

How Modernity Changed Judaism

Interview with Rabbi David Ellenson

- The advent of modernity led to radical political and legal changes for Jewry, particularly in the West. Coercive belonging to a community was replaced by voluntary adherence to what might best be called a congregation. The political and legal changes also led to many religious, cultural, financial, and social developments.
- The initial changes about two hundred years ago laid the basis for the Jewish people's current characteristics. Understanding where Jewry is today and where it may go requires analyzing and understanding the process that has taken place since modernity's infancy.
- Modernity has affected many disparate areas including new forms of Judaism, opting out, Jewish identity, marriage, gender relations and expression, interfaith dialogue, attitudes toward universalism and particularity, and so on. Modernity has stimulated assimilation but also has fostered new ways of expressing Jewish identity.
- Nowadays, when most Jews judge Jewish culture, they do so in light of values taken from the larger world. For many, a new issue arises: "How do I become Jewish?" Jews will increasingly have multiple options and make different choices, the more so because they do not share a common Jewish culture and are not likely to internalize the same type of norms.

"The advent of modernity led to radical political and legal changes for Jewry, particularly in the West. Coercive belonging to a community was replaced by voluntary adherence to what might best be called a congregation. Rabbis or the community thereafter could only induce people to observe, for instance, *kashrut* (the dietary laws) or give *tzedakah* (charity). They no longer had imperative religious authority, that is, coercive legal means to impose their commands or desires on individuals."

Rabbi David Ellenson became in 2001 the eighth president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), the major institution in the world for ordaining and educating Reform rabbis, cantors, and educators. He was ordained at HUC-JIR's New York School in 1977. Ellenson also holds a PhD in the sociology of religion from Columbia University.

"The functioning of the Jewish community thus became dependent on individual Jews internalizing certain types of values. People will light candles on Friday night and go to synagogue if they have internalized certain Jewish norms. However, should they elect not to do so, no one can compel them. This explains why Jewish education has become so crucially important in contemporary Judaism. Without such education, the norms and values of the community and the tradition cannot be 'naturalized' by individuals.

"The rabbi today has only 'influential authority' at his disposal. If a person has been raised in a specific way and has been socialized into upholding certain values, the rabbi can issue a directive and that person will observe it. But even in the most traditional ultra-Orthodox precincts such as Brooklyn or Monsey, people, if they want to-however psychologically difficult it may be-can leave. No public authority can legally force them to do otherwise.

"The political and legal changes that marked the advent of the modern world led to many religious, cultural, financial, and social changes for the Jewish people. For instance, with the demise of state and communal legal coercion, not only Jews who ideologically questioned the authority of Jewish law, but also many others no longer observed large parts of *halacha* (Jewish law). This abandonment of halachic observance became a major characteristic of 'Jewish modernity.'

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The Medieval World

"The medieval world was-politically speaking-a corporate one. The status of a person was accorded him as a member of a corporation. His political condition was determined by the group to which he belonged, for example, the nobility, the church, the peasantry. For Jews, it was the Jewish community that was determinative of status. Culturally and religiously, Jews were informed almost exclusively by Jewish teachings."

Ellenson uses an anachronism. "If I was given a ticket for an offense today in the United States, and if I were to tell the arresting officer, 'But I am Jewish,' that would be completely irrelevant. However, if I had lived in the Middle Ages and had violated the law, I would have come before a Jewish court. Rabbis were not 'spiritual ministers' as they are today, but *dayanim*-judges. They could fine a person or throw him in jail. In medieval Spain they even had people executed.

"With the advent of modernity the community was destroyed as a public corporation. With modernity came individual rights. The French Revolution only became a genuine one when the estates were dissolved. Once one assumed that all men were equal, the question that remained was whether Jews were 'men.' If one concluded that they were, even if one didn't like them, they had to be emancipated.

