

Jewish Renewal: Toward a ‘New’ American Judaism

Shaul Magid

It is time to begin thinking about writing the history of Jewish Renewal in America. This is not because the Jewish Renewal movement is over. Quite the opposite: Jewish Renewal, just one generation old, is quickly becoming part of mainstream American Judaism and is now at a threshold moment. Jewish Renewal is essentially an attempt to revive, recontextualize, and reform Jewish spiritualist movements that have most recently manifested in Hasidism but have roots in pre-modern Jewish pietism. It is a reformation of Jewish spiritual practice in the spirit of humanism and global consciousness. Most of what has been written about Jewish Renewal—by both insiders and observers—focuses on how it relates to developments *within* the parameters of Judaism. People often ask, is Jewish Renewal *sui generis*, is it a fad, is it “good for the Jews” or not? In my view, these are the wrong questions. Jewish Renewal is a theology that grows as much out of late twentieth-century America as out of Judaism. It is, perhaps, the second stage of an indigenous American Judaism born in America’s transition from late pluralism to multiculturalism following the Second World War. (While Jewish Renewal is developing at a fast pace in Israel, the Israeli context is quite different and deserves a separate study.) The right question to ask about Jewish Renewal is this: Will Jewish Renewal provide the beginnings of a new American Judaism that will change the face of Judaism in the twenty-first century? Or will it, like the Hasidic and Mussar movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, fold back into the strong current of conventionality, serving at best as a chapter in the history of Judaism in America?

Chabad’s Spiritual Outreach

The initial groundwork for Jewish Renewal arguably began in 1929 when the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn (1880-1950) traveled to America. Schneersohn saw the dark cloud forming over Europe two decades before the rise of Nazi Germany. A virulent anti-Zionist, he believed America would be the next phase of the Diaspora and the future of Judaism (he was virulently anti-

Zionist). In America, he created what became the Chabad movement.

The vision of Judaism that dominated Chabad after the emergence of Schneersohn’s son-in-law, Menahem Mendel Schneersohn, as the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe melded classical Hasidic spirituality with an attenuated accommodation to modernity. In the 1960s, American Chabad became the first large-scale American Jewish attempt to reach out to unaffiliated, alienated, and spiritually charged youth culture. Hasidic nomenclature and metaphysics were employed to interpret contemporary events, while Hasidic spirituality was proffered as a “Jewish” alternative to the spiritual renaissance influenced by Eastern religions. Chabad emissaries envisioned Hasidism as the alternative to counter-cultural spirituality, at least for Jews.

This outreach was not necessarily intended to make more Chabadnikim (Chabad followers)—although this did occur—but rather to proffer a user-friendly and Americanized Jewish mysticism as a tool to foster Jewish traditionalism, distinctiveness, and identity. As much as reaching out to an alienated Jewish-American youth population, Chabad challenged the non-Orthodox influence on American Jews by arguing that Hasidically reconstructed Orthodoxy was the most, if not the only, authentic Judaism. Paradoxically, Chabad succeeded in large part because its particularistic, hegemonic vision of authentic Judaism fed off the multicultural spirit of the late twentieth-century American youth movement. In reaching out to alienated youth, Chabad emphasized the importance of claiming a particular identity within a multicultural environment.

The two figures perhaps most important to the founding of Jewish Renewal, Rabbis Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (Jewish Renewal’s acknowledged architect) and Shlomo Carlebach (renowned singer, songwriter, and translator of Hasidism to counter-cultural America), began their religious lives at the forefront of this new Chabad project. Chabad’s approach was attractive to these young immigrants from war-torn Europe who had already been introduced to the West and who wanted to bridge the old world and the new. Chabad’s structure of outreach and its openness to translating Hasidic ideas to an alienated audience served as an important foundation for Jewish Renewal. The young Rabbi Zalman and Rabbi Shlomo absorbed the essence of Hasidism (as manifest in

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Chabad and other sects)—its focus on joyous celebration and integrated Judaism—as a much needed alternative to the ossified state of American Judaism immediately following the war. They also knew that the unreconstructed Hasidism that was transplanted from Europe could not speak to a youth culture who had already “tuned in, turned on, and dropped out” of the American mainstream. While Chabad was not the answer for these young seekers, it provided the necessary template for their project.

