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Continuity Requires Religion

FOR A PEOPLE as numerically modest as the Jews, we have more than our fair share of civic, cultural, and advocacy organizations in service of Jewish continuity. From historical societies to Holocaust memorials, Maccabi Games to Jewish museums, the American Jewish establishment is filled with passionate individuals working tirelessly to preserve, defend, and forward the mission of our people. We attend rallies and conferences, sit on boards, give *tzedakah*, and sign our names to statements of support or outrage. These are the rites and rituals of what sociologist Jonathan Woocher famously described as the "civil religion" of American Jews.

But what of *actual* religion? Our robust communal infrastructure raises the question of whether it is possible for Jews to continue without being part of the *religious* system of Judaism. Significant as the contributions of the alphabet soup of organizations may be — ADL, AJC, AJWS, HIAS, JFNA, and I could go on — none of these institutions are religious in nature. Are they sufficient to carry Jewish communities from one generation to the next? In the absence of Judaism itself — prayer, devotional text study, and observance of mitzvot — will our people endure?

The question goes to the very heart of the modern Jewish condition. In the pre-modern era, anxieties regarding Jewish continuity were focused on the fear of the next pogrom, not on concerns about intermarriage. Internal and external forces ensured that a Jew lived, married, and died within the fold. To be a Jew was neither a religion nor a nationality; it was an all-encompassing and inescapable identity that, antisemitism permitting, was generationally assured. There simply were no alternatives.

The first sign of change came in 1656, when the famous Jewish heretic Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) was excommunicated from the Amsterdam Jewish community for his "evil opinions and acts." Rather than convert to Christianity, Spinoza chose to live the remainder of his days independent of any religious affiliation. Spinoza's transformation "from Baruch to Benedict" prefigured contemporary Jewry: He was the first to opt out of his Jewish identity and community, becoming a pioneer of what today we might term a "Jew of no religion."

The idea that Judaism was a religion arrived by way of the German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786). As Leora Batnitzky explains in her introduction to modern Jewish thought, Mendelssohn responded to the challenges of his contemporaries to leave the faith of his fathers through his book *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism*, in which he asserted that his faith-based commitments as a Jew were no different than those of his Protestant neighbors. He could exist comfortably as a German citizen, as they did; being Jewish, he asserted, no longer needed to set Jews apart as a people. Many post-Emancipation Jews would follow his lead, coming to define themselves through the "revealed legislation," or religious mitzvot of Judaism.

From here, the story of modern Jewry really takes shape — in Europe and eventually in America. Reform Jews refashioned themselves as "German Jews of the Mosaic faith," a sentiment that would reach its apotheosis in America with the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, which proudly declared that "we no longer consider ourselves a nation, but a religious community." Orthodox Jews transformed Judaism into a religion in a different way, zealously clinging to the punctilious observance of Jewish religious law and rejecting any innovation in practice. Only through this path, they believed, could Jews withstand the assimilating allure of modernity. Transforming Judaism into a religion both opened doors and closed them, built walls and tore them down.

The redefinition of Judaism as a religion was not, to be sure, the only Jewish response to the challenges and opportunities of modernity. Many Jews assimilated out of Judaism and Jewish communities entirely; others poured their energies into secular Jewish socialist movements; still others directed their efforts intellectually, to the scientific study (*Wissenschaft*) of Judaism and Jewish history. The most famous and successful Jewish response to modernity is, of course, Zionism. Whether it was the anti-Jewish Russian pogroms of the 1880s, the Dreyfus trial of the 1890s, or the horrors of the Shoah, the emergence and endurance of modern Zionism is a rejection of not only the false promise of the Emancipation but also the notion that Judaism is only a religion. The Zionists argued that it is our attachment to our land, our people, our Hebrew language, and nationhood that defines us — not our faith.

