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# Judaism Without Limits

*Jack Wertheimer*

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EVER SINCE last fall, when several Israeli religious parties introduced new legislation to grant Orthodox rabbis a formal monopoly over conversions to Judaism performed in the Jewish state, the issue of religious pluralism has taken center stage in the organized Jewish community of the United States. In truth, the conversion bill was but the latest expression of a long-festering struggle in Israel over the question, "Who is a Jew?"—and who has the authority to decide. Every few years, a different piece of legislation is proposed by religious parties to strengthen the authority of the chief rabbinate and formalize the status of Orthodoxy. Inevitably, these actions have repercussions in the United States, where Jews preponderantly identify with non-Orthodox denominations; the leaders of those denominations regularly take umbrage at the implied delegitimation of their version of the faith, while also rising to the defense of non-Orthodox Jews in Israel itself.

Perhaps because this matter has never been resolved, tempers have become increasingly frayed and positions more extreme. Thus, some Orthodox groups in Israel recently enlisted their American counterparts to pronounce before the international media that all non-Orthodox versions of Judaism

are "not Judaism." Representatives of non-Orthodox denominations, for their part, have also raised the ante. The leader of the U.S. Reform movement, for example, has taken to castigating the chief rabbis of Israel as "medieval," and the chancellor of the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary has called for the abolition of the office of the chief rabbinate. Other prominent American Jews openly demand a formal separation of religion and state in Israel.

The tacit assumption of many who engage in these debates is that American Jews have much to teach their benighted Israeli cousins. Living in a heterogeneous environment, American Jews—so the argument runs—have learned the blessings of diversity, and accept the legitimacy of many different forms of religious Jewish expression. Moreover, thanks to constitutional guarantees of church/state separation, American Judaism is not demeaned by the kinds of electoral horse-trading to which Israeli religious parties inevitably must stoop. In short, American Jews and American Judaism have flourished in an atmosphere of pluralism and tolerance, and Israeli Jews would do well to learn from their example.

One would never guess from such protestations that, far from flourishing, the American Jewish community is in crisis. Vast numbers of contemporary American Jews have turned their backs altogether on Jewish identity. Several hundred thousand have converted to other faiths; still more have failed to marry Jews; and a great many neglect the Jewish educa-

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tion of their children. In the meantime, a number of deeply problematic developments have begun to affect those who remain within the fold, especially the growing demand among some intermarried Jews that their children and their non-Jewish spouses be counted as Jews for religious purposes and included within the existing denominational structure. In short, American Jews themselves are not a little confused—and not a little deluded—on the question of who is or who should be considered a Jew, and who has the authority to decide.

**T**RADITIONALLY, JEWISH identity consisted of a mixture of tribal and religious elements: as defined by the rabbis of the talmudic period, a Jew was one who either had been born to a Jewish mother or had converted to the Jewish faith. (The latter was expected both to adopt Jewish religious norms *and* to identify with the historical experience of the Jewish people.) All this proved quite troubling, however, to the modern Western mindset. In most Western lands where Jews became citizens, Jewishness came to be defined strictly as a matter of confession. Jewish ethnic loyalties were for the most part considered suspect, and a purely secular Jewish identity made no sense. The United States proved, at best, only a partial exception to this rule.

Today, American society poses challenges of a different order. Rather than being pressured to conform to starkly defined categories, Jews in the United States are finding that their identity can be as loosely marked as that of any other American group. Not surprisingly, when sociologists study American Jews, they now feel compelled to create multiple categories. The authors of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study, for example, employed no fewer than a half-dozen “Jewish Identity Constructs” in order to count Jews living in the United States. Among them: born Jews whose religion is Judaism; born Jews with no religion; Jews by choice—i.e., converts to Judaism; and “children under eighteen being raised with another religion.” And the sociologists have it relatively easy, since all they have to do is describe. For those within the community who are charged with preserving and transmitting religious norms, the situation has become quite agonizing.

Until the day before yesterday, Jews of different religious denominations, whatever their theological disagreements, could agree on who was a member of the Jewish community. Not only was the ancient rabbinic standard universally accepted, the barriers to intermarriage created by internal Jewish taboos as well as by Gentile hostility saw to it that the standard was fairly easily maintained. But with today’s

massive increase in exogamy, some have been prompted to reconsider traditional definitions.

Their first and most obvious target has been the doctrine of matrilineal descent. Why, they ask, should a child with only one Jewish parent be treated differently by the official religious community if that parent happens to be the child’s father rather than its mother? Should not community and synagogue alike embrace such children, and thereby help “interfaith” families identify themselves as Jews? Is it not self-destructive to risk the loss of hundreds of thousands of children solely in order to maintain a principle which, whatever may be said for it historically, no longer suits our circumstances?

In 1983, the Reform movement, currently the denomination with which the plurality of American Jews identify, formally rejected the traditional definition of Jewish identity by adopting a resolution accepting any child of intermarriage as a Jew. No longer was descent from a Jewish mother a necessary condition. Nor, for that matter, was formal conversion to Judaism. Rather, the child’s Jewish identity was to be redefined as an act of personal choice, the only proviso being that the “presumption” of Jewish status was “to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people.”