From the Jewish Renewal perspective, Chabad outreach fails because it only envisions America, and modernity more generally, in functional terms. For Chabad, America is simply the next (perhaps last) stage of the Diaspora. What Judaism requires is the strengthening of Jewish resolve through the performance of *mitzvot* in order to anchor Jewish identity and thus hasten the redemption. Arguably, American Chabad has added little to the kabbalistic worldview it inherited from Europe. Jewish Renewal differs from Chabad by not viewing the historical events of the twentieth century as merely another chapter in the book of Jewish exile. Instead, these events are understood to have created a seismic shift in the world that demands a radical change of perspective for all religions, Judaism included. The tragedy of the twentieth century, viewed theologically, is viewed as the result of a world in disaccord, partly fed by the exclusivist doctrines of Western religion either manifest (Christianity and Islam) or covert (Judaism). For Judaism to participate in this global shift it must seriously reconsider its entire theological foundation.

The End of Denominationalism

As has been duly noticed by observers of American Judaism, one of its distinctive characteristics is its denominational structure, largely adapted from American Protestantism. While contemporary American Jewish denominations have their foundations in western and central Europe (German Reform, German neo-Orthodoxy, Hungarian Neologism, and central European proto-Conservatism) the transition from these more intellectual and theological movements to religious denominations took place on American soil.

Nineteenth-century America was guided by an ideal of pluralism or, as British playwright Israel Zangwill later termed it, a “melting pot” in which different cultures would come together and mix, forming “out of the many, one.” The primary issue for Jews at the end of the nineteenth century was how best to navigate a pluralistic culture. Conservative Judaism, and to a lesser extent Modern Orthodoxy, followed the cultural pluralism of Horace Kallen, who suggested that ethnic and religious minorities in America could maintain a private sphere of separation and uniqueness (i.e., their own religious practice) while in the public sphere mixing together with everyone else and living the American dream. Reform Judaism responded instead with an inclusionary model of acculturation to American life, omitting many of the particularities of Jewish law or practice that could not be made to

coexist with modernity. One denomination rejected the American mainstream—albeit only in the private sphere—while the other denomination accommodated to it. Both denominations reacted to the American religious landscape, rather than engaging proactively in contributing to it.

The first indigenous American Judaism, Mordecai Kaplan’s Reconstructionism, challenged the denominational structure of Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform Judaism. An ex-Orthodox rabbi, Kaplan took a sociological approach to religion, transforming it into culture, or as he put it, “Judaism as a Civilization.” On the one hand, he called upon assimilated and Reform Jews to return to *mitzvot*, and on the other he suggested to traditionalists that they view Jewish religious law (*halachah*) as an expression of the Jewish will and not necessarily the will of God. This became known as a post-halachic approach to Jewish practice. Kaplan thus created a way for Jews to live religiously in various ways, from traditional halachic to non-halachic reform, while considering their piety as an expression of cultural identity and not an adherence to doctrinal authority.

Kaplan was able to envision a Judaism that would transcend denominations because he had moved past the ideology of pluralism. For Kaplan, the distinctiveness tolerated and then erased by a pluralist ideology was replaced by a celebration of diversity. Kaplan saw the demise of the inclusionary pluralism of the melting pot and knew that assimilationist Judaism would have to retrieve a theory of separateness without exclusivity. He knew that to survive in America, Judaism had to become an unadulterated “American” Judaism, one that fully participated in the theological and cultural climate of America and was not simply a reaction to it.

