

All Quiet on the Religious Front?

JEWISH UNITY,
DENOMINATIONALISM, AND
POSTDENOMINATIONALISM
IN THE UNITED STATES

Jack Wertheimer



The American Jewish Committee

*The Jacob Blaustein Building
165 East 56 Street
New York, NY 10022*

The American Jewish Committee publishes in these areas:

- Hatred and Anti-Semitism • Pluralism • Israel*
- American Jewish Life • International Jewish Life • Human Rights*

April 2005

www.ajc.org

\$2.50

AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

The American Jewish Committee protects the rights and freedoms of Jews the world over; combats bigotry and anti-Semitism and promotes human rights for all; works for the security of Israel and deepened understanding between Americans and Israelis; advocates public policy positions rooted in American democratic values and the perspectives of the Jewish heritage; and enhances the creative vitality of the Jewish people. Founded in 1906, it is the pioneer human-relations agency in the United States.

**All Quiet on the
Religious Front?** JEWISH UNITY,
DENOMINATIONALISM, AND
POSTDENOMINATIONALISM
IN THE UNITED STATES

Jack Wertheimer

AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

Jack Wertheimer is provost and the Joseph and Martha Mendelson Professor of American Jewish History at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He is the author of *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* and of five feature articles on aspects of contemporary Jewish life in the *American Jewish Year Book*, published by the AJC.

CONTENTS

Foreword	v
All Quiet on the Religious Front?	1
Forging a Transdenominational Culture	3
The Declining Denominationalism of the Movements	7
Orthodox Judaism	7
Reform Judaism	9
Conservative Judaism	10
The New Anti-Denominationalism	12
The Broader American Context	15
What Lies Beneath the Surface	16
Orthodox Exceptionalism	17
Division over Issues of Personal Status	20
Implications of the Status Quo	22
Notes	27

FOREWORD

In 1973, with publication of the first volume of the highly acclaimed *Jewish Catalog* series, enthusiasts of the *Catalog* and the Jewish counterculture proclaimed that the traditional denominational labels—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist—were rapidly becoming obsolete. The overwhelmingly favorable reception accorded the *Catalog* caused many observers to believe that American Jews were far more interested in discovering the meaning of their Judaism than in engaging in endless squabbling over which form of Judaism was authentic or correct.

Nevertheless, in subsequent decades, interdenominational tensions within the Jewish community appeared to increase sharply. Reform Judaism in 1983 accepted patrilineal descent as a criterion for Jewish identity, sharply splitting Reform Judaism from both Conservative Judaism and Orthodoxy on definitional issues. As rates of divorce and mixed marriage increased in the United States and a massive aliyah of Russian Jews arrived in Israel, the Jewish people appeared irreparably divided over questions of personal status and religious identity. Advertisements appeared in the media proclaiming that Jews had never been so divided since the division of the Davidic monarchy, with civil war ranging between the two kingdoms. Although clearly excessively apocalyptic in tone, these ads gave voice to a widespread perception that the time-honored slogans of “we are one” and “that which unites us is greater than that which divides us” were more mythic than real.

To be sure, there were dissenting voices. The late Rabbi Joseph Glaser, executive vice president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, underscored that, on the ground, considerable interdenominational cooperation did, in fact, exist. Similarly, the sociologist Steven M. Cohen argued that while issues of religious ideology mattered to elites, at the grassroots level, Jews had made their peace with one another. In particular, Cohen underscored that the divisions

within American Jewry were primarily of concern to Modern Orthodox Jews, who sought to act as a bridge between the movements. Beyond that group, beleaguered by left and right alike, most Jews had come to terms with differences over personal status. Dominant opinion, however, expressed in widely read books and leading articles, remained that the persistence of religious conflict in Israel and the ever-vexing questions of personal status in America were laying the groundwork within the Jewish body politic for tensions that were on the verge of a virtual explosion.

To examine these questions from a twenty-first-century perspective, the American Jewish Committee invited Dr. Jack Wertheimer, provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, to revisit the current status of interdenominational ties and tensions. Dr. Wertheimer had entitled his 1993 volume on American Judaism *A Divided People*, underscoring the reality of intra-Jewish conflict. That analysis had largely gone unchallenged in the intervening years, and the respected journalist Sam Freedman had similarly entitled his important 2000 book on the subject *Jew vs. Jew*.

Yet the portrait that Dr. Wertheimer draws in 2005 is of a cooling of intra-Jewish tensions. Partisans on all sides appear more eager for accommodation on divisive issues, or, at a minimum, have opted to soften their rhetoric on areas in which they disagree. Conversely, major steps undertaken by one or another of the parties evoke barely a ripple of protest.

Several factors apparently explain this trend toward a softening of the rhetoric between the religious movements, if not a softening on the issues that divide them. For one thing, in pronounced contrast to the Oslo years, the Jewish people again appears threatened by external foes. Nothing unites Jews more than the specter of the loss of Jewish life. Secondly, the issues themselves—e.g., patrilineal descent, conversion—appear so intractable that many have simply despaired of finding any solution to them. Lastly, the newfound interest in Jewish continuity has prompted many observers to say, “Forget about the ideological differences and get with the program of educating Jews.” Thus an incipient postdenominationalism among many American

Jews suggests constant fluidity across denominational boundaries, with ideology of lesser concern than stylistic differences. Or put another way, at a time of great anxiety over the resurgence of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, with the threats of future assimilation and demographic losses looming, Jews are, perhaps, learning to live with denominational differences rather than battle over seemingly insoluble problems.

A consultation of Jewish intellectuals and communal leaders convened by the American Jewish Committee to discuss the implications of Dr. Wertheimer’s paper confirmed his analysis of decreased interdenominational quarreling. Disagreements, however, persisted over whether this was a healthy or an unhealthy development—or perhaps a little of both. Some maintained that the absence of conflict was, at best, temporary. In the long run, differences over questions of personal status would continue to afflict the Jewish people and undermine marriage eligibility between Jews of different camps. Some predicted further coalescence between Conservative and Reform Jewry, isolating Orthodoxy even as it becomes of greater significance because of its numerical growth and increased political and intellectual influence. Still others maintained that some ideological conflict was, in fact, quite desirable because the conflict reflected only our passion and concern over the meaning of being a Jew in the twenty-first century.

By this reckoning, the Jewish community will, in fact, be strengthened by vigorous debate over alternative expressions of Judaism rather than by conformity to an ideological blandness in which all live together by avoiding serious dialogue and debate over *halacha*, theology, questions of communal policy, and the like.

Although I personally incline to this latter position, I, like others, easily acknowledge the advantages of the current situation. Decreased communal squabbling means enhanced unity at a particularly tense moment in Jewish history. Secondly, it is the mark of a mature people to be able to live with difference. Diverse perspectives need not be translated as “two Jewish peoples,” to utilize a phrase current in the earlier era of communal polarization.

Nevertheless, there are at least two reasons why the cooling of denominational debate does not bode well for the Jewish future. For one thing, the issues dividing Jews from Jews are quite real. Differences over patrilineal descent, conversion to Judaism, divorce and remarriage, and intermarriage itself all blur the definition of Jewish status and, left unchecked, threaten to create different categories of Jews. Personal tragedies may well result, to say nothing of fraying the broader fabric of Jewish unity. The number of Jews of questionable Jewish status is only increasing and warrants serious communal attention. Some years back consideration was given to developing a uniform conversion procedure acceptable to all religious movements. This idea continues to merit communal attention and debate.

Perhaps even more problematical are the implications of decreased tensions for future Jewish continuity. Strong ideological beliefs tend to nurture more committed and activist Jews. Ideology does serve to rally the troops. Living in a postideological age may well attenuate the passion and commitment necessary to transmit serious Jewish ideas to the next generation. In this sense, the Jewish community is not at all well served by those who trivialize denominational differences in a well-intentioned effort to safeguard communal unity.

Lastly, these reflections make no pretense at being the last word on interdenominational tensions. Rather, it is our hope that Dr. Wertheimer's paper will both broaden our understanding of current ties and tensions between Jews and focus communal attention upon whether the Jewish community is, in fact, best served by policies of benign neglect toward differences or policies that encourage communal ideological debate concerning these divisive issues.

