

Denominations and the Jewish Future: An Exchange



With the publication of “*All Quiet on the Religious Front? Jewish Unity, Denominationalism and Post-Denominationalism in the United States*” (American Jewish Committee, May 2005), **Dr. Jack Wertheimer** offered an analysis of the current state of post- or trans-denominationalism in American Jewish life. **Rabbi Yitz Greenberg** met with Professor Wertheimer to survey the current state of Jewish intra-faith relations.

Yitz Greenberg: I thought it would be interesting to discuss the implications of your recent study. Do we face a future of renewed denominationalism? Or will trans-denominationalism become the dominant mode? Or possibly, could post-denominationalism win out altogether in American Jewish life?

Jack Wertheimer: Before responding about the future, let us first review the past. In the 1980s you predicted that American Jewry was headed for a schism, with the community dividing into two peoples. This hasn't happened. Do you feel good or bad about that?

Dr. Jack Wertheimer is Provost and Professor of American Jewish History at the Jewish Theological Seminary. **Rabbi Yitz Greenberg** is President of Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation.

YG: Both. I feel bad because, although the final step was not taken, there has been a fundamental breach in the community. The Orthodox and the non-Orthodox are living in two different worlds; there is little serious contact between the denominational organizations, their youth movements or their religious authorities. There continues to be a great deal of hostility and rejection between the two worlds — and I would venture, little ‘intermarriage’ between them.

On the other hand, your excellent paper gave me some comfort about my life's work. Along with others, I started CLAL: the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership to advance Jewish learning among Jewish community leaders and create rabbinic dialogue to foster religious pluralism and the unity of *clal yisrael* (the whole community).

When people asked me how CLAL did, I

used to answer: CLAL is the classic case of the surgeon who reports that the operation was highly successful; but unfortunately, the patient died. CLAL reached hundreds of rabbis and an even greater number of lay people with models of positive pluralist interaction, cooperation and learning together. However, at the end of two decades of CLAL's work, the Jewish people was fundamentally more divided and hostile, reaching the level of being two peoples psychologically, i.e., the patient died. Now, in light of your paper, I believe that CLAL's programs (and others) played a constructive role in averting the evil decree of permanent separation — so my work was not totally wasted. But maybe you can share your analysis of why the worst did not happen.

JW: In my view, a number of broad factors are at work. One is the deliberate effort of philanthropists, federations and central educational agencies to bring together Jews of different backgrounds. A plethora of educational programs for young people, adults, rabbis and other Jewish professionals intentionally are designed to focus on issues of common concern and to downplay differences. Some allow for the airing of different perspectives, but the implicit message is: We all are addressing the same texts or issues; our common interests far exceed our areas of disagreement. In addition, major funding agencies have made it clear that they expect diverse Jewish groups to play nicely together. In its most aggressive form, this actually led to an explicit threat by several of the largest Jewish philanthropies to withhold funding from institutions whose leaders engage in divisive, highly partisan rhetoric.

But this is only part of the story. Each of the movements has its own internal reasons to tend to its own garden at this point, rather than engage in polemics. Furthermore, the movements are all facing a common challenge: How to respond to the argument of post-denominationalists who regard all the religious movements as *passé*; who claim the trouble is caused by out-of-touch, elite denominational leaders who insist on drawing boundaries between Jews when *amcha* is not interested in such boundaries; and who cast the denominations as selfishly absorbed with their own institutional survival to the detriment of the true interests of *clal yisrael*. These are powerful critiques and the movements don't know quite how to respond.

Finally, the larger environment seems to be reinforcing tendencies to mute tensions: Protestant denominations are also weaker today than they were a few decades ago. As is the case in the Jewish community today, the divisions are not between denominations but cutting across them as people line up on the liberal/conservative sides of the “culture wars” divide. There is also no denying that

the greatest irritant to Jewish denominational relations in the United States has been the periodic eruption of the “Who is a Jew?” debate in Israel. Given the weakness of the so-called religious parties in Israel over the past five years, that source of friction has lessened in intensity, with the result that Jews in the U.S. could focus on other matters. Needless to say, our preoccupation with Israel’s welfare during the so-called Second Intifada has also directed attention away from disagreements between the denominations.

YG: Let me add one more factor. In retrospect, the 1960s introduced a period of acceptance for American Jewry and a collapse of the barriers against Jews; anti-Semitism plummeted. With the threat of Gentile hostility removed, carried away with the new sense of freedom, American Jewish denominations responded with an outburst of self-assertive, self-centered policies. The Orthodox became more Orthodox (wearing *kippot* in public; rejecting the legitimacy of liberal movements in the name of *halacha*; bypassing the community consensus for separation of Church and State; etc.). Reform became more Reform (embracing egalitarianism, accepting the intermarried, and advocating for gay rights as morally superior American-Jewish values, etc.). Each group essentially said: “Do it my way.”