"Similarly if one started from the principle of 'one man, one vote,' then the question arose whether women, too, were 'men.' If they were, voting rights had to be extended to them as well. Of course, such changes did not take place, principles aside, overnight. In the United States it took more than 130 years from the adoption of the American Constitution in 1787 to the extension of suffrage to women."

The Community's Governmental Structures Collapsed

"Modernity for Jews begins first and foremost when the governmental structures that formerly marked the medieval *kehila* (community) collapsed. The American and French revolutions also brought with them the separation of religion and state. This led to the dismantlement of the political and organizational structure of the Jewish community.

"The change is best evident in the Grand Sanhedrin that Napoleon convened in Paris in 1806. Twelve questions were put before the representatives of French Jewry who in essence answered, 'We are going to be good citizens of the French state.' Count Clermont-Tonnerre remarked in the Constituent Assembly: 'To the Jews as a nation, nothing; to the Jews as individuals, everything.' The only issue on which the Jewish delegates at the Sanhedrin did not yield completely was that of intermarriage, where there was a degree of dissension. In carefully nuanced language, they still insisted on affirming the ethos of in-marriage.

"Before the modern period, being a Jew defined the Jew's political status. In the modern West, being a Jew has become principally a mark of religious identity. Nevertheless, this transition did not take place immediately. The legal requirement of membership in a community remained in

force for most of the nineteenth century. For example, even after the coercive powers were taken from the community leadership, Jews in Germany were still required by the secular government to pay a tax and belong to the community until an *Austrittsgesetz* (Law of Secession) was enacted in 1876 that allowed Jews the option of nonmembership."

Cultural Aspects

"Culturally speaking, one might consider that modernity began earlier than with these political transformations. My late teacher Jacob Katz contended that a major criterion for determining when modernity began was to analyze the moments when Jews began to think in cultural patterns taken from the non-Jewish world. The political-legal change was, however, far more exact in time and easier to pinpoint than the more lengthy process of acculturation.

"One cultural precursor of Jewish modernity was the Dutch Sephardi philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677). In his *Theological-Political Treatise*, he advocated the separation of religion and state. Spinoza also said, contrary to the claims of classical rabbinic Judaism, that God did not reveal the Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai. Instead he maintained that the Torah was the product of human authorship. That is why, in my eyes, the Amsterdam-Portuguese rabbis who excommunicated Spinoza were correct in doing so, that is, they correctly identified a 'heresy.' On the other hand, the ban they issued was completely ineffective in controlling the spread of his ideas.

"All non-Orthodox denominations have their foundations in Spinoza's heresy. They claim that Judaism is literally embedded in culture. This also leads to the view that Judaism is in flux and that halacha develops.

"Katz claims that with Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) Jews began to think in non-Jewish cultural patterns, and that is why the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment in the late 1700s) is a decisive moment in measuring the Jewish transition to the modern world. Mendelssohn himself represented the cultural integration of Jews in the modern world. Gershom Scholem, on the other hand, asserted that modernity for the Jews began when Jewish currents began to be antinomian, that is, when Jews started to abandon observance of halacha. He therefore traced modernity back to the false messiah Shabtai Tzvi and later to the antinomian currents in the Hasidic movement and its thought.

"Katz was highly critical of Scholem's views. He pointed out that while there were seeds of anti-halachic behavior in the thinking of these currents, both Sabbateans and Hasidim essentially thought in Jewish cultural patterns."

Uprooted Jews

"The major challenge modernity posed to Judaism and the Jewish people is that today Jews know more about non-Jewish culture than about the Jewish one. Most contemporary Jews in the West are 'uprooted.' By this I mean that while they are Jewish and have Jewish identities, they know neither Hebrew nor any Jewish language such as Yiddish or Ladino."

Ellenson explains what he means by using a popular image. "In the United States today far more Jews would be able to identify Michael Jordan than the *Tana'im* who were the authors of the Mishnah. That means more than the fact the Jews are distanced from the classical sources of Jewish tradition. It also signifies that when they approach the Jewish tradition, they will do so with ideas taken from a larger world and will judge the tradition accordingly.

