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Publisher's Note

Where is faith in Jewish life?



IT HAS LONG PERPLEXED ME that American Jews talk so little about faith.

I understand that being Jewish isn't only about religion: We are a nation, a culture, a family. Much of institutional Jewish life shies away from faith talk out of a desire to create a home for as

many Jews as possible.

There's also the question of which faith we would be talking about if we did. It's been said that being Jewish requires the belief in one God—or fewer. Jewish organizations are loath to find themselves embroiled in theological controversy, which can be even more fraught than the political kind, if that's possible. Jewish communal groups try to avoid this by adopting a nondenominational approach.

Finally, I think there is something particularly American (or Jewish American) at play in this self-censorship. Jews have been at the forefront of defending the separation of church and state. The history of

our people has conditioned us to feel threatened by the appearance of religion in the public square, and I think that has led us to treat faith as something intensely private. Freedom *of* religion has become freedom *from* religion.

This might be okay if it were working. I don't think it is. Synagogues outside the Orthodox community are serving increasingly older congregations each year. Young people are voting with their feet, walking away from the synagogues where discussion of God or faith is least present.

One of the interesting developments since October 7 has been the increase in Jewish faith and religiosity. Talk to Chabad rabbis and rebbetzins and they will tell you about running out of mezuzot for people's doors. Talk to Hillel professionals and they will tell you about not being able to accommodate the number of students who want to be around the Shabbat table. Part of it comes from a desire of young Jews (and not-so-young ones) for community and human connection. But for many, that human connection is tied to a faith experience.

This is Jewish identity performed in a faithful key, and the counterintuitive truth is that this chorus has been rising for some time. The insatiable demand for song leaders in the Jewish world is a clear indication of the renaissance in religious and spiritual expressions of Jewish belonging. Take, for example, Yeshivat Hadar, which began as a Talmud-focused institution. Now, thanks to Joey Weisenberg, it can boast nearly 2 million streams of its Rising Song Institute recordings, not to mention the widespread use of its cantorial resources.

What all this means is that the Jewish epic, with its countless twists and turns, is largely a story of searching for our voice, collectively and individually. Ever since God implored us to “hear” Him — *shema yisrael* — at Sinai, we have been developing ever-evolving ways for Him, and His world, to hear *us*. In this issue of SAPIR, we have brought

many of those different voices together. I pray that we all listen a bit more closely to the ones we may not have yet heard. *