



**THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

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**Internal Jewish Cohesion:  
Problems And Prospects**

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## INTERNAL JEWISH COHESION: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

### *1. Background*

The aftermath of the Rabin assassination sent tremors throughout the Jewish world. The assassination exposed deep fissures within the Jewish people and body politic. It signaled conflicting and, to some, irreconcilable visions of what is a Jew and what is a Jewish state. Israel and the Jewish people are divided not only along political lines but also along far more existential lines—questions of what it means to be a Jew today, and what is the definition of a Jewish society.

In reality, the breach between religious and secular, hawk and dove, and even Tel Aviv and Jerusalem long predated the Rabin murder. To be sure, these categories were hardly absolute, and considerable overlap and crossover occurred between them. However, the breach is quite real and has only widened in recent years.

Since the assassination, religious polarization has been especially intense. Particularly galling have been statements by Israel's chief rabbis referring to Reform Jews as "terrorists" who should be "vomited" out of the Jewish State. Perhaps the saddest part of the unfortunate statement of the once-prestigious but now inconsequential Union of Orthodox Rabbis that Reform and Conservative Judaism were simply "not Judaism at all" was that privately many Orthodox Jews and their rabbis may well have agreed with it. Indeed, only a bitterly anti-Reform and Conservative animus may explain the refusal to accept any form of validation for the non-Orthodox religious streams. Thus, for

example, the professional head of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (OU) a centrist Orthodox organization, found it necessary to disassociate himself from the widely-acclaimed "Turn Friday night into Shabbat" program for it amounted to encouraging Jews to attend a Friday night service in a Reform temple.<sup>1</sup>

The backlash against Orthodoxy, and in some respects even against Israel itself, has, of course, widened the breach. For some, the advocacy of religious pluralism in Israel became a code word for Orthodox bashing. Other key leaders in the Reform and Conservative Movements have called for dismantling the Chief Rabbinate and for redirecting American Jewish philanthropic funds away from Orthodox institutions. Rabbi Sheldon Zimmermann, President of the Hebrew Union College, warned that Knesset members could expect only hostility from Reform congregations should legislation be passed preserving the Orthodox monopoly on conversion. His colleague, Rabbi Simeon Maslin, in a presidential address to the Central Conference of American Rabbis offered his own rejection of pluralism: "Let me make it clear that when I say we, as 'we are the authentic Jews' I refer to the two great non-Orthodox synagogue movements of America, Reform and Conservative. My we includes both Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, but it does not include those who act and think today as the Sadducees acted and thought 20 centuries ago." Although perhaps couched with greater eloquence, Rabbi Maslin's statement was no less exclusionary than that of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis. In fact, if not in spirit, his statement excluded both Reconstructionist and Orthodox Judaism. Lastly,

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Bayme, "On Orthodoxy and Non-Orthodoxy", Jewish Week, May 2, 1997, pg. 26.

some go so far as to advocate a new Jewish unity of all committed to pluralism against the anti-pluralists. Needless to say, such a scenario would both fracture what little is left of Jewish unity and deprive the entire Jewish people of genuine Orthodox contributions to strengthening Jewish life.

The root causes of this polarization lie both in the rise of a triumphalist Orthodoxy and in the increased radicalization of the liberal movements. Orthodox triumphalism signals the well-known attitude of dismissal of the non-Orthodox movements. Orthodoxy of the 1950s perceived itself as on the defensive—having to refute the standard wisdom predicting its imminent demise. By contrast, Orthodoxy in the 1990s radiates an almost smug self-confidence about its future—especially in the context of widespread assimilation and Orthodox successes at securing continuity by comparison with the non-Orthodox movements. Aggravating this cultural attitude of “we will survive—you will disappear” has been the political extremism of Meir Kahane and its offshoots in the Baruch Goldstein and Yigal Amir affairs. The ugly racism and cult of violence of Kahane all too often permeated religious Zionist circles. In his last years Kahane remained a respected speaker at Orthodox synagogues and educational institutions long after he had been ostracized by the organized Jewish community in America and by the Knesset in Israel.