"A typical example concerns gender equality. This idea is so ubiquitous nowadays in the United States that no rabbi of whatever denomination would say that it is actually better to be a man than

a woman. They will instead selectively draw on the Jewish tradition to indicate that somehow-even should they defend traditional gender definitions and roles-separate is still equal.

"The dispute over homosexuality and ordination of gay men and lesbian women in the Conservative movement is another result of this acculturation. Once one is part of a culture that affirms equality in matters of sexual preference and orientation, ultimately one is led to grant ordination to gays and lesbians. It has happened with the Reform and Reconstructionist movements and recently with the Conservative. It is one among many proofs that how Jews approach their own culture is influenced by the larger world."

Esriel Hildesheimer

Ellenson mentions that "the gender issue had been discussed long before. The German Orthodox rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer (1820-1899) once wrote an essay on those who could not be witnesses in Jewish law. In that essay Rabbi Hildesheimer wondered why women could not, for instance, sign *aketubah* (marriage certificate). One might assume that this is because classical Jewish culture is patriarchal. Consequently, gender roles are constructed so that positions of public status and authority are reserved for men and positions of domestic honor are assigned to women.

"Hildesheimer, however, said the explanation is that this is a divine commandment. Thus, when the Messiah comes at the end of days, God will explain why women are not permitted according to the directives of Jewish law to sign a *ketubah*.

"Hildesheimer, on whom I wrote my doctorate, provides an interesting case study. He had been raised with a completely traditional Talmudic education. He was ordained by Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger, the rabbi of Altona, then part of Denmark. He sat on the town's rabbinical court for thirteen years, when it still had coercive political authority. He thus lived part of his life as a premodern religious judge who had the power of the state behind him.

"Yet the world was changing very fast. He was one of the first Orthodox rabbis to receive a doctorate from a German university (Halle). Shortly thereafter he moved to Eisenstadt, then in Hungary, where he opened the first yeshiva (Talmud school) in Central Europe to include secular studies in its curriculum. He had become convinced that traditional Judaism could only survive in the modern world if it adapted in culture and education.

"Out of such views and his creation of the Berlin Orthodox Seminary (Rabbinerseminar) developed a modern Jewish Orthodoxy that asserted one had to learn Torah and *derech erez* (social behavior and aesthetics)."

Different Trajectories

"Another clear historic example of cultural change, as a result of modernity, can be found in the works of Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888), the organizational founder of modern Orthodoxy. He was also ordained by Ettlinger. Hirsch himself writes that he grew up in a home that he describes as 'enlightened-religious.' His family in Hamburg began to be influenced by the Enlightenment, yet they remained observant of halacha.

"When Hirsch wanted to reorganize the structure of the German Jewish community, he used arguments drawn from modern Western political theory regarding freedom of conscience. His acculturation trajectory is radically different from that of his roommate Abraham Geiger (1810-1874). They both studied at the University of Bonn; Geiger, however, became one of the founders of German Reform Judaism.

"An earlier, even more striking example of acculturation concerns Rabbi Yehezkel Landau of Prague (1713-1793)-the greatest halachic authority of his time-and his son. The father forbade

Jews to speak the language of the countries in which they lived. He thought Jews could still be kept within the walls of their own environment. The son Samuel Landau (d. 1834), who was also a rabbi, said it was an obligation to teach one's children German."

Ellenson adds: "To make it autobiographical: in my family acculturation took one generation. My grandparents were wonderful but simple Jews from Eastern Europe who came to America. Their children already attended universities like Harvard. My grandparents lived in Yiddish-speaking enclaves; my parents spoke Yiddish, but in our home it was a sort of secret language. My parents used it when they didn't want the children to understand.

"My late teacher Arthur Hertzberg used to say that the chief cultural characteristic of Jews in the Western world rapidly became their desire to participate in Western culture. He would say, 'Jews didn't walk, but ran out of the ghettos.'"