Despite its revolutionary possibilities, or maybe because of them, Reconstructionism has not become a significant movement in American Jewish life. The reasons for this are not clear. Perhaps it simply could not compete with the dominant institutional structures of existing denominations. Perhaps its radical theological critique of tradition coupled with the centrality of post-halachic practice as “folkways” was too much for many secular but sentimental Jews to swallow. Many American Jews want a “traditional” Judaism they choose not to observe (this is part of the success of modern Orthodoxy, the Conservative movement, and Chabad) or an assimilationist social activist Judaism they can live as part of their Americanism (Reform). Reconstructionism is too idiosyncratic in that it demands too much of a ritual commitment and too great a theological leap. Perhaps it is also because Reconstructionism now views itself as a denomination when in fact its greatest strength was to offer a new theological model that could be adapted by Jews who identify with other denominations.

Jewish Renewal has arguably fulfilled the role that Reconstructionism first claimed, so much so that it could be viewed as an extension of Reconstructionism, as even Reb Zalman has acknowledged. Emerging in the heyday of multiculturalism, Jewish Renewal, unlike its predecessor, does not

have any pretense of being a denomination. It is not bound by the enclosed denominational structure that could be confining for any religion functioning in an American landscape of shared diversity and the blending of religious sensibilities. Free from the confines of both doctrinal and sociological denominational boundaries, Jewish Renewal responded to the celebration of diversity with a syncretistic approach that readily borrowed from unpopular and even deviant strains inside Judaism and from spiritual resources outside Judaism. Most radically, Jewish Renewal has made the important, innovative move of enabling non-Jews to find meaning in Jewish worship. This syncretism may make Jewish Renewal more than just an indigenous American Judaism; its anti-denominational spirit may be the beginning of a new era of Judaism—Judaism as an American religion.

Historicism vs. Syncretism

Liberal Jewish denominations including Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionism, were built on the foundations of historicism. They argue that the Jewish tradition has developed over time, adopting new ideas, some from outside its own boundaries, and re-formulating old doctrines to align with contemporary beliefs and practices. While historicism exposes tradition to a critique of its own authority, it can still be employed to support a largely self-enclosed theological universe. For example, many Jewish historians, like Yehezkel Kaufman and Henrich Graetz, have maintained that Judaism is a unique phenomenon in the history of religion. They argue that while Judaism may have been influenced by surrounding culture, ancient Israelite religion and later Judaism successfully absorbed and “Judaized” these foreign influences into its own distinct and independent outlook.

These arguments show that historicism can acknowledge the complex and quilted nature of the genealogy of a religious tradition and yet also support the authority structure of that tradition. This is because authority is determined not only by the genealogy or purity of doctrine but by the decisions of authorities as to what is “inside” or “outside” tradition. On this reading, historicism and traditionalism are not mutually exclusive. In fact the former has often been used to support the latter.

Syncretism or, more accurately “conscious syncretism,” is an act that intentionally infuses foreign ideas and practices into a religious tradition that may lead to new religious formations not grounded in any traditional precedent. In most cases, these foreign ideas are incompatible with the *au courant* understanding of tradition. They are not unified with the tradition, but co-exist in unreconciled tension with religious norms.

In the nineteenth century, the tendency was to value uniform cultures over heteronymous ones. In religion, that tendency led to a belief in the myth of pure, unadulterated revelatory systems. As a type of hybridity, syncretism was a pejorative term mostly relegated to “oriental” religions that did not make exclusivist claims and were thus considered

inferior religions. Modern Jewish thinkers, even the more progressive and historicist thinkers, tended to present Judaism as a coherent belief system and avoided the notion of syncretism as a phenomenon in the history of Judaism.

In a multicultural world, however, syncretism has taken on a positive valence. Blending is viewed not as “defiling” but as enhancing a particular religion. The phenomenologist of religion Gerhard van der Leeuw has suggested that religions are in constant flux and thus borrowing is a natural part of religion’s own dynamism. Multiculturalism pushes particularistic societies to abandon their master narratives and theories of “uniqueness” in favor of an orientation that acknowledges, and supports, borrowing from one another while maintaining distinct, but not exclusivist, self-identities. While historicism may sometimes undermine the mythic construct of uniqueness, it often erects in its place an ostensibly “factual/historical” construct of distinctiveness that is still exclusivist in orientation. In existing Jewish denominations built on the historicist model, Judaism is still by and for Jews and theories of Jewish chosenness are still defended. In Jewish Renewal’s syncretistic model, Judaism is constructed by Jews but what Judaism has to offer is not necessarily limited to Jews; the boundaries of Judaism itself have become permeable.

