

JEWISH IDEAS DAILY

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Who Needs Denominations?

By Yehudah Mirsky

Several weeks ago, an American law professor who serves on his synagogue's search committee for a new rabbi put forward the provocative argument that the process was not only stifling but illegal. The culprit, he wrote, was the highly restrictive role played by national rabbinic bodies, especially the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly and the Reform movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis. (He reserved judgment on the less elaborate placement procedures of Orthodoxy and Reconstructionism.)



RELEVANT LINKS

Modernization and Its Discontents Louis Jacobs, *My Jewish Learning*. On the emergence and growth of Reform and Orthodoxy, in that order.

Two Trends in American Jewish Life Steven M. Cohen, *Contact/Berman Jewish Policy Archive*. Though often conflated, post-denominationalism and non-denominationalism are distinctive phenomena (PDF). The entire issue of *Contact*, devoted to the denominations, is [here](#).

The professor may or may not be right on the law. But his article, taken together with other developments like the emergence of the liberal Orthodox International Rabbinic Fellowship and the non-denominational rabbinical school of Boston's Hebrew College, as well as the rising popularity of pluralist "community schools" and independent prayer groups (minyanim)—and, above all, the fact that membership numbers in Conservative and Reform congregations are static or falling—leads one to ask, not for the first time, what exactly American Jewish religious denominations are for.

Pre-modern Jewry was organized in communal structures (*kehillot*). The dissolution of those structures, voluntary in some instances and forcible in others, was one of the defining features of Jewish modernization. The denominations we see today represent an effort to reconstitute some sort of collective identity and institutional heft under the changed circumstances of modernity. They also reflect, in both structure and name, a set of ideological struggles dating back 200 years.

In Europe, the modernizing Reform movement conjured itself into being as a self-consciously distinctive group in the early 19th century. In response, Orthodoxy emerged not long after, reaffirming tradition as a self-conscious, and now countercultural, ideology

and taking very different forms in Western and Eastern Europe. The Conservative movement as we now know it, proclaiming at once a loyalty to tradition and openness to change, developed over decades and in the U.S. achieved an identity of its own only in the 1920s.

Recognizing the historical contingency and limits of the old denominational labels is the necessary first step toward thinking about them usefully. Today's American Jewish denominations are very much the products of their time and place and of the specific circumstances of American religious life as a whole, heavily shaped as that life has been by essentially Protestant nomenclature and modes of organization. Interestingly, the denominational structure is dramatically different from that prevailing in Israel or other places in the world. No less interestingly, the denomination registering the greatest current growth, or at least the greatest internal retention rate, is the one with the least centralized structure and the most thoroughgoing demands on the faithful—namely, Orthodoxy.

So is the denominational structure hopelessly obsolete, as the rise of alternative congregations and rabbinical training schools suggests, and should the movements be thinking strenuously of ways to reconfigure themselves? There is, as it happens, plenty of thinking going on, and plenty of experimentation even within the denominational template. But there may also be sound reasons why no new structure has yet emerged alongside or in place of any of the existing movements, and why no sort of formal merger appears anywhere on the horizon—even though each of them, including Orthodoxy, has been borrowing and incorporating elements from each of the others for decades. It would seem that, quite apart from the inherent difficulties of any institutional change, the movements' enduring and genuine differences—ideological, sociological, and cultural—remain compelling enough to make any large-scale transformation unthinkable: a situation that in turn encourages some to go on exploring the territory beyond or in between the margins.

The crucial distinction may lie between those who explore and those who drift away altogether. The sociologist Steven Cohen has written of a dual process of non- and post-denominationalism. The former term refers to those who maintain only minimal ties to formal Jewish life as a whole and who intermarry in substantial numbers; the latter, those who remain deeply committed and engaged but who express their commitment outside the large formal structures of the denominations.

"Express" is a key word here. If one feature of modern life is the ascendance of reason and science as sources of knowledge and authority, another is expressiveness, the conviction that the truth is to be found in one's own subjectivity and in the recesses of one's own experience and passions. This impulse, helped along by new technologies and forms of organization that make for more diffuse structures of authority and belief, and by currents like feminism that link the expressive ideal with the demand for equality, has powerfully reworked all of contemporary religion. In Western societies today, even the most stringent form of traditionalism is *chosen*; if it does not find an echo in the subjective experience of the individual, it will not long endure.

But there is another way of looking at the relation between the impulse to maintain boundaries and the impulse to push beyond them. The late anthropologist Victor Turner observed in *The Ritual Process* that social and religious life proceeds through a dialectic of structure and anti-structure. Both are essential, the one for continuity, order, and responsibility, the other for meaning, passion, and critique. This systole-and-diastole motion can be seriously destructive if it springs from self-indulgence or slides into mere argumentativeness. When driven by real commitment, it may be one of the healthiest features of Jewish life.

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