Radically Different Choices

"In the modern voluntaristic environment people made radically different choices. For instance, Rabbi Samuel Holdheim (1806-1860) grew up in a traditional Jewish home speaking a type of German Yiddish. He even wrote his last book, *Ma'amar ha-Ishut* (An Essay on Personal Status), in rabbinical Aramaic. When Holdheim passed away, he still didn't speak German perfectly. Holdheim was about thirty when he started to move toward Reform Judaism and became perhaps the most radical reformer of his time.

"Moses Sofer (1762-1839)-better known as the Chatam Sofer-who lived in what was then called Pressburg and now Bratislava, made a very different choice. He decided to create a countermodernizing kind of movement. Thus ultra-Orthodoxy was born. Sofer concluded that if one began to express or explain Judaism in a rational, enlightened, European idiom, one was ultimately going to subject it to dissolution.

"The process he foresaw was that embedding Judaism in Western culture would lead to that culture finding it wanting in some way. That would result in diminishing the stature of Judaism. Therefore Sofer advocated a separatist Orthodoxy, which meant rejection of Western culture.

"Most Jews, however, chose to participate in the Western world. They adopted a Western aesthetic yet continued to affirm Judaism. In his book *Out of the Ghetto* Katz observed that, in light of all these conditions of change, one might have expected Judaism to atrophy and die.[1] Judaism, however, reformulated itself in various ways. One of these was that a cultured Orthodoxy emerged.

"It differed in some aspects from today's Orthodoxy. A picture exists of Hirsch Hildesheimer-son of Esriel Hildesheimer-with no head covering. David Tzvi Hoffmann (1843-1921), who later succeeded Esriel Hildesheimer as the head of the Berlin Orthodox Seminary and who, earlier in his lifetime, taught in the school of the Hirsch community in Frankfurt, mentions in a responsum how Samson Rafael Hirsch had told Hoffmann when he first arrived in Frankfurt from Hungary that he should remove his head covering in Hirsch's presence when the Gentile secular school principal was present because otherwise it would appear-in light of German manners-that Hoffmann was insulting him.[2] Hirsch clearly was trying to teach the young Hoffmann German mores."

Differences between Countries

"The modernization process started in France where major cultural changes took place in the Jewish communities. Frances Malino's book on the Sephardic Jews of Bordeaux describes the high degree of acculturation of their mores and manners.[3] A similar process took place in England. Todd Endelman's book on the Jews of Georgian England tells how Jews began to adapt

and live like non-Jewish people.[4] For example, for upper-class males in British society, it was often considered 'polite' to keep a mistress in an apartment. As the Jewish upper classes began to assimilate, a certain stratum adopted this practice as well. All these changes in manner and mores, however, were done without any attention paid to ideological justification (especially adultery!).

"Azriel Shohet, a student of Jacob Katz, wrote a book published only in Hebrew, *The Turning of the Eras*, that describes the transitions characterizing Jewish life in eighteenth-century Germany.[5] He mentions, for example, that before that time Jews did not keep pets, especially dogs. Now they began to keep dogs and to dress like the Gentiles and he devotes chapters to describing and analyzing such changes.

"Katz pointed out that only German Judaism was of transnational significance since only there was an ideological rationale advanced for change in Judaism." Ellenson wonders why that was the case. "Could one say that Germany was more philosophically oriented? Or did it happen simply because a number of Jewish leaders who were born there, such as Mendelssohn, Geiger, Holdheim, Zacharias Frankel (1801-1875), and Hirsch, were philosophically oriented? In any event, these figures provided ideological justifications for the positions they took.

"Katz was right: if one wants to understand the essence of how modernity influenced Judaism, one has to study the developments in German Jewry. That was the only country where the changes in Jewish life were based on ideological justifications. This was later followed by similar developments in the United States. The French and English Jews just acculturated, without an ideological base."