Steven Bayme, Ph.D.
Director
Contemporary Jewish Life Department
American Jewish Committee
April 2005

ALL QUIET ON THE RELIGIOUS FRONT?¹

Twenty years ago, in an essay provocatively entitled “Will There Be One Jewish People in the Year 2000?”² Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg challenged American Jews to consider the harmful consequences of their intensifying religious polarization. Warning of an impending schism, Greenberg identified two developments propelling the crisis: “the demographics of separation—an explosion in the numbers of Jews of halachically contested or unmarriageable status; and the denominational politics of separation—interdenominational alienation, delegitimation, and the shift of the balance of power within each movement toward those who seek to resolve problems by internally acceptable solutions to the utter disregard of the other denominations.”³ In brief, Greenberg feared a widening gap between various sectors of the Jewish community based upon very real differences in religious policies, especially over matters of personal status such as conversion, divorce, *mamzerut* (i.e., the Jewish legal status of children born to a Jewish mother who remarried without first obtaining a *get*, a proper religious divorce), and the Jewishness of children whose mother was not Jewish. Equally troubling to Greenberg was the hardening of positions within the various denominations that was resulting in unilateral decision-making, with no regard for how such actions would affect other groups of Jews.

The American Jewish Committee took up Greenberg's challenge, sponsoring two deliberations on the implications of these issues for future “Jewish unity.”⁴ Symptomatic of the concern at the time about religious polarization was a pronouncement in the 1988 *American Jewish Year Book*, deeming intra-Jewish religious conflict “the issue that most worried American Jewish leaders.”⁵ By the end of the nineties, Samuel G. Freedman had documented just how destructively the conflict of “Jew versus Jew” had played out in several local communities.⁶ Freedman's work echoed concerns raised already in

the early 1990s by another book that had analyzed the underlying causes for heightened religious tensions, a study whose concluding words starkly warned that “the divided world of Judaism imperils the unity of the Jewish people in America.”

I penned those words in my book *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America*,⁷ a work prompted by my concern about widening rifts in the American Jewish community occasioned by religious disputes. These controversies, I feared, were overflowing into other areas of Jewish life, such as “the international solidarity of Jews ... in America and Israel” and the “struggle against anti-Semitism.”⁸ However, from the present vantage point over a dozen years later, it appears that tensions between Jews of different religious views have not intensified, that social barriers have fallen rather than risen. True, over the years there has been some jostling among the denominations over Jewish religious issues, a bit of name-calling by leaders of those movements, and even a few outbreaks of sustained social conflict in some localities between adherents of different Jewish religious groupings. But for the most part, public expressions of antagonism have receded.

A noteworthy exception proves the rule. This is how the largest-circulation Jewish communal newspaper in the country led with a story on a recent interdenominational flap: “In a rare public attack on a competing denomination, the head of the Reform movement’s rabbinical group has predicted the demise of the Conservative movement within two decades.”⁹ Significantly, other leaders of the Reform movement distanced themselves from their outspoken colleague, and his remarks were viewed as an aberration.

Despite the occasional flare-ups, the dire predications of an internal Jewish schism have proven wrong. If anything, overt religious conflicts have either eased or have been pushed into the background. What is more prominently evident is that a goodly amount of transdenominational cooperation occurs every day, and that American Jews, like many of their liberal non-Jewish neighbors, are dealing with ideological divisions in a pragmatic fashion, seeking common ground rather than confrontation. This new climate of harmonious

relations warrants attention: What has prompted this unexpected turn of events? Why have the Jewish denominations shifted from a public posture of confrontation to one of reconciliation? How have American Jews managed their religious differences? And to what extent does the new climate reflect a true era of good feelings or merely a tactical decision to paper over differences that continue to fester? This essay will address both the manifestations of interdenominational cooperation and the underlying tensions which may nonetheless continue to reverberate in modified form over the coming decades.

Forging a Transdenominational Culture

To grasp why these public disagreements over religion have muted, one has to appreciate the revolution in communal programming, especially in the realm of Jewish education, that has swept the American Jewish community since the so-called “continuity agenda” emerged a decade ago. In response to the alarming lead story of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study—the news about spiraling rates of intermarriage—Federations of Jewish philanthropy, major Jewish organizations, and key funders launched a series of initiatives to spur Jewish education at all levels. These groups also lavished greater attention on activities designed to promote identification with Judaism and the Jewish people. Here are some of the most noteworthy examples:

- Federations, central agencies for Jewish education, and, in a few cases, Jewish Community Centers have created or imported adult study programs, such as the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School and the Meah Program, first developed by the Hebrew College for the Boston Jewish community. Each offers adults the opportunity to study a Jewish curriculum covering the scope of Jewish civilization.

- Consortia of donors banded together to form the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education to address the common fiscal and fund-raising needs of day schools across the country. Similar efforts were also launched to support Jewish summer camping and pre-school education.

► Communities around the country have funded new types of teen programming that combine formal and informal Jewish education. In Boston, for example, nearly 1,000 Jewish teens are enrolled in the high school Prozdor program, which features “a rigorous and meaningful program of Jewish and Hebraic studies” along with class trips, *Shabbatonim*, and *hesed* opportunities; in other communities, several hundred meet, largely thanks to funding provided by the local Federation or bureau of Jewish education.

► For college and postcollege young adults, Birthright Israel has provided free trips to Israel lasting from ten to fourteen days to individuals who have not previously taken a peer trip to Israel. Birthright Israel is open to anyone who identifies as a Jew. It has thus far sent nearly 70,000 young people from all over the world to Israel, the majority from the United States.

► Since the intifada, some seventy Israel advocacy programs have been established to work with teens and college students, training the next generation how to explain the policies of the Jewish state.

► Many communities have long organized parades celebrating Israel’s Independence Day with the support and involvement of a wide spectrum of Jewish participants. More recently, quite a few communities have run fairs where Israeli wares are sold and have sponsored other community-wide celebrations.

► Two programs under the auspices of the Wexner Foundation have worked with future lay and professional leaders, bringing promising young people together from around the country to annual retreats. The Wexner Heritage Program, which offers an intensive two-year program of study for women and men interested in playing a role as volunteer leaders, has created cohorts in middle and large-size communities around the country. A second program brings together graduate students who are preparing to serve as religious and professional leaders of Jewish institutions.

► Synagogue 2000 and, more recently, the STAR initiative have worked with a mix of synagogue professionals and lay leaders to help them reenvision their congregations and clarify the missions of their institutions.

► Programs such as the Rabbinic Torah Study Seminars of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Israel bring together rabbis on leave for a sabbatical or a summer of study and reflection.

The list of such programs undoubtedly could be expanded considerably. What they all share in common is a transdenominational orientation. Each intentionally brings together Jews of different religious outlooks, usually reflecting the spectrum of Jewish religious life in this country, ranging from Renewal, Reconstructionism, Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox Judaism. All types are represented; only the Haredi and Hasidic worlds of Orthodoxy are not at the table (but, as we shall see, some of them are seated at the head of the table as teachers). The implicit message of such gatherings is twofold: Jews face many common challenges and have much to learn from one another; that which divides us is less important than the common concerns and texts we share. Not surprisingly given these goals, rabbis representing the range of denominational views are far more likely in recent years to study together privately, and they often schedule public programs to model for their congregants how Jews of different outlooks can study the same text while holding firm to distinctive ways of reading those texts.¹⁰

These settings also help foster new relationships. Participants understand each other better, even if they do not necessarily agree with one another. Not surprisingly, when studying or working side by side, participants form friendships, thereby lessening ideological and religious tensions. In brief, these programs have nurtured a degree of empathy among Jews of disparate backgrounds.¹¹

Funders and major organizations encourage these trends and often foster cross-denominational cooperation. Quite a few of the large membership organizations, Federations, and most family foundations were deeply shaken by the rancor of highly public religious disputes that punctuated Jewish communal life during the last fifteen years of the twentieth century. They feared that religious divisiveness would undermine the ability of the Jewish community to address issues of common concern, such as the battle against anti-Semitism, efforts to support Israel, and fund-raising to support pan-Jewish

causes. They feared that such divisiveness would also weaken their own work, which tended to focus on bringing Jews of all stripes together to address common concerns. But in this understandable effort to encourage cross-denominational cooperation, these groups often banished religious disagreements to the margins.

They employed a variety of techniques to downplay or ignore denominational differences. Some have bypassed rabbinic leaders entirely, working instead with lay people, who are seen as less likely to engage in spats. The common assumption is that turf issues and rabbinic pride—not matters of religious principle or faith—are the primary sources of friction. Perhaps, they have simply felt that religious differences were so intractable that they should be set aside in favor of less divisive matters. In any event, the result was a concerted communal predisposition to sweep those differences under the proverbial communal carpet.

