

Continuity Requires Content



AMERICAN Jewish leaders never made the claim publicly, nor in all likelihood did they ever articulate it to themselves. Yet in retrospect, the wager they made has become clear: American Jewish leadership believed that it could fashion a variety of Judaism that would be both meaningful and sustainable with virtually no content at its core.

How many American Jews today know, when they visit the Metropolitan Museum or the New York Public Library and encounter the grandeur of the Western tradition, that they are the heirs to not one, but two grand civilizations, each with its canon of great, world-changing books, its array of pathbreaking thinkers, its cluster of ideas and questions that have shaped the way many people experience the universe? Do they have any sense, when they encounter the profundity of Western thought in universities or elsewhere — Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Locke, Hobbes, Rawls — that Jewish civilization is just as rich? Do they know anything about the

biblical mindset, the rabbinic revolution, Ibn Gabirol, Maimonides, Mendelssohn, Kaplan, Soloveitchik?

We see the result of Jewish “education” sans content most painfully when it comes to Israel. Many of us are distraught at the antipathy a younger generation feels toward what *we* see as a national liberation movement, but to no small degree, it’s our fault. What have we done to show them that Zionism is not a simple and uniform ideology, but a profound and ongoing conversation? What have we done to usher them into the *chavruta* that was once (and in certain circles, still is) Zionist discourse? What have we taught them about the differing worldviews of the great Zionist thinkers — the anti-statehood Ahad Ha’am; Pinsker, the diagnostician of the illness of European Jewry; Gordon and his belief that redemption would come from having the earth of the Land of Israel under their fingernails; Jabotinsky, the classic liberal who opposed mainstream Zionism’s naïveté about Arabs; or Rav Kook and his unique theological stance that allowed his Orthodoxy to embrace the revolution?

Can we imagine how different — less strident, more connected — our discourse would be about Jewish life, Jewish peoplehood, and Israel if it could be rooted in familiarity with some of these people and some of these ideas? Can we imagine a Jewish world in which subtlety, sophistication, nuance — all summoned through engagement with content — were what characterized us? Would people still be fleeing? Or might they, instead, be clamoring to find their way back in?

The most basic truths about Judaism are utterly unfamiliar to the Jews we claim to have educated. By the time we send them off to freshman orientation, have we ever taken their intelligence seriously? Have we ever explained, for example, how in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple and the loss of Jewish sovereignty, the framers of rabbinic Judaism (which first emerged in the Mishnah and then developed in the two Talmuds) fashioned a way of Jewish living that they intuited would be best equipped to

sustain a people that would no longer be bound together by residing in an ancestral land? Instead of sanctifying space, they chose to sanctify time. With the pomp of the Temple gone, they moved pageantry into the home. In a world in which the categories of pure and impure had been largely destroyed, they substituted rituals that would distinguish between sacred and profane. With the priestly class rendered irrelevant, they established a new form of leadership, based not in heredity but on learning, whose job would be not to offer sacrifice but, instead, to transmit the substance of the new Jewish civilization just beginning to emerge.

For almost 1,500 years, it worked. But then, as a result of the Enlightenment—which bolstered the individual freedoms of the West (particularly in America) and hastened the decline of intimate ethnic community—the “plausibility structures” of American religion (to borrow Peter Berger’s term) began to decay. American Jews were hardly the only community buffeted by these sociological and intellectual storms; the moderate Protestantism of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich in America has also been pummeled. Today, Protestantism, too, is but a mere shard of its former glory.

How did this play out in American Jewish life? American non-Orthodox religious leaders, increasingly shaped by academic scholarship, found themselves unable to embrace theological principles that had long been a bedrock of Jewish life. If God’s authorship of the Torah was suddenly called into question because of various formulations of the documentary hypothesis, how could one speak of the authority of the laws that emerged from the Bible, or the Talmud, or the Shulchan Arukh? And the flocks, in turn, felt welcomed in the United States in a way that no other Diaspora had ever embraced them. They did not want to miss out on the opportunity called America.

Very quickly, in a matter of just a few decades, the default setting in American Jewish life went from traditionalism to one in which tradition was first on the defensive and then largely jettisoned. The rituals that had once sanctified time were gone—the rigors

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of Shabbat; the practices that gave meaning, not simply a nod of recognition, to the holidays; a daily rhythm with morning rituals and liturgy, afternoon worship, practices for nighttime. As those practices evaporated, so, too, did the sense that Judaism could do much to sanctify life. To entice Jews into Jewish life, we demanded less of them. Three days of Hebrew school became two, then one—and the students learned very little. Services were diluted and shortened—and we robbed the liturgy of its power to move us, to say anything. To hold on to an increasingly disconnected laity, American Jewish non-Orthodox leaders lowered the bar, demanding less, teaching less, even cajoling less, so that now, the best and brightest of young American Jews had no sense of the grandeur that had been abandoned in order to retain their waning loyalty.