New Forms of Judaism

Ellenson adds: "Interestingly, Katz used to remark that one of the myths of modern Judaism is that apostasy in Germany was high. However, he noted that France had a much higher rate of Jewish conversion to Catholicism than Germany had of German Jews to diverse Christian denominations. This may well be because French culture and society were so monolithically Catholic that, to participate fully in French life, far more Jews felt they had to go to the baptismal font than in Germany.

"This acculturation process also gradually gave rise to new forms of Judaism, ultimately leading to the current Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist denominations. These maintain that there are different legitimate ways of being religious Jews. This is another major result of the changes modernity has wrought within Judaism."

Ellenson stresses the need to separate belief from ritual. "Zacharias Frankel, the first president of the Breslau-based Jewish Theological Seminary, was fully observant. Even though he observed the halacha, Hirsch considered him a heretic because Frankel believed in the historical development of the Jewish religious tradition. Hirsch thought such beliefs about the evolution of Jewish law were theologically destructive of the base upon which traditional Judaism was constructed-the belief in an 'eternal Torah.'"

Social Change

"Legal, religious, cultural, and political changes together mark the modern period as unique. With it also came social change. The impact of these transformations is not fully felt routinely in the West until the third generation after they have begun. One major area is that of marriage.

"In practical terms, when Jews such as my grandparents emigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States around 1900, there was no intermarriage. These Jewish immigrants maintained a taboo on exogamy. Furthermore, their cultural patterns made it impossible for them to mingle

socially with non-Jews. The generation of their children also had hardly any intermarriage. Sociologically speaking, this generation had still-as far as intermarriage is concerned-internalized the parental disapproval of marrying outside one's ethnic group, and the social barriers between Jews and non-Jews were still very real. However, by the third generation-that of the grandchildren-the internal taboo began to weaken as the acculturation process took place and as non-Jews and Jews began to mingle socially as equals. Thus, by the 1970s the Jewish intermarriage rate arrived at one in three Jews.

"For such high rates of exogamy two variables have to be present. First, members of the ethnic group have to be highly acculturated into the host society. Second, society at large has to see members of that group as desirable or at least acceptable marriage partners. And both these traits are present for the American Jewish community today. As Jonathan Sarna has pointed out, social interactions among Jews and Gentiles have increased as Jews have become fully acculturated and as Gentile prejudice against Jews has significantly declined, thus leading to high rates of intermarriage.[6]

"The Israeli historian Jacob Toury observed that in nineteenth-century Germany, when a Jew married a non-Jew, he almost always left the Jewish community. The same was by and large true in the United States up to 1970.

"In America today, the situation has changed. Jews intermarry and yet many want to remain in the community and identify as Jews. The Reform movement would not have decided to accept patrilineal descent if there were not so many intermarried Jews who still want to be part of the Jewish community. Whether or not this approach will succeed remains a debate for future generations.

"Other countries are often behind the United States in these matters. The Australian Jewish community, for instance, was largely created by Holocaust survivors who came to the country after the Second World War. That was the first generation. Their children still spoke Yiddish. The third generation will emerge there in another twenty years. It will be interesting to see whether intermarriage rates grow."

Opting Out

"Another consequence of modernity concerned opting out. In the premodern world it was almost impossible to leave the Jewish community because one had to completely change one's political and legal status. Culturally, it also meant abandoning the community that had defined who and what one was as a person. The number of actual apostates from Judaism-though there were always some-has been relatively minuscule except in those cases where Jews were forced to convert.

"Modernity, however, made opting out possible. The more the secular-neutral sphere grew and society at large became neutral, the less active abandonment of Judaism was necessary as it had been in premodern times. Today one can, as it were, simply drift into a larger world. Those who are informed by Western culture can become totally part of it without any formal abandonment of the community. The same goes for those who were born in Christian homes and are no longer religious. We might best call them Gentiles as opposed to Christians.