Funding institutions have created a reward system to encourage civil behavior and a renewed appreciation for the overarching needs of the Jewish people, for *klal Yisrael*. Some Federations either explicitly or implicitly condition their support for schools on the participation of principals and teachers in cross-denominational activities and affinity groups—e.g., heads of all the local day schools are expected to attend meetings of the principals' council; teachers from all types of supplementary religious schools are expected to attend in-service study days. When there is interest in founding a new day school, Federation officials are likely to exert pressure that it be cross-denominational or “pluralistic” in order to secure communal funding. Jewish philanthropists are taking a similar tack, and a few large foundations have even pledged to withhold grants from institutions whose leaders engage in “sensationalism and slander” directed at other Jewish groups.¹² In short, quite substantial groups on the Jewish scene have deliberately employed the power of the purse to press for cross-denominational cooperation—or at least a muting of denominational combativeness.

The Declining Denominationalism of the Movements¹³

Orthodox Judaism

The religious movements, in turn, have their own motives for soft-pedaling their differences. Historically, Orthodoxy has taken a strong separatist posture vis-à-vis all who are not within their camp. Beginning in Central Europe and then in Eastern Europe, Orthodox leaders seceded from the larger Jewish community, often forgoing communal funding to avoid legitimizing non-Orthodox leaders.¹⁴ This strategy was then imported to the United States, and groups in the Hasidic and Haredi sectors continue to avoid interacting with the leaders of non-Orthodox institutions;¹⁵ in the last quarter of the twentieth century that approach won support within the Modern Orthodox camp as well, prompting the departure of Orthodox rabbis from umbrella organizations such as the Synagogue Council of America and from local and regional boards of rabbis. There is some evidence of a partial reversal of this trend recently. In Baltimore, for example, an Orthodox rabbi assumed the presidency of the local board of rabbis.¹⁶ Furthermore, in communities where Orthodox educators and institutional leaders have come to rely upon communal funding to cover the costs of some of their programs, they have accepted the need to interact with their counterparts outside the Orthodox world.

Even more significant is the growth of so-called “Jewish outreach” (which might be more accurately described as “Jewish inreach”) by Orthodox Jews. A growing corps of Orthodox men and women are working with Jews of all stripes, providing them with religious goods and services and serving as their personal religious trainers.¹⁷ Chabad emissaries are the best known: Several thousand such families have served in communities across the land and, indeed, across the globe from Siberia to the Congo; they continue to open new centers, schools, synagogues, and meeting places in every corner of the country.¹⁸ Their efforts are now imitated by other Orthodox groups, such as the vast network created by Aish HaTorah, which boasts on its Web site of programs in seventeen countries that attract 100,000 people annually.¹⁹

This trend is also exemplified by the relatively new proliferation of *kollelim*, schools of higher learning for Haredi rabbis, which have redefined the scope of their activities “from enclave to outreach,” as Adam Ferziger of Bar-Ilan University has aptly described it.²⁰ Across the United States, close to thirty such “outreach *kollels*,” operate, with three or four new ones coming into existence on average each year.²¹ These *kollels* minimally provide teachers for the Orthodox community, but often they are engaged in teaching all Jewish comers. The model for such activity is the Atlanta Kollel, which limits the personal study time of its fellows to three to four hours per day (rather than encourage full-time study) and then expects its students to partake in formal and informal educational activities within the Atlanta Jewish community. Members of the *kollel* teach in venues across the city, including in private homes, business offices, and a Reform temple. Proudly proclaiming its mission as transcending the classroom, the Atlanta Kollel boasts: “Whether you’re Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, unaffiliated or somewhere in between, Scholars Kollel ... is your most vibrant source for Jewish learning in Atlanta.”²² Their home base, a synagogue popularly known as the “Kollel Dome,” offers Orthodox religious services, but keeps its parking lot open on the Sabbath for worshipers who drive to the synagogue.²³ Ferziger’s analysis of this phenomenon is striking:

What ... seems to have transpired ... is that in its efforts to address the weakly affiliated, the Right Wing Orthodox themselves have internalized the cultural norms that they previously pejoratively viewed as reflections of the compromising ways of Modern Orthodoxy.... [T]he Right Wing outreach *kollel* [has diluted] some of the active antipathy of this camp toward integration with other Jews and the cultural norms that they possess.²⁴

As a result of their engagement in so-called “outreach” activities with non-Orthodox Jews—work undoubtedly springing from altruistic and religious motives to set such Jews on the correct path, but also from the clear economic need to connect with people who can provide financial support for Haredi Jews with large families—Orthodox Jews of the more right-wing stripe, who would have been

expected in the past to keep their distance from non-Orthodox Jews, now are interacting openly with them and are modifying some of their attitudes in light of such contacts. In short, outreach work is lowering social and ideological barriers and is modifying the historical tendency of Orthodox leaders to castigate their opponents as “deviationists” and to trumpet their own way as “Torah-true.”²⁵

Reform Judaism

The Reform movement, for its part, has also toned down its rhetoric. As the fastest-growing and largest of the religious movements, it is gaining self-confidence to go about its business without overtly addressing the other movements. The Reform movement is tending its own garden, as it continues to grow. It is concentrating on building its infrastructure rather than picking fights, particularly because the prevailing sentiment within the movement is that Reform will never win the approval of Orthodox Jews and that Conservative Judaism will inevitably catch up to Reform, but simply lags behind the times. Accordingly, Reform is expanding its base, confident in the correctness of its decisions on patrilineality, conversion, homosexuality, and other controversial matters. Rather than attack other groups, its leaders proudly proclaim that they were the first to address new issues and, in due course, the other movements will come around.

Indeed, what ties together the Reform movement’s disparate positions is a rejection of ideology in favor of pragmatism. Where once the Reform movement insisted on defining and redefining its “platform,” it now avoids such divisive efforts and prides itself on its “inclusiveness.”²⁶ Jews of all varieties and all kinds of Jewish practices are welcome inside the Reform movement’s “big tent.” It sanctions traditional practices that earlier had been denounced from the pulpit as anachronistic: the dietary laws, wearing a head-covering and *tallit*, performing the *tashlich* ceremony, even going to the *mikveh* (the ritual bath). All are now options in the Reform menu—as too are less traditional ways of observing Judaism. Where once the movement lambasted Jews who felt the need to observe outdated rituals, it is now open to the full range of options.²⁷ This means that Reform

leaders are unlikely to denigrate traditional practices, thereby eliminating one of the past sources of friction with more traditional movements.

The movement, moreover, is led by rabbis and cantors who have been required to spend a year of study in Jerusalem, where they encountered traditional Jewish observance in living religious communities—often for the first time. They are neither rebelling against traditional Judaism, as did their predecessors, nor necessarily opposing its practices. Younger rabbis and cantors, in fact, are more likely to observe *kashrut* and to study traditional texts, rendering them less likely than earlier generations to rail against those practices and texts. Whereas several past generations of Reform rabbis publicly ridiculed those traditions as primitive,²⁸ today's leaders bring a far more reverent approach. At the same time, Reform rabbis are not bound by Jewish law and feel unconstrained when questions arise that impel them to seek untraditional answers. Reform leaders are serene in their belief that they have the best of both worlds—of traditional Judaism and modern society—and that leaves them quite content with their own approach.

Conservative Judaism

As the movement at the center of the spectrum, the Conservative movement could be expected to engage most strenuously in religious polemics with the movements to its right and left, if only to distinguish itself from the pack. The Conservative movement, moreover, has suffered the greatest attrition in the past decade or two through the defection of its members to other movements.²⁹ Its congregants are leaving in large numbers for Reform temples (often because they or their children have intermarried) and are being courted by thousands of Orthodox outreach workers who find Conservative Jews especially receptive to their programs.³⁰ Thus, for ideological and practical reasons, one would expect a Conservative counteroffensive. In fact, no such effort exists.

