personality is thus the fundamental explanatory principle."⁸ Personalism is reflected in the observation by Sklare that "the modern Jew selects from the vast storehouse of the past what is not only objectively possible for him to practice but subjectively possible for him to 'identify' with."⁹ Sklare is referring to the performance of mitzvot, or Jewish ritual, but personalism is imposed on all aspects of the religious tradition. Personalism refers to the tendency to transform and evaluate the tradition in terms of its utility or meaningfulness to the individual. "The best assurance of Jewish survival," Cohen and Fein say, "is the development of a community that offers its members opportunities for personal fulfillment not easily found elsewhere";¹⁰ that is what American Jews appear intent on doing with their religious tradition.

Voluntarism refers to the absence or devaluation of *mitzvah*, or commandment. The individual is urged, encouraged, cajoled into performing certain acts of a ceremonial nature and is constantly reassured that what one does is legitimate if that is what one chooses to do. Personal choice is endowed with spiritual sanctity and is in all cases (contrary to past tradition) considered more virtuous than performing an act out of one's sense of obedience to God. While subtle distinctions exist between personalism and voluntarism, they are interrelated, and the examples offered here illustrate both these principles.

The new Conservative prayer book, *Siddur Sim Shalom*, includes among its selected readings a statement by Edmund Fleg (1874–1963), the French author and essayist, who only affirmed his Jewishness in mid-life. He wrote, "I am a Jew because [among other reasons] Judaism demands no abdication of my mind." This statement was reprinted and formed a central reading in a Sabbath prayer service at the Conservative movement's Pacific Southwest convention of synagogues in 1986. (We shall return to Fleg's affirmation because his formulation of "Why I am a Jew" foreshadows many aspects of contemporary Judaism.) Prayer, as it is transformed by personalism, ceases to become a medium of communication between people and God. Rather, asks one writer, "How, practically, can Jewish prayer function to help one confront anger and utilize it for personal transformation and social change?"¹¹ Another author says, "As we begin to focus on issues of importance to us, perhaps

our Jewish traditions will evolve in ways to help us sustain our efforts. We have learned over the past 5000 years that things do not change overnight. But we have also learned that if we do nothing, they do not change at all."¹²

What we have here is the belief that tradition should be made compatible with the needs of the individual Jew. This, given the emphasis on voluntarism, is hardly surprising. Personalism and voluntarism are incompatible with ritual, that is, behavior performed in a specified, stylized manner undertaken because this is believed to be God's command. It is not, however, incompatible with ceremonial.

Siddur Sim Shalom, first published in the mid-1980s, offers a number of alternative services or prayers for different occasions. It has been argued that each of the alternatives in the Conservative prayer book, unlike the Reform prayer book, has a basis in Jewish law. However, the Union for Traditional Conservative Judaism, representing the more traditionalist wing within the Conservative movement, has published a responsum (legal opinion of Jewish law) that concludes, "although *Siddur Sim Shalom* may be used as a resource work, it should not be used for the purpose of fulfilling one's prayer obligations" because, among other reasons, some of the alternatives are not the services that the tradition prescribes.¹³ Whatever the case, offering the worshipper a variety of choices reflects the spirit of personalism and voluntarism to which we have alluded.

The Conservative Temple Beth Ami in Reseda, California, proud of its efforts to encourage what it takes to be "ritual observance," prepared a booklet on the topic that it distributed to other Conservative congregations. The program was conceived and developed by a faculty member of the University of Judaism, the west coast rabbinical seminary and institution of higher education of the Conservative movement. The synagogue program is built around a voluntary group patterned on Weight Watchers. Each member of the group undertakes to perform certain "rituals" and to report back to the monthly meeting of the group on his or her progress. Members fill out a "12-Month Goal Sheet" in which "they should determine which rituals they would like to involve themselves in during the coming year. The members should understand that the goal of this program is not to make them become any more Jewish than what they will be comfortable with."¹⁴

No less interesting is that a number of these "rituals" have no great significance in Jewish law, others are customs rather than mitzvot and still others are probably contrary to Jewish law. However, their functions are quite obvious in contributing to a sense of family harmony and personal fulfillment. For example, among the eighteen Sabbath rituals we find: "playing shabbat music to set mood," "blessing children," "blessing wife," "blessing husband," "have a special Shabbosdick meal," "using a white tablecloth and good dishes" and "singing shabbat songs around the table."