If they only knew what had been discarded, they would be shocked by the absurdity of the proposition.

As a result of this Faustian bargain, we also lost the ability to fashion what one might call a sane center—a sense of shared vocabulary, concepts, narratives, and practices that might afford Jews of radically different religious, political, and moral worldviews an opportunity to see themselves as partners in the same enterprise. To put the matter bluntly, Jewish illiteracy has also vitiated Jewish pluralism; absent Jewish literacy, who could possibly ground their views on any issue in Jewish terms? A lack of familiarity with Jewish

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texts has made it inevitable that Jews must resort to an exclusively Western frame of reference. Once that happens, though, in what way are they *Jewishly* linked to Jews who see the world very differently from them?

If we instinctively disagree about whether one should first support Jewish causes or, alternatively, the neediest wherever they might be, how do we ground our positions? Can mere instinct suffice? What, if not the numerous canonical texts on the subject, might bind those two differing camps as parts of a shared conversation? If we have entirely different sentiments about Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, what kind of unifying discourse can we have if we have never engaged with the Jewish texts that address the role of landedness in Jewish life, or the narratives that cannot imagine telling the story of the Jewish people without the Land of Israel as an anchor? (Consider the fact that the Land of Israel is much more central to the Bible than God, Abraham, or Moses is.)

With no familiarity with the Bible or liturgy, how are we to feel the power of the heartbroken yearning of Chaim Nachman Bialik's poem "To the Bird," which weeps for the healing that landedness might provide, or the angry impatience of Shaul Tchernichovsky? What about Natan Alterman's "Silver Platter," which described the declaration of the state as a replacement for Sinai? Or Avraham Shlonsky's "Toil," which suggests that the black strips of newly paved roads in the Galilee are a substitute for the black leather

straps of phylacteries? How can we debate as one unified people the ways in which land softens — or callouses — the soul if we have not read Amos Oz, David Grossman, A.B. Yehoshua? Is there any chance that we will feel bound to one another if the worldviews we bring to our conversation are derived solely from the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New Yorker*?

Yes, there is an intermarriage crisis. A birth-rate crisis. The future of many midsize Jewish institutions in a post-COVID world is far from certain. There are angry, vitriolic divides over Israel. And much more. But more foundational than any of these crises is the fact that a thick sense of Jewish peoplehood is dissolving. It is our fault, because we have robbed the Jewish tradition of the power to enrich its people. When we failed to teach the texts and rituals that had been its foundation, we weakened our connection to a great civilization — and also to one another.

Not everyone is moved by intellectual pursuit. Others might be touched by the simple but still deeply felt satisfaction of singing at the Shabbat table songs we call *zemirot* that are hundreds of years old. We may live very different lives than did our great-great-grandparents. They might or might not have been proud of us, might or might not have recognized or approved of our way of Jewish life. But would it not have reassured them — or much more important, inspire *us* — to know that we and they sang the same songs, welcomed and celebrated Shabbat in surprisingly similar ways?

We gave up that anchor. We relinquished our bond to them and, as a result, to one another.

For a while, there were indications that American Judaism had fostered communities in which tradition and modernity might meet in dialogue, where there might unfold a thoughtful discourse about what a unique but sustainable American Judaism looks like. But Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's brand of modern Orthodoxy has not survived; its intellectual openness is, in most of the communities that still speak of him as "the Rav," a faint memory.

In its heyday, Conservative Judaism also claimed that role. But those cavernous sanctuaries that made worship passive, the hope that the synagogue would substitute for homes where ritual was increasingly absent, couldn't hold the line. As the latest Pew study of American Jewry notes, in recent decades, "for every person who has joined Conservative Judaism, nearly three people who were raised in the Conservative movement have left it." Among American Jews 65 and older, only 3 percent self-identify as Orthodox, while among 18–29-year-olds, 17 percent do. What is shrinking is the center, the segment of the Jewish community that is not Orthodox but that is still denominationally affiliated. Among those 65 and older, 69 percent self-identify as Reform or Conservative. In the 18–29-year-old cohort, that number is 37 percent. Are there nondenominational, noninstitutional, or new varieties of Judaism that might carry us forward? That is certainly possible, but so far, at least, passionate though the adherents of these new communities are, their numbers do not come close to assuring us a future.