The Conservative movement is currently in too weak a condition and is too preoccupied with its own internal problems to engage in

communal disputes. Its most successful rabbis direct their energies inward toward strengthening their own congregations and schools; few speak or write about larger issues that transcend their institutions. For the most part, when the Jewish press covers a religious or communal issue, it will seek an Orthodox and a Reform voice, but not necessarily include the position of the Conservative movement. True, leaders of Conservative Judaism have spoken out forcefully about the status of their movement in Israel and have fought Orthodox efforts there to delegitimize Conservative and Reform rabbis, but it is harder to identify instances when Conservative rabbis have weighed in on domestic Jewish concerns. One would have to go back to the mid-1980s, when the late Rabbi Robert Gordis lambasted the Reform movement's decision on patrilineality³¹ to find an instance of a prominent movement leader taking a sharp position on the domestic policies of another movement.

Rather than energize its leaders to articulate “where Conservative Judaism differs,” the movement's position at the center of the spectrum has led either to a kind of “me-too-ism” or to diffidence. Conservative leaders can be counted on to support resolutions and programs enunciated by leaders of other movements, but rarely initiate their own campaigns. Even when the movement has proven successful, as in the vast expansion during the 1990s in the number of Conservative families enrolling children in Jewish day schools, it does not trumpet its successes, let alone build upon them.

The Conservative movement has also produced most of the major advocates of postdenominationalism, an approach that seeks to draw from the best of all movements without identifying with any, and of transdenominationalism, an effort to bring together Jews of many outlooks under the same roof. For example, the University of Judaism, a West Coast institution of higher learning founded under the auspices of the Jewish Theological Seminary and staffed overwhelmingly by individuals trained by the Conservative movement, has repositioned itself as a nondenominational, Los Angeles communal institution that happens to sponsor a rabbinical school training Conservative rabbis.³² The Hebrew College in Boston, which now

trains rabbis and cantors, is also staffed primarily by products of the Conservative movement who proudly define their institution as transdenominational. And quite a few day schools that were originally envisioned as Conservative have instead opted for a transdenominational, pluralistic identity, even while the majority of their children are drawn from families affiliated with Conservative synagogues. All of these are symptomatic of a declining will to stake out and insist upon the correctness of the Conservative position, let alone to confront other movements.³³

The New Anti-Denominationalism

The various Jewish religious movements may also be treading more lightly because a new spirit of anti-denominationalism is in the air. “Denominations are yesterday’s news,” declares a key backer of the New York Limmud conference, a program designed to bring together Jews of many “backgrounds.”³⁴ Increasing numbers of Jews today eschew a denominational label when surveyed about their preference: According to the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey, 25 percent of those polled prefer to call themselves “just Jewish”—up from 13 percent ten years earlier.³⁵ Thus some have come to believe that denominational identity is on the decline, and perhaps the very language of denominationalism is outdated. Denominations are seen as the creations of elites who have manufactured false distinctions between Jews. They are also regarded as poor reflections of a far more complex reality; as Jews increasingly pick and choose to form their Jewish identities, they do not fit neatly into denominational packages.

A variety of factors are stimulating this interest in postdenominationalism. Certainly, the overt conflict between the movements from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s repelled quite a few Jews. If this nasty in-fighting is the consequence of having separate Jewish religious movements, some contended, a plague on all of them. Critics of the denominations are convinced, moreover, that these groups deserve to be consigned to the dustbin of history because they have not been compelling: If so many Jews are disengaged from Judaism,

the argument goes, it must be because the movements are outmoded. Indeed, two Jewish academics, Michael Berenbaum and David N. Myers, have argued that “a Jewish world without denominations”³⁶ might have a better chance of retaining the allegiance of Jews. In their view, “drift and alienation from organized Jewish life continue, in part, because denominational packaging no longer appeals to a growing number of hungry spiritual consumers.” In other words, the denominations are a cause of the declining engagement with Judaism.

Along similar lines, a Jewish Renewal rabbi named Gershon Winkler, who promotes a conception of Judaism he calls “flexidoxy,” believes that many American Jews are “turned off by the rigidity of established ‘standards’ found in every Jewish denomination.” He blames the religious movements for the “disinterest” of many Jews, who need to learn about “the broader spectrum of Judaism that shines far beyond and above the particular party-line versions they have been fed by every denomination.”³⁷

Besides, the real distinction between the movements, in the view of some, comes down to a choice between heteronomy and autonomy, between Orthodox Jews who accept externally imposed limitations on their actions and everyone else.³⁸ Since the Orthodox share of the population is ten percent, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of American Jews behave autonomously and share a common desire to construct their own versions of Judaism rather than to accept a received version. Postdenominationalism provides an option to draw upon the best in all the non-Orthodox movements—the social action of Reform, the Conservative movement’s mediation of tradition and modernity, the neo-Hasidism animating Jewish Renewal, and so on. A *mélange* is preferable to heteronomous Jews. In such circumstances, labels are constricting rather than liberating.

Some have argued that there is a strong generational element to this new postdenominationalism. Writing of younger Jewish adults, Leon A. Morris claims his generation “is characterized by the idea of hybrids, not just with regard to being Jewish and American, but by additionally defining ourselves in a myriad of complex ways.”

Younger Jews “resist categorization. We don’t want to be labeled. We seek a model of Jewish life that is self-designed.” As a result, he claims, “we create Judaisms as diverse and individualistic as the Jews who practice them.” And in a concluding affirmation that might leave some heads spinning at the various denominational headquarters, he declares: “Perhaps in the new century, each one of us is Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist.”³⁹

A variation on this theme is evident in the teaching of Orthodox outreach workers who deride denominational labels. “Conservative? Orthodox? Reform? Labels are for clothes ... not for Jews,” proclaims an ad placed by an organization of Orthodox outreach workers.⁴⁰ It suits Orthodoxy to maintain that Jews are all on a continuum of observance: Some are more observant, some less, but everyone is trying to do better. Scratch the surface and one quickly discovers who is at the top of the pecking order by virtue of being “the most observant.” An organization called Olam, Samuel G. Freedman reports, purports to welcome all Jews to the “Ashkefardi-Ultrarefconservadox Generation,” but, upon closer inspection, one finds that “beneath the rhetoric of mutual respect, Olam was proselytizing for wayward Jews to adopt Orthodoxy, the one true faith.”⁴¹ In some instances, then, the language of postdenominationalism may be lip service more than anything else.

It is not clear as yet how pervasive or deep these postdenominational longings are. Few proponents of this position have articulated how it ought to work in practice.⁴² And it remains to be seen whether younger Jews who deliberately eschew denominational labels will eventually change their attitudes when they discover how dependent they are upon denominational institutions to educate and socialize their children in schools, youth movements, summer camps, and the like. Still, there is far more talk today about jettisoning the denominations and far more publicly voiced criticism of their failings. As a result, the movements are on the defensive—still another reason for them to be on their best behavior.

The Broader American Context

It would be a mistake to attribute the diminution of interdenominational conflict solely to the inner dynamics of American Judaism. Altered circumstances beyond those movements have also dampened tensions. Three of these external factors are especially salient: First, rivalries between the denominations of American Protestantism have also declined in recent decades.⁴³ Some observers have argued that the key divide today is not between Protestant denominations, but within them. The culture wars, it is argued, are creating links across denominational lines to connect like-minded conservatives across the spectrum and also like-minded liberals, regardless of their denominations. This has proven the case with Mel Gibson’s Hollywood extravaganza: Evangelical Protestants flocked to *The Passion of the Christ* in droves, often led by their ministers, even though the movie was made by a self-described conservative Catholic and was suffused with imagery not normally emphasized in Protestant denominations. Similar cross-denominational alliances have been forged over public policy questions such as reproductive rights, gay marriage, and stem cell research by conservatives and liberals. Protestant denominations are generally too preoccupied with avoiding internal schisms to engage in running battles with one another. For this reason, as well as the prevalence of rampant denominational switching in the last two decades of the twentieth century, the momentum within Protestantism has been toward a diminution in the importance of denominationalism. (The Jewish community has lagged behind, just as it may be slightly behind the times again as Protestant denominational allegiances seem to be rebounding.⁴⁴)

A second external factor accounting for the diminution of interdenominational tensions in recent years, undoubtedly, is sheer distraction. American Jews have been preoccupied with threats to Jewish security that emanate from without in the form of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. As the Oslo Accords disintegrated and the Durban Conference on Racism of 2000 threw a spotlight once again on venomous anti-Zionism, only to be followed by the second intifada and then 9/11, external threats have captured the attention of

American Jews. The sheer horror of terrorism has overwhelmed American Jews, as has the drumbeat of controversy over Israel's policies. Jews can focus only so much attention on their problems, and that attention has been riveted lately on the threats from without.