Consistent with our understanding of personalism and voluntarism, we would expect that the definition of who is a Jew and the boundaries between Jew and non-Jew would become increasingly flexible. Jews, in keeping with these principles, are those who choose to call themselves Jews, and they are free to incorporate into their religious behavior whatever it is within a broadly and freely defined Jewish tradition that they find personally fulfilling. It would be an overstatement to say that the majority of American Jews affirm the applications of these principles in their ex-

treme form, but it would not be an exaggeration to say that some of them do so and that most of them seem to be moving closer to, rather than further away from, the more extreme applications of these principles.

The recent decision of the Reform movement to include within the definition of a Jew someone whose mother is non-Jewish but whose father is Jewish is one such effort. This decision simply legitimated practices that have been employed for many years in many, if not most, Reform synagogues. This, in turn, is attributable to the rising number of mixed marriages (the marriage of a Jew and a non-Jew when neither partner converts to the other's religion) and, no less important, the desire of the couple to affiliate with a synagogue and raise their child within a Jewish framework. In other words, what we are witnessing is a process whereby the Jewish spouse, married to a non-Jew who may remain a believing Christian, not only demands legitimacy of Jewish status for himself/herself and children, but even, to some extent, for the Christian partner. As the authors of a study on conversion point out, over half of the non-converts in their sample "felt that one could be part of the Jewish people and community without undergoing a formal conversion process."¹⁵ The point is brought home in articles by converts to Judaism who remain married to non-Jews, a condition facilitated by an increasingly tolerant Jewish community.

Thus, a potential convert to Judaism writes, "*Chanukah* and Christmas will probably both be observed, simply because the family ties my husband associates with the mid-winter holiday are too significant to abandon."¹⁶ And another says:

I am very fortunate because my husband supports my decision to convert to Judaism. . . . His main concern was that I might expect him to convert also, or that the rabbi might expect it. [Apparently the rabbi did not.] Tom is a very spiritual person and I had no expectations that he would have to take the same journey. I knew that we could still share much of Judaism as a couple and as a family.¹⁷

And later, describing her synagogue:

At Beth Shalom there are many non-Jewish spouses and so there is a great deal of concern that these non-Jewish family members feel accepted and a part of the community. Our religious school also is very supportive of the children who have a non-Jewish parent or relative and every effort is made to make those children feel that they belong.¹⁸

And:

I refuse to let my religious choice cause strife in my family. I made a personal religious choice and if I expect people to honor my choice than I must honor theirs.¹⁹

Or, as another writer says:

As for synagogue and community involvement, I do not see a need for the gentile spouse to feel excluded. While there are definite honors from which one would be excluded, there are plenty of meaningful opportunities to involve the non-Jew in synagogue life and congregations should do that. Though these people may not be Jewish, that does not mean they do not want our synagogue and organizational activities to be successful. Because their families are involved, they do want to see us reach our goals.²⁰

A recent book entitled *Raising Your Jewish Christian Child: Wise Choices for Interfaith Parents* is advertised as “how to give your children the best of both heritages” and urges readers to “act now to enrich your children’s spiritual lives. This year’s holidays can be the richest, most harmonious ones your family has ever celebrated.”²¹

A book on the topic, even when published by a large commercial house, is only a straw in the wind. But the book, advertised in *Commentary* magazine, carries a blurb written by the then-president of the Association for the Sociological Study of Jewry, who calls the book “An endearing message on a thorny subject . . . both a ray of hope and a helping hand to families such as her own, who wish to celebrate the duality of faith and culture.”

Universalism and Moralism

Universalism refers to the sense that the Jewish tradition has a message for all people, not only for Jews, and that it is also open to the messages of other traditions and cultures. As we have seen, Judaism can even be construed at times as open to non-Jews who may develop a variety of partial affiliations with the Jewish people. The *Commentary* ad that suggests how the child of an interfaith marriage can benefit from the “best of both heritages” is a good illustration. Moralism is another term borrowed from Sklare. He defines it as the notion that “religious man is distinguished not by his observance of rituals but rather by the scrupulousness of his ethical behavior.”²² Recent emphases in American Jewish life (as already suggested) continue to invoke the term ritual but convert ritual to ceremonial and reinterpret its meaning in moralistic terms. Jewish symbols are retained in their particularistic form, but the referent or meaning is explained as a moral or ethical imperative. Since ethics are generally viewed as universal, examples of universalism and moralism tend to overlap.