More moderate than Kahane, but in some ways no less problematic, has been the growth of messianic activism in both Lubavitch and among settlers on the West Bank and their American supporters. All too often the dangerous roles messianic movements have played throughout Jewish history have been downplayed in favor

of inciting millenarian sentiment of an imminent end to history as we know it and the ushering in of a final redemption. Advertisements placed in the media suggesting that the Lubavitcher Rebbe still lives and is ready to return as the King Messiah have already invited comparison with early Christianity. Predominant opinion within Rabbinic Judaism generally discouraged messianic frenzy as futile at best and dangerous at worst. Ironically, in recent years, some of the foremost apostles of Rabbinic Judaism have become the purveyors of precisely that messianic frenzy. Some deride these activities as a waste of energy and resources. Others question whether messianism inflames the climate between Jews, spilling over into extremist politics and even violence.

The effects upon Jewish unity and peoplehood have been considerable. Confronted with the image of Orthodoxy as obscurantist, politically reactionary, and triumphalist towards non-Orthodox Jews, liberal Jews react with disdain and even disgust. The Orthodox, of course, respond by reminding their critics of the threats of assimilation and claim that non-Orthodox hostility is really only a reflection of resentment at Orthodox successes in transmitting Jewish identity and preventing mixed-marriages.

The collapse of the Synagogue Council of America and Orthodoxy's reaction to its demise is a case in point. Where Orthodoxy had been among the creators of the Synagogue Council in the 1950s, and Orthodox leaders had been among its most senior officers, by the 1990s the Synagogue Council was at best tolerated within Orthodox circles. With its demise, a senior official of the

leading Orthodox congregational body commented, "I always felt dirtied by it" and proceeded to pronounce a blessing rejoicing in its collapse.<sup>2</sup>

For non-Orthodox Jews, Orthodox triumphalism and intransigence has fractured Jewish unity. The most common formulation of the problem is that "it's the Orthodox vs. the rest of the community". Modern Orthodox Jews, anxious to build bridges between different portions of the community, are dismissed as inconsequential or as "exception Orthodox".

Less heralded but no less significant as a root cause of the communal fissure has been the radicalization of the liberal movements. Acceptance of patrilineal descent and same-sex marriages within the Reform and Reconstructionist movements have broadened the breach not only with Orthodoxy but also with Conservative Judaism. Within Israel, even many of the strongest proponents of Judaism acknowledge that the adoption of these measures has undermined the credibility of Reform Judaism in the eyes of many secular Israelis. One indication of this radicalization in the United States has been shifting perceptions of Reform rabbis who officiate at mixed marriages. Where, in the 1970s, less than 10% of Reform rabbis officiated at mixed marriages, and these were widely considered to be marginal to the Reform movement, by the 1990s the percentage has increased to almost 40%, and the prevailing attitude among rabbis who refuse to perform mixed marriages was that "I do not perform them, but I respect the right of my colleagues to do so".

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<sup>2</sup> National Conference, UOJCA, November 1994.

In short, the tensions expressed in the past year over who is a Jew, conversion to Judaism, and the legitimacy of the non-Orthodox movements in Israel only reflect a much larger battle within the Jewish people on how we relate to one another and how we preserve any semblance of common peoplehood.

The Ne'eman Commission recognized the urgency of this situation and developed recommendations to avert a split in our common fabric of peoplehood. Its final proposals called for a joint conversion institute including faculty drawn from the three major religious streams. Graduates of this institute would then undergo a conversion process administered by representatives of the Chief Rabbinate.

This recommendation fulfilled two major objectives within the conversion debate: provide recognition and legitimacy for the non-Orthodox streams and ensure a uniform conversion procedure acceptable to the entire Jewish people. Like most compromises, it failed to satisfy any group completely. However, it did offer the Reform and Conservative movements a "place at the table" without asking Orthodox rabbis for compromise on Jewish law itself.

The response of the Chief Rabbinate to the Ne'eman proposals clearly has disappointed Ne'eman Committee supporters. The Rabbinate rejected, in principle, cooperation with the non-Orthodox movements while promising to appoint judges inclined to affirm the conversion of candidates recommended by the jointly-sponsored institutes. Whether this will work for the candidates individually, only time will tell. In the meantime, the Reform and Conservative movements, denied validation of the Chief Rabbinate, have promised to pursue further their battle for recognition.