Third, and most important, the issue that has most inflamed tensions between Jewish religious movements in the past—the “Who is a Jew” question in Israel—has been relatively quiescent for quite a few years. Nothing within the United States has damaged relations between the religious sectors of American Jewry as much as the eruption of this controversy in far-off Israel. Whenever Orthodox religious parties have pressed for legislation to alter Israel's definitional status quo, tensions have increased palpably. Roughly from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, political horse trading in Israel resulted in efforts to alter laws and policies regarding the acceptability of converts to Judaism. In the process, non-Orthodox rabbis felt delegitimized, and the various non-Orthodox sectors of Judaism took umbrage. Inevitably, some American Jews threatened to withhold their contributions to Israel and to local Jewish causes if the planned changes went through; and just as inevitably, other Jews threatened to withhold their funds if the legislation mandating changes was stymied. In recent years, the religious parties have fallen on hard times—and their influence has waned. The “Who is a Jew” issue receded, and so too did some of the bad feelings.⁴⁵

What Lies Beneath the Surface

If the surface of American Jewish life appears relatively undisturbed by religious conflicts, is it reasonable to conclude that the warnings of a religious schism vastly exaggerated the threat? At first blush, the answer would seem to be yes. The accommodationism of American culture has apparently triumphed over ideological and religious conflict. American Jews, including their rabbinic leaders, have found ways to work around potential areas of conflict and to identify matters of mutual concern that transcend denominational boundaries. This spirit of cooperation, moreover, has been given a major boost by key funding agencies that have offered incentives to a range of

denominational institutions to participate in communal life. Not surprisingly, the holdouts are predominantly clustered in New York and Los Angeles, the two largest Jewish communities in the country, where the Federations have the least leverage; and conversely, in intermediate and smaller communities, cross-denominational programming is most fully developed.

Still, it would be myopic to imagine that the underlying sources of religious conflicts have completely dissipated. The halachic differences noted by Yitz Greenberg two decades ago remain unresolved, and new trends may intensify the friction. The question is: How long will religious differences between Jews remain submerged?

The key divide in American Jewish life today essentially runs between the Orthodox world (ten percent of the Jewish population) and everyone else. On either side of the divide there is little expectation of resolving the disputed religious matters, and perhaps that perception alone accounts for the absence of further discussion. Greenberg was probably correct in his observation that, to a great extent, both sides assume the other will eventually disappear or become irrelevant, and that is the only way these matters will be settled: Orthodox Jews are convinced they alone will remain standing in the long run;⁴⁶ and many liberal Jews assume that Orthodoxy, if it does not disappear, will continue to be a marginal force in the Jewish community. Given these perspectives, there is nothing to be gained through confrontation.

Orthodox Exceptionalism

In fact, however, the demographic facts on the ground are changing the situation rapidly, and may confound the expectations of both sides. For those convinced that they can easily dismiss the Orthodox world as retrograde and irrelevant, a visit to the hospital newborn nurseries in areas of Orthodox density may provide a reality check. A recent report on “The Orthodox Baby Boom” cited patterns in Lakewood, New Jersey, which has a strong Haredi population base. A local nurse estimated recently that 1,700 babies had been born in a single year to the 5,500 Jewish families in the community, a birthrate

of 358 per thousand, as compared to the overall American rate of 65 births per thousand women.⁴⁷ According to the National Jewish Population Survey of 2001, Jewish women are having 1.86 children on average. One informed estimate has put the comparable figures in the Orthodox world at 3.3 children for Modern Orthodox families, 6.6 for Haredi families, and 7.9 in Hasidic families.⁴⁸ When we factor in the role Orthodox births are playing in raising the overall numbers for Jews, the disparity is still greater. To imagine, therefore, that Orthodox Jews who, in addition to their high rates of fertility, also have minimal rates of intermarriage and high rates of retention, will remain marginal (if they are that today) is myopic. The Orthodox population will surely grow in importance as time goes on and will be impossible to ignore.⁴⁹

The high rate of fertility is symptomatic of other fundamental differences separating Orthodox Jews and Jews in other camps. The former attend synagogue services, observe religious rituals, give to Jewish causes, travel to Israel, send their children to study in Israel, and immerse their children in intensive programs of formal and informal Jewish education at rates far exceeding Jews who identify with the other movements. It appears that Jewish identification carries an entirely different valence in the lives of Orthodox Jews.

These commitments, in turn, have far-reaching effects on the way in which Orthodox Jews behave and think. As one writer has put it: "All religious questions aside, the Orthodox and non-Orthodox live very different lives. The number of children, the cost of their education, the age at which one has children, the duration of the financial help expended to them, all create radically different lifestyles, priorities, and concerns."⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, Orthodox Jews dissent from the larger Jewish community on a range of political and social questions ranging from church/state matters—especially the question of state funding of religious schools—to the status of homosexuals.

Orthodox organizations have forged political alliances that are anathema to the organized Jewish community, with some courting Evangelicals and others on the religious right. The just-completed

2004 presidential election campaign illustrated how out-of-step Orthodox Jews were with the mainstream of the American Jewish community. Pollsters have put the overall Jewish vote at 75 percent for John Kerry and 24 percent for George W. Bush. The Orthodox vote is believed to have gone in the reverse proportion, with three quarters of Orthodox voters supporting the candidacy of Bush. (By contrast, one pollster has claimed that Reform Jews went for Kerry by a margin of 85 percent to 15 percent.⁵¹) Some have dismissed this sharp disparity as an aberration caused by the desire of Orthodox Jews to reward Bush for what they perceived as his strong support of Israel. But this begs the question of why Orthodox Jews should have looked at things this way, whereas other Jews had entirely different interests or perceptions. It is far too early to tell whether the Orthodox vote, which in previous elections conformed to the strongly Democratic tilt of the Jewish community, will continue to favor Republican nominees. But for now, the divide within the Jewish community suggests a very different political mind-set operating in the Orthodox and non-Orthodox camps, and it is unlikely to change anytime soon.

For the present, Orthodox Jews are content to live in a counter-community, largely divorced from the key agencies of the larger Jewish community, mainly associating with one another and seeking services from their own institutions. Particularly in localities with the largest Orthodox populations, Orthodox Jews have created their own social welfare agencies, certainly their own religious institutions and schools, their own delivery system for certain forms of health care, and their own agencies for supporting Jews abroad, in Israel and in the former Soviet Union. True, some Modern Orthodox Jews work for key agencies and play a disproportionate role as professionals in Jewish life. And, as we have seen, a growing cadre of outreach workers has become dependent on non-Orthodox Jews for their livelihoods. But when we put aside those who earn their living by serving the larger Jewish community, it is unclear how many in the Modern Orthodox world participate as volunteers for national organizations or even in local Federations. Interactions between the more numer-

ous Haredi and Hasidic Jews and the secular agencies of the Jewish community are even rarer.⁵² How this counter-community will connect with the larger Jewish community in the future, when sheer demographic growth will provide the Orthodox community with far greater proportionate weight, remains to be seen.⁵³ But it is not difficult to imagine that dramatic changes in the way the Jewish community does business are in the offing.

Division over Issues of Personal Status

Orthodox Jews, in turn, are myopic in imagining that all the other movements will disappear anytime soon. The overwhelming majority of Jews affiliated with Jewish life are not Orthodox. Their way of dealing with matters of Jewish personal status will continue to bedevil communal relations. To make matters worse, their leaders have convinced themselves that they need to do nothing to bridge the differences because, in their view, questions of personal status have become irrelevant to much of the Jewish community, and the community has no interest in enforcing its boundaries.

The Reform and Reconstructionist movements seem not at all concerned about the question of whom Jews may marry and are barely able to find anything to say in public about such delicate matters.⁵⁴ On intermarriage, these movements no longer talk publicly about the desirability of converting non-Jews who have married Jews. The titular leader of the Reform movement, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, not long ago bemoaned this reality. He reported:

[C]onversations with both rabbis and lay leaders lead me to believe that in most instances we do not encourage conversion by non-Jewish spouses in our synagogues. Perhaps this bespeaks a natural reluctance to do what we fear will give rise to an awkward or uncomfortable situation. Or perhaps we have been so successful in making non-Jews feel comfortable in our congregations that we have inadvertently sent the message that we neither want nor expect conversion.⁵⁵

The policies of the Reform and Reconstructionist movements to accept patrilineality also obviate the need for children to convert if

their mother is not Jewish. And the question of *mamzerut* is a nonissue for these groups. In the Orthodox world, these are also nonissues, because the boundaries are defined sharply to keep out individuals of questionable status. As ever more Jews intermarry, Orthodox outreach workers will be forced to confront a large population of Jews who do not conform to an Orthodox understanding of “who is a Jew.” And for the foreseeable future, they will have to contend with a communal leadership that sees the world and Jewish interests through very different spectacles.