The freedoms of America, religious and otherwise, have granted American Jews the ability to opt in to or out of Judaism in ways that neither Spinoza nor Mendelssohn could ever have imagined. We can largely live freely as Jews — though not entirely, as Pittsburgh and Poway remind us. The countless philanthropic bodies of self-help and self-defense established over the past 100-plus years all signal the strength of American Jewry. The existence of so many and such politically diverse organizations advocating on behalf of Israel further signals our arrival as American Jews. By a certain telling, American Jewry lives in the best of all worlds, free to practice our faith, all the while retaining the telltale signs of peoplehood and nationhood.

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But the blessings of America come with their concomitant challenges. More than any Jewish denomination, it is the rise of "Jews of no religion" that should cause consternation in anyone invested in Jewish continuity. Per the 2020 Pew study, 40 percent of American Jews under 30 eschew any faith commitments or discernible patterns of observance, considering themselves "ethnically" or "culturally" Jewish.

What does this mean and where will it take us? We are living in an unprecedented chapter of our people's history, when Jews can and do live proudly as Jews but may not be either interested in or educated about what Judaism as a lived religion means. It is a state of affairs best described by the late Reform rabbi and theologian Eugene Borowitz, who dubbed American Jews "Marranos in reverse." Unlike the Marrano Jews of 14th- and 15th-century Spain, who adopted a Christian exterior but remained steadfast as Jews in private, we American Jews publicly affirm our identities as Jews but are removed from our religion, the wellspring of our inner identity.

Uncomfortable as it is to discuss, the impoverished condition of the religion of American Jews sits in plain view. We are more at home debating the Iran deal and the grades of uranium that can be weaponized than we are opening a prayer book. We make every effort to understand the opportunity and challenge of critical race theory, Mitzvot are the sacred shibboleths by which Jews build conscious community.

but we are flat-footed when asked to consider what it means to stand in a covenantal relationship with God. We are willing to drive for hours to freeze on the sidelines of our children's club sports, but we find ourselves unable (or unwilling) to sit next to them in synagogue on a Friday night or Shabbat morning. We will try any fad diet other than the one prescribed by our Torah. We would rather label another Jew a "self-hating Zionist" or "settler-colonialist" than acknowledge that our children or grandchildren have no ostensible connection to Judaism, never mind the State of Israel.

To be clear, I am not critiquing the civil religion of American Jews. I myself sit on organizational boards and contribute what I can in time, treasure, and talent to their continued well-being. My concern is simply this: As important as nonreligious expressions of Judaism may be, they are entirely insufficient to transmit the riches of Judaism from one generation to the next. In many cases, the secular commitments of American Jews serve as compensatory guilt offerings hiding paper-thin religious identities. In all cases, they presuppose a commitment to Judaism that, for much of American Jewry, is not as present as we would care to admit. My concern is that ramified effects of a Judaism without the foundation of religion will prove to be our undoing, a giant sinkhole into which the hard-earned superstructure of American Jewry will collapse.

It is only by way of mitzvot, the positive acts of Jewish identification, the language and behaviors of the Jewish religion, that Judaism will survive. Mitzvot are the mystic chords, the commitments and commandments by which one Jew connects to another—and, belief permitting, to God. When I put on tefillin, when I study Torah, when I refrain from eating from one side of the menu in favor of the other, I am, to use Heschel's language, taking a leap of action, giving expression to a vertical relationship to God.

Even for those to whom appeals to the divine are a leap too far, a life of mitzvot remains the most assured means to inspire individual and collective Jewish identity and continuity—a connection to the Jewish people by way of religious expression. We light the same Shabbat candles, we sing the same (or similar) prayers, we read the same books, and we observe the same festivals as the Jews who have come before us, those who are alive today, and those who will come after us. Mitzvot are the sacred shibboleths by which Jews build conscious community. They are the vessels of transmission by which Jewish identity is passed on—the Proustian madeleines, the triggers to memory that have kept our people together across continents and through the generations.

Now is an opportune time to operationalize a cross-communal effort to recover and reclaim the language and practice of mitzvot. In an era of podcasts, Pelotons, and "Couch to 5K" training programs, there is no reason that the Jewish community can't figure out a way to bolster the individual and communal performance of Judaism as a religion. Preliminarily, such an effort would be framed by way of four rubrics: "head," "heart," "how-to," and "community."