"Secularization in society at large did not mean that religion disappeared totally. It rather meant that religion informed fewer and fewer precincts of one's life. In Judaism's codex-the Shulhan Aruch-society was informed completely by religion. This included not only one's ritual life but also, for instance, the way one conducted business, or the way one dressed.

"Secularization also means that compartmentalization becomes possible. One can go to synagogue on Shabbat morning and to a soccer game in the afternoon. Many areas of life are usually no longer seen from or guided by an 'elitist-religious' kind of perspective. Yet, as we saw

for Jews living in France and England in the early modern period, no thought is given to justifying this type of behavior. It has no ideological dimension.

"Once the community became voluntaristic, there were also financial consequences. A major source of income for the premodern community was the control of *shechita* (ritual slaughter), and we often read of fierce disputes in the nineteenth century when different groups of Jews would appoint their own *shochet*, thereby depriving the larger community of a needed source of revenue. Modernity allowed groups to split off and form their own congregations as well as individual Jews to opt out. At the same time, a situation evolved where people violated halachic norms on the one hand-even the prohibition of intermarriage-yet still called themselves Jews on the other.

"Technology further complicates the notion of community. It provides new options for many people. It allows the community or elements in it to reach thousands and thousands of people. Indeed, many of the traditionalists in the Jewish community have adapted to these new technological advances, and classes and the dissemination of halachic sources and teachings abound on the Internet. Yet many questions remain. Do 'virtual communities' constitute genuine community, or will the advances in technology help to bring-in a traditional sense-more Jews into 'face to face' settings? For someone like myself, these technological advances are still somewhat perplexing, but I do see how comfortable all five of my own children and their friends are with these changes that undoubtedly have implications for the Jewish community in the twenty-first century."

Multiple Identities

"Religious shifts often occur very gradually and changes are almost imperceptible at a specific moment. That is also one of the reasons why nowadays Jewish identity has become so difficult to define. Jews express identity in very complex ways. Elites in all the movements of Judaism often consider many of these expressions nonnormative. There are many individuals who hardly participate in Jewish communal life at all. Some of these, for instance, create a work of art that they contend is an expression of their Jewish identity. In open society, this is the way they identify Jewishly.

"One finds this, for instance, in music. The Orthodox rapper Matisyahu has become a cultural phenomenon in the United States. The Public Broadcasting System (PBS) did a major three-part documentary series on the Jews in America, ending with Matisyahu as the contemporary expression of Jewishness for many people.

"The sociologist Bethamie Horowitz has been a foremost student of this phenomenon. In one article she describes the life journeys of many Jewish individuals. One finds there highly eclectic, idiosyncratic patterns.[7] One even sees these patterns among non-Jews who take an interest in Judaism, such as Madonna who claims to be a student of Kabbalah."

Aesthetics

"As part of their acculturation, Jews also began to internalize Western aesthetics. This found expression in the synagogues they built, their homes, as well as their dress. Their ideas of beauty were and are influenced by the cultures that surround them.

"The key contribution of modern Orthodoxy was asserting that one can acculturate and internalize a Western mode of aesthetics and simultaneously remain an authentic Jew. As a historian it is interesting to see that different people are at various stages of this process. Others, such as the ultra-Orthodox, are on a different trajectory altogether.

"This often leads to the opinion that all those to the left of one are heretics and inauthentic and those to the right, fanatics and medieval. In my youth this opinion prevailed in my family. When I took a step back and looked at how all these Jews actually lived their lives, I was struck by how similar their life patterns and social mores were despite the fact that they felt their religious differences were of monumental significance.

"Ultra-Orthodoxy also introduces radical changes. It is a self-conscious 'countermodernizing' trend in which the ultra-Orthodox, completely aware of the impacts modernity has had upon the Jewish community, attempt to create enclaves that resist these impacts. An example is the recent decision by ultra-Orthodox rabbi Avraham Sherman of the Israeli High Rabbinical Court to annul the conversions of Orthodox religious-Zionist rabbi Chaim Druckman, a leading rabbinical authority charged with overseeing conversions by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. Sherman's decision represents an attempt by an ultra-Orthodox authority to counter trends toward 'accommodation' and 'leniency' that he feels have and will lead to the dissolution of traditional communal norms and standards.