## *II. Programs to Strengthen Peoplehood*

Therefore, what can be done? The following represents some modest proposals for rebuilding Jewish peoplehood in an age of polarization:

1. Strengthen Modern Orthodoxy: Once considered the wave of the future and a bridge to the non-Orthodox movements, no sector is as beleaguered today as are the Modern Orthodox. As the influence of Roshei Yeshiva—one of whom went so far as to equate the Modern Orthodox of today with Amalek<sup>3</sup>—has increased moderate voices within Orthodoxy have receded. Yet Modern Orthodox day schools continue to be widely admired models of Jewish education. The conferences in 1997 and 1998 on feminism and Modern Orthodoxy were historic both in the number of participants and in signaling a shift of authority in the community from the voices of ultra-Orthodoxy. These currents merit the support and encouragement of the entire Jewish people.
2. Cool the rhetoric: Extreme statements on all sides polarize the climate further. Statements equating the State of Israel with third world regimes that deny freedom of religious practice and expression only defame the Jewish State. Statements contemptuous of the non-Orthodox movements

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<sup>3</sup> The Forward, May 2, 1997, pp. 1-2.

and their followers divide Jew from Jew. Similarly, it does no good to engage in panic hysteria. Public advertisements to the effect that "the last time we were so divided we lost ten tribes" only escalate communal angst. If anything, disunity has been the norm of Jewish history. Periods of actual unity have, unfortunately, been all too often exceptional.

3. Recognize the reality of the "who is a Jew" problem rather than reduce it to the triviality of "who is a rabbi".

Conservative rabbis by no means automatically accept Reform conversions. Some Reform rabbis acknowledge that there are those within Reform Judaism who perform pro-forma conversions. The acceptance of patrilineal descent by Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism fractured a historical consensus over Jewish identification. Currently, in America, there are at least 50,000-55,000 self-proclaimed converts to Judaism who have done so without the involvement of any rabbi at all.

In short, the questions of personal status can not be simplified to a slogan of "who is a rabbi?" Heated rhetoric of who recognizes whom will not solve the very real problem within the Jewish people of who is a Jew. Conflicting criteria of Jewish status signal a very real problem of marriage eligibility between Jews. Power politics is no road to conflict resolution. However, the complexity and scope of these problems are far greater than simplistic suggestions of Orthodox intransigence might imply.

4. Recognize that the common problem facing Jews lies far more in assimilation and religious indifference than in religious pluralism. On the contrary, the availability of diverse models of religious expression may act as a corrective to assimilation. However, this entails a definition of what constitutes a true pluralism in pronounced contrast to religious relativism.

More specifically, I suggest a true pluralism contains four specific components:

- A. No group possesses a monopoly on religious truth. We all need to learn from one another, or, in the words of the Talmud, "who is a sage, one who learns from all humanity".
- B. Different Jews will require different avenues to connect with Judaic heritage. No single formulation of Jewish expression will work for all Jews. Rather we need multiple entry-points and pathways to Jewish identification.
- C. Pluralism should not be invoked to validate whatever Jews do. Religious relativism, indeed, mandates an "I'm okay you're okay" attitude in which religious truth and conviction lose all meaning. As Dr. Norman Lamm has put it eloquently "if everything is kosher, then nothing is kosher".<sup>4</sup> Rather pluralism

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<sup>4</sup> Norman Lamm, "Unity and Integrity. Critical Issues Conference: Will There Be One Jewish People By the Year 2000?" CLAL: National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, 1996, pg. 56.

does mean the freedom to criticize one another but in an atmosphere of respect and cooperation rather than of delegitimation.

D. Pluralism connotes a clarion call to combat religious indifference. Its essential message means increased religiosity rather than freedom from religion. One of the greatest ironies of the current controversy over pluralism has been the common cause that advocates of religious pluralism have made with atheists and agnostics in their struggle against the Chief Rabbinate. Short-term political gains may be realized through such alliances. But defining pluralism as opposition to the Chief Rabbinate or as the complete separation of synagogue from state will hardly create the forms of Judaic expression in Israel that advocates of religious pluralism claim are central to the future Jewishness of the Jewish State.