One of the wild cards in this equation is the future viability, let alone assertiveness, of the Conservative movement. On quite a few measures, the population of affiliated Conservative Jews stands out in its levels of observance, interest in Jewish education for Jews of all ages, commitment to Israel, and investment in the causes of *klal Yisrael*, Jewish peoplehood. In the aggregate, Conservative Jews exceed Reform, Reconstructionist, and nonaffiliated Jews by wide margins in their Jewish commitments, but are surpassed by Orthodox Jews, especially on matters of religious observance and synagogue attendance. Historically, Conservative Judaism has also insisted on fidelity to traditional norms in the area of Jewish personal status. In fact, some rabbis of the Conservative movement have differentiated between leniencies they were prepared to countenance within their own congregations and their opposition to religious innovations that affect the unity of the Jewish people. To the present day, the Conservative movement continues to insist on a traditional conversion ceremony, maintains the principle of matrilineal descent as defining who is a Jew, requires a Jewish bill of divorce (a *get*),⁵⁶ and in other ways departs from Reform and Reconstructionist practices. But in its public rhetoric, the Conservative movement tends to minimize friction with groups to its left, siding with them on “Who is a Jew” debates in Israel. Because their converts are no more accepted in Israel than are those of the Reform movement, the Conservative leadership is publicly allied with Reform Judaism, even though its standards on matters of personal status are far closer to those of the Orthodox world. Israeli politics has made for strange bedfellows, leading many

observers to conclude that the actual divide in religious life is between the Orthodox and everyone else.

It remains to be seen whether the Conservative movement will rally to become once again a “third way” in Jewish religious life, will fracture, or will be absorbed into the camp of Liberal Judaism—a resolution hoped for by almost everyone outside the movement and by some within. Though it is too early to tell which way the Conservative movement will go, the outcome will surely affect denominational relations.

Implications of the Status Quo

From one perspective—perhaps the dominant one—the current climate of public amity is healthier than was the period of friction and conflict between the movements a decade and more ago. There is much evidence of overt cooperation, and where there are differences, everyone is more polite and eager to cover them over. Consensus has seemingly returned to the Jewish community. And insofar as there is ideological conflict, it is not over religion but over the best way to help Israel live in peace and security. Otherwise, the mood is one of “live and let live.”

An almost unremarked development illustrates the nature of what has happened in the American Jewish community. The Reform rabbinate in March 2000 debated whether to endorse gay unions. Rather than argue directly about the poor fit between traditional Jewish teachings on the subject and current mores, opponents of the proposal warned against inflaming tensions with Orthodox groups, particularly in Israel. In response, a backer of the motion, Rabbi Denise Eger, contended that her “goal is not to please the black-hats of our religion. The reality is that the Haredi community will never accept Reform Judaism.” The motion to take a stance publicly endorsing gay marriage in American society passed—and evoked barely a ripple of response in Israel. “We do not seem to have appeared on their radar screen,” said Rabbi Charles Kroloff, then head of the Reform rabbinate. By contrast, a few Modern Orthodox rabbis in the United States fulminated, and Agudath Israel, the Hare-

di organization, took out an ad in major newspapers, charging that Reform rabbis had “gravely mislead not only other Jews, but the entire world” as to the position of Judaism on homosexuality.⁵⁷ And there the matter seemingly came to an end. The unilateralism feared by Greenberg was again enacted, yet there was virtually no direct confrontation of the issue between the denominations; and the Conservative movement was nowhere to be seen or heard.

Undoubtedly, many in positions of communal leadership would celebrate the resolution of this matter in a peaceful and relatively quiet fashion. A knowledgeable journalist, in fact, viewed this episode as an exemplary instance of finding a “broad middle ground where Jews agree more than disagree.” But is it true that the movements of American Judaism agree on the question of gay marriage? Interestingly, the paper’s editor saw matters differently when he attached as a subtitle to the article, “Reform and Orthodoxy glare at each other across an abyss of mutual incomprehension.”⁵⁸ In truth, that formulation captures what continues to fester beneath the surface: Despite all the positive rhetoric and cooperative programming, the religious leaders of the various movements speak very different languages and employ entirely different categories of religious discourse.

Certainly, this remains the case when it comes to matters of personal status. The question of “Who is a Jew” is no more resolved in the U.S. than it is in Israel. There is no agreement among American Jews on patrilineality. There is no agreement on what ought to be expected of potential converts to Judaism. There is no agreement on what is required to obtain a religious divorce. And there is no agreement on the status of children born to Jewish parents who did not obtain a Jewish bill of divorce, a *get*, from a previous marriage.⁵⁹ On all these matters, the denominations are divided. As increasing numbers of people come of age who are patrilineal Jews or whose mothers did not obtain a *get*, questions of marriageability inevitably will propel ever more Jews into opposing camps and will engender resentment, as when, for example, patrilineal Jews are asked to convert to a religion they always assumed was their patrimony.

The further damage caused by the current effort to paper over differences is that hardly anyone is working domestically on resolving these issues for the betterment—and unity—of the Jewish people. Significantly, in Israel, where various groups are forced to confront one another within a single polity, religious leaders continue to propose new and creative ways of addressing questions of personal status. In Israel there are efforts to launch joint conversion initiatives. And rabbinic leaders there are engaged in new thinking about *gittin* (bills of divorce) as well as a range of issues concerning the status of women. American Jews, by contrast, have concluded with great self-satisfaction that the magic bullet is “pluralism,” a fine ideal that simply avoids confronting differences by celebrating them. In the absence of a real polity, American Jews who disagree can ignore one another when the issues are too uncomfortable, and agree to meet only when the issues are uncontroversial and therefore safe.

This determination to avoid conflict characterizes much of American Jewish religious life today. Where once Jews debated what is permitted and what is impermissible, what is kosher and what is *treif*, what is proper Jewish behavior and what is beyond the pale, today American Jews avoid normative discussions. The various movements of Judaism can agree only upon the unacceptability of messianic Jews—Jews for Jesus, and the like. Beyond that, there are no clearly defined communal boundaries, and the current state of affairs is celebrated by those who prefer “fuzzy boundaries.”

The conventional wisdom in communal organizations is that boundaries tend to be exclusionary and discourage participation. While some Jews may take comfort and guidance from clearly articulated norms, it is argued, others will be repelled because they wish to experiment and construct their own versions of Judaism. Many Jews will not even approach communal institutions, let alone synagogues, that are not open-minded and validating. Hence, some argue that talk of boundaries and norms should be replaced by efforts to offer an inviting and pluralistic understanding of Judaism. The current emphasis in communal thinking is on creating an inviting atmosphere as a means to foster community building.

But while there are certainly virtues to such openness, there is also the danger that the rich and multilayered culture of Judaism will be stripped of its authenticity and meaning. As “nonjudgmentalism” has seeped into the way American Judaism is taught and marketed, promoters of Judaism emphasize the personal benefits to be derived from religion, but refrain from speaking a language of religious responsibilities. Song and dance have assumed prominent roles within synagogues of all flavors, in order to enhance the enjoyment of services, but the concept of mandatory prayers and a fixed structure of worship services (*keva*) has become an alien concept. Choreography has triumphed over content. In the past, various movements revised prayer books to remove offending passages. Today, there is far less concern about such matters, because the words themselves do not mean very much. Which synagogue-socialized Jewish child, for example, cannot sing the words of the closing *Aleinu* hymn? Yet how many would imagine that the prayer they are singing proclaims the distinctiveness of the Jews that sets them apart from Gentiles? How many, in short, accept the theology of the prayers they are singing so lustily?

Similar questions can be posed about Jewish education, now invoked as the solution to much of what ails American Jewry. Jewish education certainly is much needed, but how often do classes address aspects of Judaism that are difficult to understand, if not downright out-of-step with current mores? How often is Jewish education presented as a prescriptive guide to religious behavior rather than in a neutral, descriptive fashion? There is a large measure of obfuscation in Jewish life today that helps paper over the tough, divisive issues. This strategy of denial also carries over to the relationship between the denominations, where good manners have trumped serious confrontation of the issues. Style, rather than substance, is all.