One of Edmund Fleg’s reasons for being a Jew—“because the promise of Judaism is a universal promise”—suggests moralism as well as universalism. At the 1986 Conservative synagogue convention referred to earlier, a second selection entitled “The Essence of Judaism” was read immediately before the recital of the *Sh’ma*, a central point in the religious service. The selection (author unknown) begins by affirming that Jews are united by a four thousand-year-old bond that has “sensitized the Jewish individual to the needs of the group” and then states, “From one group to one humanity has been our goal. From our early teachings came the ideas of a society where individuals will treat each other with dignity and respect. These ideas are the essence of Judaism.”²³

Thus, the essence of Judaism is contained in three ideas: group (i.e., Jewish) needs, the integration of the group into one humanity and the treating of all individuals with dignity and respect.

The meaning of universalism and moralism is also illustrated in a newspaper article by a Conservative rabbi who writes on the topic *Golus* (or *Galut*), which means exile. He refers to the exile of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel. Within the Jewish tradition, especially its mystical wing, one can also find a metaphysical meaning attributed to the term. But it is strange to find a rabbi writing:

While *Golus* is a Jewish word it is not only a Jewish issue. It is a human issue as well. *Golus* in 1986 is children going to sleep hungry night after night. It is approximately 30 armed conflicts raging around the globe. It is the continuing deterioration of our habitat and ecosystem. . . . And most alarmingly, it is thousands of nuclear warheads ready at this moment to annihilate us all.²⁴

In a sophisticated and carefully balanced discussion of the topic of Biblical particularism and universalism, Jon D. Levinson makes the following statement, which is very relevant to our concerns:

For Jews in the post-Enlightenment West, where ideas of human equality and democratic government hold sway, there is a temptation to stress the instrumental dimension of Jewish chosenness and to deny or ignore the self-sufficient dimension. We are sometimes told that the “chosen people” means the “choosing people,” as if passive and active participles were not opposite in meaning. Judaism is presented as a commitment to some rather amorphous “Jewish values,” which, on inspection, turn out to be *universal* values, in which Jews and gentiles alike ought to believe. Covenant, if it is mentioned at all, appears only as the basis for a warm, meaningful community life. The fact that the Covenant distinguishes sharply between insiders and outsiders—although both are God’s—is ignored.

In large measure, such attitudes are dictated by the exigencies of living as a minority in a mixed society with a high degree of openness. It is simply not prudent to affirm a distinctiveness of ultimate significance based on heredity, and what is not prudent to express publicly often loses credibility, becoming peripheral or taboo even in private discourse. In addition, the contemporary theology in question represents a cognitive surrender to a Kantian theory of ethics in which morality entails universalability: if the behavior cannot be advocated for everyone, it cannot be moral. On Kantian principles, Jewish ethics—a norm for one group only—is a contradiction in terms. Hence the common substitution of ethics for Torah. “Ethics,” writes Michael Wyschogrod, “is the Judaism of the assimilated.”²⁵

The moralization of Judaism is most pronounced on the Jewish political Left. Arthur Waskow is a major representative of this tendency. He serves as executive director of the Shalom Center located at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (but with a board of directors and advisory council that includes three Orthodox rabbis). Here, for example, is an excerpt from a recent fund-raising letter:

Across the US, Jews will celebrate the harvest festival of Sukkot from October 17 to 25 as *Sukkat Shalom*—the Shelter of Peace. The fragile Sukkah, open to wind and rain, is the exact opposite of a fallout shelter or of a “laser shield.” It symbolizes that in the nuclear age, all of us live in a vulnerable Sukkah. *Our only real shelter is making peace.*

The theme of Sukkat Shalom is “From Harvest Booth to Voting Booth.” Urge your congregation or Jewish group to press your members of Congress to *end all nuclear testing.*

Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world. As the new year turns and returns, *let us look our children and all the world’s children in the eye and say—*

“We did our best to choose life for you and us this Rosh Hashanah!”