It is late, very late. For decades, we have allowed what was once the world's largest postwar Jewish community and is still its second-largest to sink into an anemic brand of universalist vapidness. It will take at least as long to climb out of the rut we have dug. But is it too late to try, to save at least some of what still survives?

We should derive great encouragement from the growth of emerging, often grassroots, communities that are fired by the power of tradition without theological gymnastics; of communities that still demonstrate the profundity of surrendering autonomy without judgment of those not yet ready for that. There are communities animated by the sense of God's closeness, which do not disparage those who are animated more by doubt than by certainty. Think Kehilat Hadar in New York, the Mission Minyan in the Bay Area, the Cambridge Minyan; think Chabad. Think many Hillels and the transformative educational work of SVARA, M², and many others. There is, in Jerusalem, Zion, a congregation that attracts

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Orthodox women with traditional head coverings as well as men without kippot, men in black pants and white shirts, and men in shorts, all of whom want to welcome Shabbat together.

Since it *can* be done, we need a strategy. Very briefly, a few key elements I think are critical:

First, let's jettison the prevailing assumption that an embrace of tradition has to be theologically driven. Here the Mizrahi Israeli world offers us a new model for emulation. Meir Buzaglo of the Hebrew University describes a world that he has said focuses more on "reverence" than on "obedience." He describes a "traditional" Jew as one, for example, who does not allow questions about whether the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai was true to determine her commitment: "To be a believing Jew does not necessarily require certainty that the event took place. His loyalty to the Judaism of his parents is key to Jewish life."

This is no embrace of Orthodoxy as most Americans understand it. Buzaglo argues that change can still happen within such a traditional system, but that when it unfolds in a life *anchored by commitment*, it can engage others in conversation and build bridges even with those who disagree with that particular shift in practice. Change on the back of no commitment is in dialogue with nothing—it can provide neither meaning nor connection. It is time for

what Jaroslav Pelikan, that great scholar of Christianity, described as “the vindication of tradition.”

Second, we need a curriculum. In a digital world, nothing could be simpler than sharing materials and ideas across America (or the globe). Imagine a Jewish world that adopted the 929 Project (named for the number of chapters in the Hebrew Bible), marching day by day, week by week, on a shared schedule, through the entire Bible, engaging its grand ideas. Imagine a Jewish world re-embracing Jewish and Hebrew literature, in which first hundreds and then thousands of American Jews were reading at least snippets of important works, and then conversing about them across communal, congregational, and denominational lines.

Imagine an embrace of *daf yomi*, not necessarily to do the entire Talmudic page every day, but to hear, each day, or even every week, some insight, some idea, some concept that roots our conversations in our canon. Take the seemingly arcane idea of the *eruv*. Studying it in depth helps one to see that the rabbis were not simply focused on logistics—they used it as a proxy for larger questions about connection, (physical) closeness, community. What were they telling us about Shabbat, home, our emotional needs, our communal needs—and how might those conversations inform the ways we think about those same issues today?

What if we knew that the congregation down the block—different denomination, dissimilar politics, a wholly other worldview—was studying the same concepts, the same texts? Would there not be power in that shared experience, not only in continuity but in unity as well?

Third, we need new leaders. We need radically reconceived rabbinical schools. We need reconsidered notions of what leaders of rabbinical schools and education programs ought to be trying to produce. Can today’s rabbis read an Israeli novel? What about the deans of their rabbinical schools? Do Jewish communal leaders know Hebrew? Or modern Jewish history? In what way can we aspire to be part of a people when half of us live in a language and are building a culture that much of the other half cannot parse?

Fourth, we need the courage to say to ourselves, to each other, to our flocks: We were wrong, we erred. It will require genuine grit to acknowledge that the educational system we have built has not succeeded, that the visions of Jewish community we fashioned cannot sustain our people. The following is not politically correct to say, but it’s undeniably true: American Jewish communities unengaged in Jewish textual learning, divorced from ongoing, regular Jewish ritual, and unschooled in the richness of Jewish civilization are on their way to oblivion—and that oblivion will come much sooner than most people imagine.

Will we summon that honesty? Can we work with a younger generation, helping it to shed its anger, or indifference, or outright rejection, working together to relearn how to embrace tradition for its own sake? Can we reimagine people-wide, lifelong learning that will bind us together, since nothing else can or will?

There is no way to know. What we do know is that if we answer in the negative, future generations of Jews will think of us as we do the Sadducees, Essenes, and Karaites. They were well-intentioned, perhaps, but they never had a chance at survival. We face a similar choice, and the future of our people rests on what we decide. *