It is, of course, possible that another “Who is a Jew” flare-up in Israel may blow the cover off the current era of goodwill and reignite religious tensions between Jews. In the meantime, what has triumphed in much of the community is pragmatism over ideology. The watchwords today are inclusiveness, pluralism, transdenomina-

tionalism, and “journeys” leading to a “self-constructed” Judaism tailored to the needs of each Jew. Other words have fallen by the wayside: religious truth, boundaries, religious obligations, *mitzvot* commanded by a God outside of us rather than a “sovereign self” inside of each Jew.

As one who feared the consequences of religious polarization for the unity of the Jewish people in America, I should rejoice over the current spirit of cooperation. I do, in fact, admire the constructive work that has brought about much transdenominational study and cooperation, but I also lament the price exacted for this goodwill. Beneath the facade of calm, the issues continue to fester, matters of personal status remain unresolved, and questions of religious principle are marginalized. A people famous for its disputatious nature has convinced itself that consensus has been reached, when, in reality, healthy debate has been silenced—for now.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Steven Bayme, Noam Marans, Lawrence Grossman, and Roselyn Bell of the American Jewish Committee for their help in thinking through the implications of this essay.

2. *Perspectives*, CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, n.d. The essay originally appeared in June 1985 and in a revised version in February 1986.

3. This encapsulation of his argument comes from a later essay: Irving Greenberg, “The One in 2000 Controversy,” *Moment* (March 1987): 17.

4. See *Conflict or Cooperation? Papers on Jewish Unity* (New York: CLAL and the American Jewish Committee, July 1989).

5. Quoted by Steven Bayme, in *ibid.*, p. v.

6. Samuel G. Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

7. Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1993) p. 196.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 193, 196.

9. Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “Reform Leader Predicts Demise of Conservatives,” *New York Jewish Week*, March 4, 2004.

10. The New York Board of Rabbis issued a report in 1998 entitled “Unity in Diversity: A Vision of Rabbinic Cooperation,” which detailed such efforts. See Stewart Ain, “Rabbis Question Report on Movement’s Harmony,” *New York Jewish Week*, Oct. 9, 1998, p. 1.

11. A somewhat offbeat example of cross-denominational cooperation comes from a meeting of the North American Hevrah Kadisha, where seventy-five people met in Las Vegas to talk about Jewish burial customs. “Orthodox, Conservative and Reform participants had no inhibitions exchanging ideas, customs, and techniques. In death,” observed the reporter, “there is no interdenominational tension.” Ronnie Berman, *Jerusalem Report*, July 26, 2004, p. 9.

12. A coalition of eleven family foundations published a signed advertisement that appeared in thirty-five Jewish newspapers across the U.S., urging “civil speech as a criterion for Jewish grant making,” according to a report by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency in late 1999. See Julia Goldman, “Ad Cam-

paign Urges More Civil Discourse in Jewish Community,” *Jewish News of Greater Phoenix*, Nov. 5, 1999, and Tami Bickley, “Additional Groups Embrace Ad’s Call for Civil Discourse,” *ibid.*, Nov. 1999. The vice president of one of the lead foundations explicitly insisted that “there should be economic consequences when people speak irresponsibly about other members and groups in the Jewish community.” Some organizations, such as the New Israel Fund, and Federations, such as the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles, are pumping money into Israeli institutions that promote religious pluralism. See “Funds Combat ‘Who is a Jew’ Wars,” *Los Angeles Jewish Journal*, Jan. 5, 2003.

13. In the past few years, the congregational arms of the two largest religious movements of Judaism adopted new names to accent their unique denominational identity. The United Synagogue of America renamed itself the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations became the Union for Reform Judaism. Both name changes probably stemmed from a preoccupation with name “branding” more than anything else, but it is nevertheless noteworthy that each name change indicated a withdrawal from earlier grandiose bids to represent all American Jews to more modest claims of representing a particular movement.

14. For some key reflections on Orthodox separation and secession in Europe, see Robert Liberles, *Religious Conflict in Social Context: The Resurgence of Orthodox Judaism in Frankfurt am Main, 1838-1877* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985); Michael Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of a Tradition,” in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary Press, 1992), pp. 23-84; and Adam S. Ferziger, *Exclusion and Hierarchy: Orthodoxy and Non-Observance and the Emergence of Modern Jewish Identity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

15. These sectors continue to take a stridently confrontational approach toward other groups, including the Modern Orthodox. The press organs of these groups, such as the *Jewish Press* and the *Jewish Observer*, as well as Yiddish papers, are scathingly critical of other Jewish viewpoints. Avi Shafran, the director of public affairs for Agudath Israel, is perhaps the best known polemicist of the right-wing world. See, for example, his assault on Conservative Judaism in “The Conservative Lie,” *Moment* (Feb.-March 2001). He explains his rationale for combating all forms of Judaism other than his own in “The Dangers of Diversity,” *New York Jewish Week*, Aug. 18, 2000, p. 24.

16. Joel N. Shurkin, “Orthodox Rabbi Heads Board of Rabbis,” *Baltimore Jewish Times*, July 30, 2004. In neighboring Washington, by contrast, Ortho-

dox rabbis typically eschew the local board. See Rick Newkirk, “Rabbis Seek to Continue Collegial Atmosphere,” *Washington Jewish Week*, June 28, 2004. Recently, an Orthodox rabbi new in town broke ranks and joined the board, hoping to “foster a sense of unity among all Jews regardless of denomination.” Aaron Leibel, “Board of Rabbis Gets First Orthodox Member,” *Washington Jewish Week*, Dec. 23, 2004.

17. On the recruitment and education of such workers, see Adam S. Ferziger, “Training Orthodox Rabbis to Play a Role in Confronting Assimilation: Programs, Methodologies, Directions,” Research and Position Papers: The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and the Strengthening of Jewish Vitality, Bar-Ilan University, 2003.

18. “There are now more than 4,000 Chabad emissaries worldwide, double the number a decade ago, according to Chabad officials.” Jonathan Mark and Michael Kress, “Against All Odds,” *New York Jewish Week*, June, 18, 2004. See also Sue Fishkoff, *The Rebbe’s Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavich* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), and especially *idem*, “The Chabad Challenge,” *Reform Judaism* (Winter 2003) 16 ff., where the activities of Chabad *shlichim* are held up as a “Lubavitcher lesson” from which there is “much Reform Jews can learn,” p. 70.

19. See also, Aaron Joshua Tapper, “The ‘Cult’ of Aish Hatorah: Baalei Teshuva and the New Religious Movement Phenomenon,” *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 44: 1-2 (2002): 5-29. This success has prompted even Agudath Israel, arguably the most confrontational Haredi group, to consider new outreach programs to “rescue” non-Orthodox Jews. See Uriel Heilman, “Chabad’s Model of Outreach Gains Favor among Fervently Orthodox,” *Jewish Telegraph Agency*, Dec. 12, 2003.

20. I am grateful to Dr. Ferziger for sharing an advance draft of his manuscript “The Community Kollel in America: An Emerging Model for Confronting Assimilation.” Ferziger cites a study by Herbert W. Bomzer, which identified over sixty kollels in America as of the early 1980s. Since then, the number has only increased. See Bomzer, *The Kolel in America* (New York: Sheingold, 1985), p. 9.

21. Ferziger, “The Community Kollel,” p. 37.

22. <http://atlantakollel.org/about.htm>.

23. Ferziger, “The Community Kollel,” pp. 35-36.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

25. The recent publication of a book, *One People, Two Worlds*, coauthored by two rabbis, one Reform and the other Haredi, illustrates the limits of such outreach. After word of the book’s publication spread, Rabbi Yosef Reinman,

the Agudath Israel rabbi, was pressured by his Orthodox colleagues to desist from engaging in public dialogue with his coauthor. See Sandee Brawarsky, “Agreeing to Disagree” and Gary Rosenblatt, “Closed Chapter,” in the New York *Jewish Week*, Oct. 11, 2002, and Nov. 1, 2002.

26. On the battle to define a more traditional Reform platform in the late 1990s and its eventual watering down, see Dana Evan Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), chapter 11, “The Battle over the Future of Reform Judaism.”

27. This can sometimes lead to jarring scenes: “[I]t is not uncommon,” writes Dana Evan Kaplan, “to find congregations where many of the women wear yarmulkes and *tallitot*, while most of the men sit bareheaded and bare-shouldered.” *Ibid.*, p. 25.