As I see it, only in Jewish Renewal’s syncretistic post-denominational approach does Judaism move in a direction that suggests both an ideological and functional universalism. This non-exclusivist particularism frees Judaism to view itself as one of many societies, and one of many spiritualities, each of which has a role to play in the order of the world. When Judaism no longer needs to defend its uniqueness (theologically or historically) it can more comfortably view itself as a partner in humanity. While it is true that the permeability of boundaries threatens the survival of any distinct community, the multicul-

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tural model that promotes an ideology of “mutual recognition” and respect is a buffer against that danger. In this regard I think Jewish Renewal takes multiculturalism more seriously than other American Jewish alternatives. Its universalism is not some prophetic or messianic utopianism relegated to a redemptive future, but part of the way Judaism needs to be lived in the here-and-now. Instead of simply assimilating into a pre-existing Americanism as the Reform movement did, Jewish Renewal creates a religious framework in dialogue with other religious currents in America. Instead of offering Judaism as a separate sphere of religious practice, Jewish Renewal offers a blending of Judaism with other spiritual practices in order to construct a more complex and sensitive religious alternative that is aligned with American sensibilities garnered from a counter-culture now mainstreamed.

A New Reality Map

In many respects, Jewish Renewal may be understood as the belated success of Reconstructionism and the adaptation and subsequent subversion of American Chabad. Or, to put it another way, multiculturalism created the cultural context, Kaplan provided the beginnings of a post-denominational framework, and Schneersohn provided the spiritual passion and commitment to outreach. Like Chabad, Jewish Renewal *is* a kind of outreach, but its goal is not a return to Orthodoxy; its goal is the creation of a new American Judaism that is unafraid and open to the world. Like Reconstructionism it is willing to rethink its most sacred doctrines and is willing to bring the private sphere of religion into the public discourse of justice, equality, and freedom.

Unlike Jewish denominations more generally, Jewish Renewal is not apologetic in tone or practice. As I view it, it is not out to defend Judaism from outside critique but rather to see Judaism as a potential resource for renewed spiritual

meaning and sustenance in America. It takes multiculturalism at face value and does not succumb to the deep-seated cynicism Jews often bring to any gesture of inclusion and equality. Throughout history, fear—whether real or imagined—has prompted Judaism often to adopt a reflexive inward posture, which has sometimes justified the false accusations against it. Jewish Renewal has determined that tragic history (isn't most of Jewish history tragic?) sometimes demands a creative response and not a reflexive, defensive, and inward-looking reaction. Sometimes tragedy does not teach us that we have gone too far but that we have not gone far enough. For Jewish Renewal, post-war America was an opportunity to reinvent Judaism using courageous interpretive schemes in the syncretistic spirit of postmodern spirituality.

In Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi's language, Jewish Renewal offers a new Jewish “reality map” that can be adopted by any Jewish seeker, a “map” constructed from the wellsprings of the Jewish mystical and Hasidic traditions refracted through an Aquarian Age commitment to global humanism. Its openness to the larger world can speak to those inclined toward humanism, and its ritual passion and creativity can speak to those more inclined toward devotion and piety. Liberated from denominational confines, Jewish Renewal has provided a new template with which contemporary American Judaism can re-evaluate itself. The ramifications are enormous and the price is quite high. In this sense Jewish Renewal is testing the elasticity and courage of American Judaism. Can it meet the world halfway “with its sacred learning under its arm”?

NOTE: this essay is the first in a three-part series. In the next installment Magid will address the theological underpinnings of the universalist turn of Jewish Renewal and its relationship to Jewish heresy and deviance.

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