"Although the normative and virtually unanimous position in halacha over the centuries has been that the person who has converted to Judaism remains incontrovertibly Jewish, Rabbi Sherman has reversed this position. In my view he is mainly influenced by sociological judgments, not halachic stances. Indeed, there are very few precedents for this new court ruling."

Interfaith Dialogue

"Modernity also radically changed the nature of interfaith dialogue. The leading medieval scholar Rashi and others did interact to some extent with Christians on matters of biblical interpretation. In medieval Spain - and elsewhere in Europe - there were also forced religious debates between Jewish scholars such as Nachmanides and Christians. In these exchanges, voluntary or coerced, Jews had to stand up for their identity and their religion.

"Today we are part of a liberal, universalistic ethos that speaks about truth being expressed in a variety of ways. Thus interfaith dialogue is no longer exclusively a means of defense even though for Jews it may still be principally so.

"Interfaith dialogue, however, also becomes a way in which people attempt to explore questions of faith and the emphasis they have in different religions. In the modern world there is much of such dialogue. It is not only the Jews who have been influenced. The theological changes in Catholicism expressed in Vatican II, including-but not exclusively-on the Jews, were rather radical."

Universalism and Particularity

"Earlier Christianity had a universalistic tradition that said 'all people are one in Christ.' Modernity secularized this ethos. The universalistic ideology of modernity led to the emancipation of the Jews. Jews, in turn, have also started to stress the universalistic elements in their tradition. After all, these elements allowed Jews to participate fully in the modern West.

"I once read an article by Solomon Schechter who said that if one analyzes the Midrash literature (a method of rabbinic explanations for biblical texts), one finds that for every midrash with a universalistic tendency, there are an overwhelming number that are quite particularistic. It is not that Judaism has not always had universalistic as well as particularistic elements; just think of the Noahide Covenant that God established with all humankind as opposed to the particularistic covenant established with Abraham and his descendants. It is the emphasis placed on the universalistic pole of Jewish tradition that is unique in our age.

"In one of the best-known universalistic midrashim, as the Egyptians are drowning in the sea the angels began to sing to God. God quiets them, however, saying, 'My creatures are drowning in the sea; how is it that you can sing to me?'"

"Many Jews seem to know this midrash, while they ignore-or simply do not know-the many others where there is exultation and rejoicing about the drowning. This shows how much the universalistic ethos has been internalized. Those sources whose meanings bear an affinity to the ethos of the modern world are emphasized. Others are simply not studied or are unknown. Jews, then, view their religious tradition from a contemporary perspective that is now dominant in the world in which Jews live.

"For Judaism insisting on universal human dignity and, at the same time, on the Jews' particularity is a major challenge. The issue already arose two hundred years ago at the Paris Sanhedrin. The Jews were prepared to say that they were completely one with the culture in which they lived.

"In American Jewry today the great irony is that universalism has brought many Jews back to Jewish particularity. One successful organization is the American Jewish World Service. Tens of thousands of young Jews are anxious to participate in various causes of international assistance within a Jewish framework. This promotes a type of Jewish identity.

"Another such organization is Avodah Service Corps. It enables young Jews, to whom it teaches Jewish texts, to work in impoverished neighborhoods in the United States. Other comparable organizations are Jewish Fund for Justice and the Progressive Jewish Alliance. These work on issues of minority rights, workers' rights, and providing low-cost housing in urban American areas where neighborhoods are becoming gentrified. The paradox is that many Jews have been brought back to Jewish frameworks because the Jewish tradition seems to be promoting this kind of universalistic commitment.