Universalism and moralism is not, however, confined to the Jewish Left. In his book *Sacred Survival*, Jonathan Woocher demonstrates how moralism comprises a basic component of what he calls the “civil religion” of American Jews, although

what he actually describes is the civil religion of the Jewish lay leadership. He quotes one Jewish leader as saying, "Charity and working for social justice—Tzedakah and Mitzvos—are not options for Jews. They have the force of articles of faith. They are duties and requirements."²⁶

What is remarkable in this quotation is the assumption that the terms "Mitzvos" and "Tzedakah" are accurately translated by the term "working for social justice," although both have a technical meaning within halakhic tradition. But this is a commonplace among American Jews, at least among their leaders. As another leader says, "For us, social justice—Tzedakah in its full meaning—has always been indivisible—for all." And yet another proclaims, "It has always been Jewish doctrine that social justice cannot be limited to Jews alone: Jews are dedicated to social justice for all mankind. 'Love the stranger as thyself,' the Bible taught."²⁷ The citation, taken out of context, confers on the passage a meaning that Bible scholars would find somewhat forced. Be that as it may, in the conception of American Jews (or at least their leaders), as long as Jews remain a people committed to these values, "Jewish survival is not a chauvinistic conceit, but a requisite for the continued fulfillment of the Jewish role as an exemplar of human values."²⁸

Moralism, universalism and even a dash of personalism are reflected in contemporary American Jewish transformations of the holiday of Purim. Purim is unique among the holidays of the Jewish calendar. It is a holiday of joy and laughter in which drinking (even to excess) and revelry are encouraged. Despite its location within the catalogue of "religious" festivals, Purim is generally considered the most secular of holy days. It has been suggested by traditional rabbis as well as anthropologists that it is an inversion of Yom Kippur, the most sacred of all Jewish holidays. During Yom Kippur the community celebrates its relationship to God and locates itself as part of the sacred order.²⁹ Purim, on the other hand, reaffirms the secular order through the mitzvah of exchanging gifts among peers and of giving charity to the needy, thereby identifying one's social place. In addition, the popular custom (rather than mitzvah) of satirizing community leaders, including scholars, reflects the practice that anthropologists refer to as "inversion." This is another device to reaffirm the social order by permitting and marking off its periodic violation. In keeping with the spirit of the holiday, there is a remarkable degree of flexibility in its celebration. Customs include masquerading (most often as characters from the Biblical book of Esther) and the production of skits and plays of a humorous and satirical nature. The prescribed *mitzvot* include the two we have mentioned—charity to the poor and gifts to one's friends—and, in addition, partaking of a Purim feast and hearing a ritual reading of the story of Esther from a scroll. The story of Esther, after recounting how Mordechai and Esther save the Jews (God makes no appearance whatsoever in this rather extraordinary tale located in ancient Persia), goes on to tell of the punishments inflicted on the Jews' enemies. Haman—the archvillain of the story and the prototype of all antisemites—and his sons are hanged by order of the gentile king. In addition, multitudes of other non-Jews are killed by the Jews with permission of the king.

The holiday (as I indicated) has undergone an interesting transformation in the United States. Masquerading and public revelry are activities ill-suited to a minority group living as part of, rather than segregated from, a majority culture in which it

seeks acceptance. Until recently, Purim, if celebrated at all, tended to be celebrated within the synagogue itself or in the home. It was, however, generally devalued among American Jews. This is less true today. Part of the reason, no doubt, rests on the insistence of many Orthodox Jews in displaying Jewish traditions to the general public. But the fact is that the non-Orthodox have acquiesced in this display, participating in it rather than shunning it. This, itself, may be a function of the increased legitimacy accorded to ethnicity in the United States. The reasons, however, are not of primary concern here. The question is, what have American Jews done with the festival in the last few years?

For one thing, although they now publicize Purim, it ceases to be an exclusively Jewish celebration. Rather, non-Jews are invited to partake as well, in which case, as we shall see, the holiday assumes somewhat different dimensions. According to a report in the *New York Times*, 1987 was the first year in which a sidewalk Purim parade was organized in Manhattan. But, says the writer:

Its organizers hope that someday it will grow into an event like the Queens parade, which last year drew some 50,000 people.

In Queens on Sunday, more than 10 blocks of Main Street will be closed for the parade. . . . It is a fully ecumenical event, according to Mitchell Mann, the chairman of the parade, and includes Jewish groups of every branch as well as Roman Catholic school marching bands and black cowboys on horseback. . . . Among the others marching are: mounted police and motorcycle escort, the United States Marine Corps Color Guard, St. Benedict's Fife and Drum Corps and the Mitzvah tank of the Lubavitcher Hasidim.