28. My first teaching position was in a Reform temple that happened to be situated down the block from a *mikveh*. I still recall the ridicule heaped upon that “medieval” institution by the temple’s rabbi.

29. According to the latest National Jewish Population Survey, 2001, 34 percent of Jewish adults raised as Conservative Jews currently identify as Reform and 9 percent as Orthodox. These figures are taken from an unpublished report on “Denominational Variations in Jewish Identity Characteristics” prepared by Prof. Steven M. Cohen.

30. In addition to the dozens of Chabad and Aish HaTorah schools, a new network called ToTal (short for Torah and Talmud), now numbering thirty-five institutions, is providing a once-a-week Jewish education that requires no synagogue membership and only a modest tuition. Many of these schools are connected to Orthodox synagogues and claim to cater only to the unaffiliated. They are making inroads, particularly among families that would have affiliated with a Conservative synagogue. On this phenomenon, see Bryan Schwartzman, “Hebrew School: Not Just for Shul Anymore,” *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*, Aug. 19, 2004, p. 1.

31. Robert Gordis, “To Move Forward, Take One Step Back,” *Moment* (May 1986):58-61.

32. Tom Tugend, “The New Face of the UJ,” *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, Dec. 1, 2001, quotes the president of the institution as saying: “Our rabbinical school is Conservative. The rest of the university is basically non-denominational.”

33. The far smaller Reconstructionist, Jewish Renewal, and Humanistic Judaism movements tend to their own members and rarely confront the larger movements directly.

34. Felice Maranz, “Staying the Night,” *Jerusalem Report*, July 26, 2004, p.

29. The inaugural New York Limmud, held January 14-17, 2005, near New Paltz, New York, was sold out.

35. Bethamie Horowitz, “Looking beyond Labels,” *Forward*, Feb. 6, 2004, p. 11.

36. Michael Berenbaum and David N. Myers, “Imagine a Jewish World without Denominations,” *Forward*, Nov. 1, 2002.

37. Andrew Silow-Carroll, “Crossing Over,” *New York Jewish Week*, Dec. 15, 1999, pp. 46-49.

38. For one version of this argument, see the remarks of Arthur Green, quoted in Eric Caplan, *From Ideology to Liturgy: Reconstructionist Worship and American Liberal Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2002), p. 180, note 61. Green sees the divide as one between “the Orthodox and the heterodox.”

39. Leon A. Morris, “Beyond, or Mixing, Denominations,” *New York Jewish Week*, March 7, 2003, p. 26. See also Steve Lipman, “The New Iconoclasts,” in a magazine, *Directions*, of the *New York Jewish Week*, Dec. 27, 2004, pp. 6-16, which discusses the proliferation of *minyanim*, small prayer groups that meet in different parts of Manhattan and eschew denominational labels. All are for young Jews, mainly singles. As one organizer explains, “We are trying to make people realize that ... the Jewish community extends beyond a movement’s walls” (p. 10).

40. *The Journal News* (of Westchester and Rockland Counties, NY), Sept. 14, 2003, p. 4B. The ad was placed by the Jewish Flame, a Queens-based outreach group. See <http://www.jewishflame.org/about.htm>.

41. Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew.*, p. 353. *Olam* was founded by an adherent of Chabad. A study of Aish HaTorah came to the same conclusion: “Aish Hatorah is more open and candid about its ultra-Orthodox perspective in the environment of its yeshiva, whereas in other venues—such as in its outreach centres and the programmes offered there, Aish Hatorah advertises itself as a pluralistic, all-inclusive environment.” Tapper, “The ‘Cult’ of Aish Hatorah,” p. 24, note 55.

42. The search for a “common Judaism” to replace “the entrenched bureaucracies of established denominations in the United States [that] have largely lost their vigor,” serves as the context of a conversation between the megafunder Michael Steinhardt and Rabbi Irving Greenberg. Their discussion, however, is short on specifics. See “Jewish Movement, Jewish Renaissance: A Forum,” *Contact: Jewish Life Network* (Autumn 2003), pp. 3-4. For a broad survey of the diverse phenomena lumped under the catchphrase of “post-denominationalism,” see Uriel Heilman, “Beyond Denominationalism,” *Long*

Island Jewish World, March 11-17, 2005, pp. 8, 26-27.

43. This view is part of the thesis of Alan Wolfe's *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2003). Wolfe also downplays the intensity of the culture wars between conservatives and liberals and claims that most Americans are gravitating toward a common centrist ground. Wolfe celebrates the triumph of accommodation over religious ideologies. It is not at all clear that he is correct in his assessment of what is happening in Christian America, but his analysis surely does not fit Jewish denominational life, as will be shown below.

44. Nancy T. Ammerman, "New Life for Denominationalism," *Christian Century*, March 15, 2000, pp. 302-07, which argues that Protestant congregations are again highlighting their "denominational particularities," and those differences are more likely to be "based on ritual and doctrine than on social divisions."

45. The issue may well resurface with the inclusion of an ultra-Orthodox party, United Torah Judaism, in the governing coalition in Israel in January 2005. The Israeli Supreme Court is "slated to decide a case that could force the government to grant Reform and Conservative conversions done in Israel the same status as those conducted under state-sponsored Orthodox supervision." Eric J. Greenberg, "Sharon Backs Orthodox in Court Case," *Forward*, Nov. 26, 2004, p. 4.

46. A graphic yet particularly insidious and methodologically flawed presentation of this analysis, based on a projection forward from the year 1990 four generations hence, concluded that for every thirteen Reform Jews and twenty-four Conservative Jews, there would be 911 Orthodox Jews. The graphic appeared in Jewish and other newspapers across the country. See the *New York Times*, Feb. 15, 1998, p. A21.

47. Viva Hammer, "The Orthodox Baby Boom," *Jewish Action* (Fall 2004), p. 8.

48. Marvin Schick, "A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States," Avi Chai Foundation (Jan. 2000), p. 13.

49. Orthodox Jews, moreover, are acutely aware of their demographic weapon. To take a few recent examples of articles by Orthodox Jews that have explicitly called attention to demographic trends and the altered political and communal realities they portend, see Hammer, "The Orthodox Baby Boom"; Berel Wein, "The Vanishing American Jew," *Jewish Action* (Spring 2004); and Hillel Goldberg, "The Soaring Orthodox Jewish Birth Rate," *Intermountain Jewish News*, Dec. 3, 2004.

50. Goldberg, *ibid.*

51. Ira Rifkin, "A Tally of Two Countries," *Jerusalem Report*, Nov. 29, 2004, pp. 26-27. The pollster is Frank Luntz.

52. There is a need for a good study of how Orthodox Jews intersect with—or avoid—the key agencies of the larger Jewish community.

53. Chabad is beginning to press for a share of Federation "renewal" funds. Such demands are likely to grow and expand, as Orthodox groups insist on a larger portion of communal resources.

54. See, for example, a symposium held in 1995 in which an Orthodox rabbi focused sharply on matters of personal status and both the Reform and Reconstructionist respondents ignored the subject entirely. The Conservative respondent also singled out decisions on patrilineality and intermarriage as conflicting with "the ultimate goal of Jewish unity." See Albert Vorspan, "Is American Jewry Unraveling?," *Reform Judaism* (Summer 1995), pp. 10ff. The other contributors were Rabbis Mordechai Liebling, Marc. D. Angel, Jerome Epstein, and Alexander Schindler.

55. Eric H. Yoffie, "A Call to Outreach," *Reform Judaism*, (Fall 1999), pp. 32-33.

56. But it does not enforce rules about *mamzerut*.

57. J.J. Goldberg, "Continental Divide," *New York Jewish Week*, April 7, 2000, p. 47. On the ad placed by Agudath Israel, see Dana Evan Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 225. Significantly, the spokesman for the group characterized the ad as educational, not confrontational; it was designed not to provoke the Reform movement, but to educate the public as to the true position of Judaism on the matter.

58. Goldberg, "Continental Divide."

59. For a cogent analysis of the solution to this problem of *mamzerut* by a major Orthodox religious decisor of a previous generation, see David Berger, "On Marriageability, Jewish Identity, and the Unity of American Jewry," in *Conflict or Cooperation?*, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-77. See especially his observations concerning the "radical delegitimation" of non-Orthodox Jews this entails, p. 72.