This reaction to freedom is comparable to the generation of the desert in the Bible. The initial response to being liberated was: freedom means I have the right to do whatever I want to, no one else can constrain my behavior. All of the community groups failed to ask the question: Now that we are free to choose, what choices will it take to live together in one community? Upon further reflection, the second generation comes to recognize that freedom means the right to choose and to act *within a community* based on my own commitments and dignified choice. I get to choose what I stand and work for, but that implies a responsibility toward others if I am to live with them in the same community. That second generation maturing in the second stage of freedom acts with more restraint. This leads to modulation of behavior and a willingness to try to stick together. That is what is happening right now.

JW: I view this question somewhat differently and focus on the political reality in the United States as compared to Israel. Precisely because we in the U.S. do not function as a polity, we can each go our own way when it suits us. Israeli Jews *must* find a way to work things out because they form a single polity. The consequence for U.S. Jewry is that we disengage from one another—and only connect when there is a tangible benefit to do so. We call this pluralism, but I encounter

ever fewer genuine pluralists—a term that to me denotes people with strong personal views of what is right and wrong but still believe that others of different views must be heard and respected. I’ve grown more skeptical of all the talk about pluralism because we have not found a way to listen to each other and also challenge one another respectfully. Too often, we play a game of “I’m okay, you’re okay”/anything goes. And so, problems are swept under the rug. More worrisome to me is that we thereby convey the message that there is nothing worth fighting over. The communal position all too often today is that we should not uphold “unreasonable” standards, which, in practice, turns out to mean, we should have no standards—other than those approved by liberal sectors of American culture. This renders American Jewry more vulnerable to the continuing pull of the general culture because we stand for nothing distinctive.

YG: In this atmosphere of increasing polarization, the Conservative and the Modern Orthodox Movements have suffered the greatest attrition. Do you think Conservative Judaism can renew itself?

JW: It is too early to say how the Conservative Movement will resolve these challenges. Some of its rabbis are suffering a crisis of confidence. My impression is that quite a few find there is little payoff in speaking the language of *halacha* and expectations in an age when Jews want community, music and dance, and celebration. There is also a fatigue with walking a centrist road when stark options seem more appealing. This certainly poses great challenges to Conservative Judaism itself, but also deprives the American Jewish community of a bridging movement. Yitz, what do you think is the future of Modern Orthodoxy?

YG: In the past three decades, Modern Orthodoxy lost its inner gyroscope as it let *haredi* tendencies set the tone of Orthodox education and policy; as a result it was pulled toward separatism. Now the establishment of the Edah Organization (“The courage to be Modern and Orthodox”) and JOFA (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance) as well as the creation of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah by Avi Weiss (with his commitment to open Orthodoxy reaching out to the non-Orthodox) signals an incipient renaissance. The new President, Richard Joel, brings openness and dynamism to Yeshiva University. Israeli yeshivot, like Maaleh Gilboa and Bat Ayin, project an unapologetic, more embracing Modern Orthodoxy. Maybe the bridge can be rebuilt.

Let us turn to our original question. In your paper, you speak both of the development of trans-denominationalism and of post-denominationalism. You even speak of

the development of anti-denominational thinking and behavior. “Just Jewish” is the fastest growing category of measuring Jewish identity in the National Jewish Population Survey. Which tendencies do you think will win out? Will the denominations regain relevance? Will they lose ground to the post-denominational institutions and streams?

JW: I’m not terribly impressed with the arguments of those who pronounce that the “Just Jewish” are outpacing other groups. For the most part, the “Just Jewish” are unaffiliated Jews on their way out. We’ve been speaking for decades now of the bi-polar tendencies of the Jewish population, which is either gravitating to greater engagement or to virtually none—i.e. “The more, the more; the less, the less.” To say that the “Just Jewish” label is growing in popularity means that we have fewer Jews committed to serious engagement.

On the other hand, we should pay heed to those Jews, especially of the Gen X and Y cohorts, who are telling us that they do not identify with the denominations and are seeking a post-denominational religious setting for worship and study. These young Jews, after all, are our future. And they are clearly dissatisfied with the options. I am heartened by the growing numbers of *minyanim* sprouting up in Manhattan, LA and Chicago established by these non-denominational young people. They are a healthy phenomenon. The big question is whether this cohort will find its way to conventional, multi-generational *shuls* and transform them, whether it will remain in its own generational ghetto, or whether it will become alienated and drift away from Judaism. I’m betting on the former—and I look forward to a transition from the boomer sensibility of our existing institutions to a new configuration of American Judaism shaped by the Gen Xers and Yers.

As to the movements: I believe there will be an ongoing role for them. Leaving aside the fact that they continue to organize much of the programming for young Jews—schools, summer camps, youth movements, Israel trips, etc.—they also have served historically as the incubators of religious ideas for the Jewish community. Currently, the movements have few if any powerful exponents of new religious thinking; for the most part, they are living off the ideas of the last generation—of Soloveitchik, Heschel, Kaplan and others. Ideology has given way to a big-tent approach that stresses emotional connection, individual seeking, and communal engagement. These are valuable correctives to win the hearts of our people. I’m convinced, though, that our highly educated Jewish community will once again ask the big questions, and that the movements will rise to the challenge by offering content and direction. 🌸