At the end of the march, there will be a street fair and concert. . . . Among the attractions on the street will be a ferris wheel, rides on elephants and camels, a petting zoo and a wide variety of foods, both Jewish and not-so-Jewish.³⁰

Universalizing the celebration of Purim involves not only changing who participates, but also what the holiday comes to represent. So, according to Orthodox rabbi and popular hasidic singer Shlomo Carlebach, as quoted in the same article, "Purim is a holiday of children." But he goes on to say, "this doesn't mean you have to be a child to enjoy it, just that you have to begin to believe in the world again like on the first day you opened your eyes." Implied, although unstated in this description of Purim, is that you certainly don't have to be Jewish.

Overtones of "personalism" mix with a universalism of style in the following report of a Purim celebration at a Conservative synagogue in Connecticut. According to the rabbi:

The Hebrew text will be wrapped around with song, dance and narrative in musical revue format—a folk art pageant involving the entire congregation. . . . We present Purim in this way in order to bring out its ever-current as well as its ancient meaning. . . . A point like this is brought out through the songs of such composers as Spike Jones, Cole Porter and George Landry, late voodoo chief of New Orleans.³¹

An explicit example of the transformation of Purim in moralistic terms is its celebration at the largest Conservative synagogue in the New Haven area. The Congregation printed a pamphlet called *Purim Service* for its members. The *Purim Service* is read aloud as a replacement of, rather than addition to, the Biblical story

of Esther. It is an abbreviated version, almost entirely in English, organized in the form of responsive readings, a style designed to involve the audience. What is especially striking about the reformulated story is the excising of any violence. Haman is not hanged on a gallows. Instead, "When the King found out that Haman plotted against the people of Esther, the Queen, he removed him from office and appointed Mordekhai in his place." The moral of the story is thus formulated as: "Our story is important because it is about people who had courage and who risked their lives to help others. That's what we celebrate on Purim."³²

Conclusion

The failure by scholars to distinguish between ritual and ceremonial has resulted in an inadequate understanding of developments taking place among American Jews. It would appear that the former is declining while the latter may even be on the rise, a development indicating the Americanization of American Judaism. The term "Americanization," however, may be a misnomer because colleagues have observed similar developments taking place among Jews of Western Europe. Furthermore, these developments in the United States are not peculiar to Judaism. William D. Dinges, for example, notes that opposition to the radical change in Catholic liturgy in the 1960s, aside from charges of mistranslations, focused on the shift in understanding of the Mass from "propitiatory sacrifice" to "communal meal," in diminishing emphasis on the "Real Presence" and on tendencies "emphasizing love of neighbor and edification of the laity and on the new liturgy's alleged 'Protestant' and 'ecumenical' character."³³ The opposition, in other words, was disturbed by the very same trends we find taking place among American Jews.

Two sets of central values, I believe, animate the reconstruction of Judaism taking place in the United States: personalism and voluntarism is one and universalism and moralism the other. These values, by themselves, are the antitheses of ritual; it is no surprise, therefore, that their ascendancy also marks the decline of ritual observance. None of these aspects or values are entirely new, much less alien to Judaism: all of them are to be found within the tradition itself. What is new is the emphasis they have received and the fact that together they have become major dimensions or instruments through which American Jews interpret and transform the Jewish tradition.

Notes

1. Steven M. Cohen, *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?* (Bloomington: 1988).
2. Steven M. Cohen and Charles S. Liebman, *The Quality of Jewish Life in the United States: Two Views* (New York: 1987).
3. Bobby C. Alexander, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 3, s.v. "Ceremony," 179–183.
4. Evan M. Zuesse, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12, s.v. "Ritual," 405–406.
5. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York: 1973), 41.
6. Charles S. Liebman, *Deceptive Images: Toward a Redefinition of American Judaism* (New Brunswick: 1988).

7. Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier*, 2d ed. (Chicago: 1979), 77.
8. John H. Lavelly, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5, s.v. "Personalism," 110.
9. Sklare and Greenblum, *Identity*, 48.
10. Steven M. Cohen and Leonard J. Fein, "From Integration to Survival: American Jewish Anxieties in Transition," *Annals of the American Academy of Social and Political Science* 480 (1985), 88.
11. Jeffrey Dekro, "Prayer and Anger," *Response* 46 (1984), 73.
12. Rebecca Alpert, "Sisterhood Is Ecumenical: Bridging the Gap Between Jewish and Christian Feminists," *Response* 46 (1984), 15.
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