"Whether and how this involvement in *tikkun olam* (social justice and repair of the world) will ultimately bring all these Jews to accept Jewish particularity-and whether the source of this activity is actually Judaism itself or the ethos of the modern world-remains a matter of debate and discussion in the Jewish world. However, I remain optimistic about what these developments may mean for the relevance of Judaism to countless young American Jews."

Additional Identities

"This brings us back to identity, which is a complex issue. From a social- science viewpoint, there are at least three ways in which identity is constructed. On the first level, it is a matter of how one views oneself. Second, how is one viewed by one's community? Third, how is one viewed by the outside world?"

"In premodern times there would have been virtually no dissonance for Jews between the three spheres. After all, the community's political structure alone was a legal authority that could determine such status. In the modern period, where no such authority exists in much of the world and cultural identities are multiple, there can be a great many disparities. For instance, somebody who has a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother may see himself as Jewish. Reform, Reconstructionist, and most secular Jews would view him as Jewish. Orthodox and certain Conservative Jews, however, would not consider this person as having a lawful Jewish status. If his name is Benjamin Cohen, most non-Jews would see him as Jewish as well. This illustrates how complex and layered is the issue of Jewish identity in the modern world.

"Part of the challenge for Judaism in the modern world is that people have myriad identities. People also have hybrid identities. This is not limited to Jews. In the introduction to his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, the great African American thinker W.E.B. Dubois says he is 'condemned' to the conditions of the modern world. Dubois has what he calls a 'double consciousness.' On the one hand, he is the grandchild of slaves. On the other, as a graduate of Harvard College, he is a

member of the most privileged educated grouping in America. Everywhere he goes he is marked by multiple consciousnesses.

"This further underlines how difficult it is to create a collective Jewish identity. People insist that they have multiple identities and that the way they define themselves is legitimate. Jewish religious leadership of any denomination may define identity and determine Jewish status (i.e., who is 'sufficiently Jewish' to marry another person defined by these leaders as possessing such status) in one way. However, this may not be 'enforceable' and sociopolitical reality may allow identity to be established in other ways.

"As if that were not enough, identities are also fluid. Many children with only one Jewish parent, who have never been raised as Jews, suddenly discover that they are Jewish and define themselves as Jews. They may then go on a 'birthright' trip to Israel. There are many more individual examples of returning to the Jewish community."

A Common Jewish Landscape

Ellenson says the dissolution of the political structure of the premodern *kehila* (community) was a trauma from which the Jewish world has never recovered. "There is no absolute solution any more. People will increasingly have multiple options and make different choices-the more so as they do not share a common Jewish culture and are not likely to internalize the same type of norms.

"Hence I view the modern world as a place where the best we can hope to do is to create a common Jewish landscape. People are going to walk along different paths. There will always be many choices and not necessarily a common cultural ethos. To understand that, it is crucial to comprehend the changes that started at the beginning of the nineteenth century."

Ellenson concludes: "When modernity began, the issue for many Jews was 'how do I become modern.' Nowadays there is no problem with being 'modern.' When Jews judge Jewish culture, they judge it in light of values taken from the larger world. And for many a new issue arises-'how do I become Jewish.' First Jews moved from the center to the periphery. Now one sees many moving from the periphery to the center. Yet options for Jews will only multiply and that will be a major part of the struggle that Jewish leadership will increasingly confront as our community and people move toward the future."

Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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Notes

[1] Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973).

[2] David Tzvi Hoffmann, *Melammed L'ho'il, Yoreh De'ah #56* [Hebrew].

[3] Frances Malino, *The Sephardic Jews of Bordeaux* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1978).

[4] Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England 1714-1830: Tradition and Change in a Liberal Society* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979).

[5] Azriel Shohet, *'Im hilufei hatekufot* ([Jerusalem](#), 1960). [Hebrew]

[6] Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

[7] Bethamie Horowitz, "Connections and Journeys: Shifting Identities among American Jews," *Contemporary Jewry*, 19 (1998).

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