5. We need to redefine what we mean by common Jewish peoplehood and collective Jewish experience. The reality of a Jewish state challenges the Jewish people to fulfill the responsibilities of sovereignty while acting in an ethical and moral fashion. Powerlessness, to be sure, always has the virtue of the moral high ground. Yet, in many ways, it signals only the classic image of sympathy for the Jew as victim. Zionism posited a much more difficult challenge—what the Zionist philosopher Ahad Ha'am referred to as the unity of ethics and politics—namely,

fulfilling the responsibilities of power and sovereignty while preserving Jewish ethics. Israel as a Jewish state constitutes a statement that Jewish history continues, that its most exciting chapters are taking place at this very moment. Jewish peoplehood in this age means that every Jew has both a share in that ongoing history and a responsibility to be part of that collective endeavor.

To be sure, we must acknowledge divisions between us over politics, religion, and even our very definition of who is a Jew. These divisions are by no means necessarily harmful. On the contrary, some ideological controversy is healthy, for it means that at least we care passionately about these issues and values. Unity should not mean uniformity of opinion. In fact, for a democracy to survive, a government must have an opposition. In terms of our religious disputes and controversies, an ethos of pluralism does not mean we must agree with one another. Rather, as Irving Greenberg has argued, a "contentious pluralism" means the freedom to engage passionately over these issues, debate with one another their merits and demerits, all in a collective endeavor to enhance the Jewish people.

Controversy, in short, is by no means the enemy of the Jews. But our challenge is to work these disagreements and divisions out in the spirit of shared excitement of the Jewish enterprise, loyalty to the Jewish people and Jewish State, and love for all Jews. Jews everywhere ought recognize that we all share the mandate of preserving and

enhancing the Jewish people. For all that we may vigorously disagree over means, our overarching ends and purposes remain the welfare of the Jews as a people and the nurturing of justice for humanity generally.

6. We must reclaim the Judaic heritage as the treasure of the entire Jewish people. For example, from its very beginnings, Zionism contained deep divisions over vision and self-definition. Some maintained that the Zionist endeavor was creating a state for Jews. Others claimed that the endeavor was meaningful only if it resulted in a Jewish state—informed and guided by Jewish heritage and teaching. Some Zionists were optimistic about the Gentile world and looked to fulfill Zionist aims through friendly Gentile assistance. Others were pessimistic and claimed that Zionism requires self-reliance and self-emancipation. Perhaps the finest moments in Zionist history occurred when these contrasting visions were shared—when those who had known the reality of war were prepared to make peace. Our task today is to nurture and further develop these competing visions of Zionism and peoplehood—to take the best of each, to synthesize tradition and modern culture, and at the same time to critique and engage both value systems—to incorporate those aspects that speak to us and to criticize those aspects that may be foreign to us. For the Jewish world needs diverse currents. It needs a vibrant Orthodoxy to sustain Jewish continuity. Yet, for the very same reason, Orthodoxy requires vibrant Conservative

and Reform movements to preserve Jews as Jews. By the same token, Israel requires the energies of the entire Jewish world. It too needs Orthodoxy to nurture Jewish tradition and articulate its voice within a Jewish state. Similarly, Israel benefits from a creative and healthy Diaspora. And Israel benefits from the resources of secular Jews who remind us of our obligations to humanity at large and to the protection of minorities.

### *III. The Role of the Memorial Foundation*

One should not underestimate either the potential role or the limitations of the Memorial Foundation in addressing the issue of future Jewish cohesiveness. First, the Foundation itself, symbolically, is a statement of cohesion by serving as the only communal table at which Jewish intellectuals and leaders who span the entire range of Jewish communal life may discuss questions of shared heritage and culture. The symbolism of Jewish unity was best demonstrated at the Foundation's 1996 Board of Trustees meetings in Buenos Aires at which Rabbi Alexander Schindler recited the kaddish followed by Rabbi Menahem Porush, who recited the El Malay prayer in memory of the victims of the bombing of Argentina's Jewish communal headquarters one year previously.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, the unity symbolized by the memorial occurred around a national tragedy rather than a cause for

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<sup>5</sup> Gary Rosenblatt, "A Rare Exception to Communal Discord" New York Jewish Week, September 27, 1996, p. 5.

celebration and hardly affected the substance of intra-Jewish divisions. Nevertheless, the Foundation occupies a unique status in Jewish life in signaling some level of cohesion and coherence in the meaning of being a Jew today.