This ruling has been duly rejected by the Conservative and Orthodox movements, both of which maintain the traditional rabbinic position on Jewish identity and regard Jews who intermarry as having broken a fundamental taboo.\* As a consequence, there is no agreement in the Jewish community over who is a Jew.

Unlike other disagreements over matters of theology and practice, this question of personal status has important social repercussions. An Internet forum for Reform rabbis has been buzzing with stories of Conservative rabbis who will not allow the teenagers in their synagogues to fraternize with their peers from local Reform temples, on the grounds that this could lead to their dating young people not considered Jewish according to traditional criteria. Or, consider the dilemma of a Conservative rabbi asked by a female congregant to officiate at her marriage to a young man who is Jewish only according to Reform’s patrilineal dispensation. A rabbi who acquiesces will be committing an act punishable by expulsion from the organization of Conservative rab-

\* According to a recent study conducted under my direction, the Conservative laity is considerably more latitudinarian on this issue than the rabbinate. As for the Reconstructionist movement, with which approximately 1 percent of American Jews identify, it adopted a version of the Reform position as long ago as 1968.

bis; a rabbi who declines will end up alienating at least two families on account of "intolerance." We are rapidly approaching the time, moreover, when there will be rabbis who are themselves offspring of interfaith families, and who will not be recognized by their colleagues *as Jews*.

CONVERSION TO Judaism, the recourse that has always been available to those not born Jewish who want to join the Jewish group, now also divides American Jews of different denominations.

The conversion process traditionally unfolds in a series of steps: (1) A term of study leading to a commitment to Jewish religious observance and an identification with the Jewish people. (2) The convening of a rabbinic court (*beit din*) which supervises the conversion. (3) The actual ceremony, in which the convert is immersed in the waters of a ritual bath (*mikveh*) and, if male, undergoes an actual or symbolic circumcision.

Each of the religious movements treats these phases differently. Many Orthodox rabbis do not accept conversions performed by their more liberal counterparts, on the grounds that such conversions do not bind the individual to Orthodox religious observance. (Many also contend that non-Orthodox rabbis are by definition never qualified to constitute a religious court.) Reform rabbis, by contrast, operate as they see fit: they offer educational programs of varying lengths; often perform conversions without a *beit din*; and do not necessarily require either circumcision or immersion. Caught in the middle are Conservative rabbis, who adhere to all three steps outlined above but whose conversions are often not recognized by Orthodox rabbis, while they themselves are hard-pressed to accord legitimacy to conversions performed under Reform auspices.

And so, despite the vaunted pluralism of American Jewry, its religious movements tend neither to accept each other's definitions of who is a Jew nor to accept each other's converts. At best, each operates independently, with little regard for the others' positions or values; at worst, each movement acts as if convinced that it alone will survive, and so does not hesitate to take unilateral actions that have deleterious consequences for other Jews.

**N**OR IS that all. If there is no consensus as to who is a Jew, there is also virtually no agreement on the limits of religious expression that can be subsumed under the name of Judaism. Writing in last summer's COMMENTARY symposium, "What Do American Jews Believe?," Michael Medved astutely noted one apparent exception to this rule:

Jews for Jesus, a proselytizing and syncretistic movement that is universally abhorred by organized Jewry. But the reason this group is singled out for disapprobation, according to Medved, is that "the chief distinguishing characteristic of most American Jews is not what they do believe, but what they do not believe. They do not believe in Jesus as the messiah." For the rest, all other versions of religious syncretism are not only tolerated but often welcomed, including by rabbis.

Among the religions on offer, Buddhism exercises particular allure: in *The Jew in the Lotus* (1994), "a poet's rediscovery of Jewish identity in Buddhist India," Roger Kamenetz reveals much about the merging of traditions that takes place among so-called "JUBU's," Jewish Buddhists, while *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist*, by Sylvia Boorstein,\* explains how to harmonize "being a faithful Jew and a passionate Buddhist." But Buddhism hardly exhausts the list. The Jewish Renewal Movement, headed by Zalman Schachter, a renegade Orthodox rabbi, has encouraged syncretism for decades at its various prayer and retreat centers. Writing in *The Reconstructionist*, a rabbi relates how she herself "sampled a lot of teachers and forms of Eastern practice and New Age offerings, including karate, yoga, tai ch'i, Sufi dancing, the Gurdjieff work, vision-questing and the twelve steps," and goes on to say that she is still "forcefully drawn to explore how . . . these traditions can honestly, respectfully, and fruitfully intersect." A rabbinical student experimenting with Native American sweat lodges adds, "I have learned that the cure for our own ailments can sometimes be found in someone else's medicine chest."