Head. For the vast majority of American Jews, the language of mitzvot is a closed book. What are the rhythms of the Jewish year? How has Jewish practice developed over the ages? What are the great books of our tradition? This is not creation ex nihilo—generations of Jewish educators have devoted careers to creating accessible curricula. The task of our time is to update and recast the efforts of our predecessors in a manner consistent with the best practices and platforms by which educational content is accessed today.

Heart. Given a lifespan whose duration is of limited and indeterminate length, what defines a life of meaning and purpose? How am I connected to those who came before me, and what is the legacy I leave to those who will follow? How shall I balance the particularism of my Jewish identity with my universal commitments to a shared humanity? What is it that the Lord requires of me? It is the obligation and opportunity of clergy and Jewish educators (and the institutions that train them) to inspire contemporary Jewry to adopt mitzvot as the historic and ever-evolving toolbox with which to explore the existential questions sitting within all our hearts.

How-To. The greatest impediment to Jewish practice is neither theological nor ideological, but practical. How do I recite kiddush? When exactly do I bow during the silent devotion? Where can I learn Hebrew? How do I host a discussion on the Torah reading at my Shabbat table — or host a Shabbat dinner at all? The gap between American Jewry's vaunted secular educational achievements and its anemic Jewish literacy is daunting, but not insurmountable. In a world filled with instructional TikToks and YouTube videos for everything from cooking to yoga, why not populate the internet with "how-to" content on the greatest spiritual practice of all — Judaism? Such curricula must be judgment-free, affirming the varied paths by which individuals today seek entry into the tradition.

Community. Critical as the aforementioned three rubrics are to motivating Jewish observance, only communal reinforcement will make it all stick. A combination of one-on-one mentorship, interconnected *havurot* (small communities), online engagement, and intensive, retreat-based education can provide the ecosystem to nurture and sustain the desired outcomes in Jewish practice. Similar intentional communities (modeled after the successes of programs such as One Table and Honeymoon Israel) should be conceived and implemented in partnership with the existing structures of American communal life. Synagogues, Hillels, and other legacy institutions are already poised to serve the needs of American Jewry, and they stand to be the primary beneficiaries of a reinvigorated religious practice of American Jews.

Head, heart, how-to, and community: a preliminary vocabulary for a program to restore the religion of Judaism to the Jewish people, an effort that could be shared by Israel and the Diaspora, across denominations and political divides. Indeed, in an era as hyperpolarized as our own, the shared rallying cry of world Jewry to return to a religion of mitzvot is a dividend worthwhile in itself.

"A community cannot survive on what it remembers," wrote the late Conservative rabbi and scholar Arthur Hertzberg. "It will persist only because of what it affirms and believes." It is our religion that has kept us as Jews, defined us a people, and that is the key to Jewish continuity. It will be an undertaking of no small significance to reverse the trends and empower American Jews to reclaim their religious heritage in all its manifold varieties. I am hard-pressed to think of a project more urgent or more exciting.

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I recall walking to synagogue with my daughter, then five years old, now in college. As we walked hand in hand, I turned to her and said, "You know what, Lucy, here we are walking hand in hand to shul together. When I was a little boy, I walked to shul holding my daddy's, your grandpa's, hand. And you know what is even more interesting? When grandpa was a little boy, he walked to shul holding his daddy's hand." On and on I went — confident that she had lost interest in what I found to be so interesting — until she tugged at my hand and responded with a question as pure as it was unexpected. She looked up at me and asked: "Daddy, did Moses walk to shul with his children?" I answered her the only way I knew how: "Yes, Lucy, Moses walked to shul with his children."

For lack of a magic elixir assuring Jewish continuity, the minimum we can do is to take agency for our personal role in our people's future. To reach out our hand to our children with the hope that they extend theirs in return. Practicing our faith, spending more time showing and less time telling. Step by step, hand in hand, mitzvah to mitzvah, and generation to generation. ✳