Moreover, the Foundation's role should not be construed as entirely symbolic. The scholarly and educational projects undertaken and funded by the Foundation may help advance the programmatic goal of preserving internal Jewish cohesion. First, Jewish disunity is hardly a novel phenomenon in Jewish life. If anything, it has often been normative. How different communities have addressed communal discord would be both a worthwhile undertaking in its own right and communicate to the broader Jewish public that despite severe disagreements Jewish leaders have been able to cooperate in order to pursue the welfare of the Jewish people. Thus, for example, Jewish communal organizations in the medieval period often included Rabbanites, Samaritans, and Karaites. To be sure, we ought not glorify schisms within the Jewish people. But understanding that schisms have occurred and have been managed successfully will help moderate the rhetoric that has proven so destructive in recent Jewish history.

Of particular interest and contemporary relevance would be historical research on marriage eligibility between Jews. What have been the vehicles of insuring the capacity of Jews to marry one another and when and why have those vehicles collapsed? Issues of personal status often turn on the question of may I permit my son to marry his daughter. Understanding what Jewish communities have done to preserve or undermine marriage eligibility will both enhance our own

capacity to address this issue and communicate to the Jewish community generally that the problems of shared peoplehood affect every Jew.

Most daunting are the challenges of creating a common culture and shared heritage. Some have already suggested that there is nothing that binds the Jewish people Jewishly beyond the specter of common enemies—an ironic parallel to Spinoza's concept that anti-Semitism has been the sole reason for continued Jewish survival. Yet the mission of the Memorial Foundation is to nurture precisely the appreciation of Judaic heritage, value of Jewish learning, and celebration of the joys of leading a Jewish life that, historically, have been the positive bases for leading a Jewish life. Projects attempting to define the future Jewishness of the State of Israel will, doubtless, prove divisive and painful for many. Yet we require precisely such a discussion to foster greater mutual understanding, identify fault lines, and enable us to manage communal conflicts within the parameters of a single Jewish people. Similarly, the questions of Jewish personal status that have been so divisive in the Diaspora—patrilineal descent connotes as pressing an issue in Eastern Europe as in North America despite the relative absence in Eastern Europe of the liberal Jewish movements from the Jewish communal arena—require honest dialogue, careful research, and astute policy planning. The Memorial Foundation, to become a true "Parliament of the Jewish People" on issues of culture, may not shirk these questions on the grounds of their divisiveness. The questions may, in fact, prove insoluble. Yet certainly they will not disappear via benign neglect. Who we are, how we define ourselves, what we share in common, and where we differ are questions that will loom all the larger in the years ahead. Jewish

leaders dedicated to preserving the cohesion of the Jewish people must find ways of confronting these issues and building a communal climate that is at least open to their potential resolution.

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Israel provides occasion for celebration of that which unites all Jews. No event in modern Jewish history has been so dramatically positive as the return of the Jews to homeland and sovereignty. Israel represents the success story of modern Jewish history. Disagreements over particular manifestations of Israeli policy or resentment of the status of religion within Israel should never overshadow our definition of Israel of a Jewish State for the entire Jewish people and as a connecting theme binding Jews together.

For 50 years the unity of the Jewish people has been constructed on external threats to Jews. But reliance upon potential foes to bind us together constitutes an insufficient basis on which to construct future Jewish unity. Rather our challenge lies in rebuilding our common Jewishness on the joys of leading a Jewish life and on celebration of the opportunity to build a Jewish State, on ties to common heritage and culture, and on the mutual interdependence between Jews the world over.

The assassination did not create our divisions. They have been with us from time immemorial. Yet the lessons of Jewish disunity have also been with us. The Talmud attributes the collapse of the Second Jewish Commonwealth to internal Jewish disunity. Our job, 2,000 years

later and fifty years after the Holocaust is to sustain and rebuild that unity and peoplehood even as we acknowledge our serious differences and disagreements.