The sheer number of Jews participating in the various forms of religious experimentation today is striking. According to Kamenetz, Jews constitute a vastly disproportionate percentage of non-Asian Buddhists in the U.S. Many others joining Eastern religions and Native American groups are eagerly welcomed by individuals of Jewish origin who are often in charge. Jewish women are among the leaders of witches' covens. And it goes without saying that the rabbinical student experimenting with sweat lodges was initiated by a man of Jewish birth who had "undergone rigorous training with the Oglala Sioux." There seems to be no shortage of such people eager to draw their co-religionists into the mysteries of other religions. Jews for Buddha, yes. Only when Jews for Jesus do it is it decried as missionizing.

Defenders of experimentation contend that exploring other religions can serve as a path back to

\* HarperCollins, 170 pp., \$20.00.

Judaism. No doubt that is true for some. But one can only marvel at the contrast between the revulsion such Jews display toward a monotheistic religion like Christianity and their eagerness to break what was once the greatest of all Jewish taboos—participation in *avodah zarah*, pagan worship. In the opening pages of *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist*, Boorstein describes a trip to a Buddhist temple in Canada, where “an Asian couple were doing prostrations . . . in front of huge, gilt Buddha statues.” Only the abbot’s “far-too-parochial, far-too-sexist introduction to Buddhism than was appropriate for this group of sophisticated [Jewish] women” sounded a jarring note in what otherwise seems to have been a pleasurable enough immersion in idolatry.

WHETHER OR not Jews are averse to Christianity, however, the intermarriage tide means that more and more Christians are finding their own way into Jewish life, thus further contributing to the breakdown of once-clear boundaries between what is Jewish and what is not. I have already mentioned the steps that have been taken to accommodate the children of such intermarriages and declare them Jews. Today, the non-converted spouses of intermarried Jews are themselves becoming increasingly active in synagogues and community centers, with results that no one has yet seen fit to assess. To the contrary, when challenged, leaders of the movements most affected by this development have taken to invoking the mantra of “inclusiveness.”

“Being welcoming, concern for feelings, and communal ties were the deciding arguments for congregations that decided to include Gentile partners in the civic life of the congregation,” reports the executive director of the Reconstructionist Federation of Synagogues. Similarly, a recent article in *Reform Judaism*, examining the role of “Non-Jews in the Synagogue,” reports positively on a congregation in Wisconsin where a non-Jew serves as chair of the religious school and Gentiles form a large part of the teaching staff. The rabbi of this congregation acknowledges that “the presence of involved non-Jews affects our presentation and practice of Judaism.” But, the rabbi adds, “if rigid boundaries are constructed, we may significantly decrease the number of people who might consider such involvement.”

The rabbi’s somewhat plaintive words underscore the circularity of today’s situation. As more Jews intermarry, institutions conclude that they must blur formerly clear dividing lines lest they suffer a steep decline in membership and financial support. But the more the lines are blurred, the greater the confusion sown among Jews and non-Jews alike as to the limits

of Jewish identity. No wonder Jews married to non-Jews now feel free to lecture the organized Jewish community on its alleged failure to “embrace the stranger,”\* or portray the traditional stricture against exogamy as nothing but a form of bigotry. Here are the worried words of one Jewish parent, quoted by the (intermarried) journalist Philip Weiss:

Can you imagine if it was a roomful of Italians or Irish, saying their kids should marry in the tribe? It would be laughable. . . . It would offend people. If you heard about a roomful of Italians saying that, you’d say, sure, Bensonhurst. But what if it were successful Irish? Lawyers and architects and journalists. It would strike a lot of people as very prejudiced. And it would be laughable because the Italians and Irish wouldn’t want to stop their kids from marrying out. They don’t want to limit their kids. They want them to have the fullness of the American experience.

The reversal here is quite complete: adherents of traditional standards may be guilty of inflicting trauma on their children, while those who flout such standards may be the true defenders of Jewish interests. The same logic also informs Alan Dershowitz’s new book, *The Vanishing American Jew*.† After correctly describing the primary threat today as coming not from anti-Semites but from those who would “kill us with kindness—by assimilating us, marrying us, and merging with us out of respect, admiration, and even love,” Dershowitz proposes meeting that threat by becoming “less tribal, less ethnocentric, less exclusive, less closed-off, less defensive, less xenophobic, less clannish.”

It would be hard to imagine how American Jews could become “less closed-off” or “less exclusive” than they already are, without becoming totally invisible. But for those who do still wish to identify themselves as Jews, there can be no worse advice than that proffered by Dershowitz and other recent advocates of “fuzzy boundaries” (the phrase is that of a Jewish communal activist). Unable to agree among themselves on where to draw limits, such people propose abandoning any hope of setting limits at all. Instead of working to clarify what Judaism requires, they counsel religious dilution. Instead of setting clear lines, they enjoin Jews to lower the barriers between Jewish and non-Jewish religion still further. Instead of working toward consensus on who is a Jew, they break down any possibility of consensus.

This way lies not pluralism but anarchy, and self-extinction.

\* See Ellen Jaffe McClain, *Embracing the Stranger: Intermarriage and the Future of the Jewish Community* (1995).

† Little, Brown, 395 pp. \$24.95.