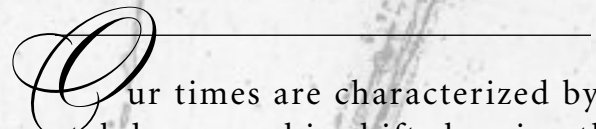


by Joseph Chuman

Imagine the following scenario: overnight all of the world's eighteen million Jews disappear. The next morning, they are replaced by an equal number of Irish Catholic converts to Judaism. These new Jews are as observant as those they have replaced. Each one has completely jettisoned Catholic beliefs while preserving intact Irish folkways, sensibilities, gestures, and customs. They become Jews by religion but remain ethnically Irish.

Would we recognize these transformed religionists as Jews? And if so, what difference would it make to our understanding of Jewishness? Behind these questions lies the knotty issue of religious belief, and its relation to ethnicity and culture. Is religion organically bound to culture, drawing nourishment like a plant from the soil?

RELIGION
&
ETHNICITY
WHICH HAS MORE STAYING POWER?



Our times are characterized by monumental demographic shifts bearing the names “diversity,” “pluralism,” and “multiculturalism.”

Can religion rest upon various, even clashing cultures? Can it sustain itself without resting within any explicit social, cultural, or ethnic expression whatsoever?

My scenario poses an extreme example of the direction Jewish identity is headed. Since the 1970's, the private sphere of the Jewish religion has crumbled—for several reasons. The taboo against intermarriage broke down, leading to religious mixing. Outreach programs (undertaken by the Reform movement) brought non-Jewish spouses closer to Judaism. And conversion became more common, making Jewish identity open to greater variations. Increasingly we encounter Italian Jews, WASP Jews, Puerto-Rican Jews, Thai Jews, African-American Jews, and yes, Irish Jews. The phrase “But you don't look Jewish!” is taking on new meaning.

The trend has only escalated, right up to this very day. Intermarriage is now normative in American Jewish life. Reform temples accept unconverted spouses as members (while excluding them from certain rituals). In temples with mixed congregations, there is a palpable change in atmosphere, as was poignantly noted by one retired Rabbi. Passing through the hallways of his old

temple, he heard a choral group rehearsing Christmas carols. He suddenly and painfully felt estranged from the place he had invested his Jewish identity.

His experience was personal, but it was hardly unique. Our times are characterized by monumental demographic shifts bearing the names “diversity,” “pluralism,” and “multiculturalism.” Increased mobility and the triumph of individual autonomy have undermined the notion that religious and ethnic identities are conferred by birth. For my grandparents, born in a Polish *shtetl*, the idea that they might choose their identity would have been as absurd as kosher crabmeat. Today, choosing one's religious identity is almost the norm (and I have eaten vegetarian “seafood” in kosher Chinese restaurants).

But freedom has profound implications. In this era of choice, it raises questions about religion, ethnicity, Jewish identity, and the future of all three.

CAN JUDAISM SURVIVE INDEPENDENT OF A JEWISH ETHNIC CULTURE? No: beliefs are sustained by culture, and culture is here to stay—a permanent feature of the human condition.

But it need not stay the same. If Judaism were spontaneously created tomorrow and eighteen million people signed on, an identifiable cultural life would grow around it. It would be far different from what Ashkenazic Jewishness feels like today; such Jews probably would not employ Yiddishisms or eat gefilte fish, and they might not worry so much about their children's SAT scores. My Irish converts would be Jews, but they would be Jews of a very different cast than we know today.

And so will the Jews of the future. As diversity and intermarriage become even more rooted in modern life, the Jewish ethnic character will change. It will be more fluid and open. It will be built less on a consciousness of “us and them.” It will be something barely recognizable to my grandparents.

But it will have a definable character; and as long as it is linked to religion, it will be Jewish.


CAN JEWISH ETHNICITY SURVIVE INDEPENDENT OF JUDAISM? Here my response is more guarded. Religion, as a cluster of beliefs and practices, has a staying power that ethnicity lacks. To

believers, God, Torah, and *halacha* are the foundations of Jewish identity. But more importantly, they are the rallying points for religious communities, which work powerfully to reinforce identity and ensure its generational transmission.

The hallmarks of ethnic identity—music, literature, dietary customs, even a common history—lack this binding power. Only a common language can cement ethnic identity in the absence of religious belief. However, the majority of Jews today do not speak Jewish languages: Hebrew, Yiddish, or Ladino. They speak the languages of their adopted countries.

Other ethnic identities seem to stand on their own—French American, Italian American, Chinese American, Hispanic American—without a religious center. But even these become weaker, and more diffuse, as generations grow more removed from their immigrant past.

Will Israel preserve Jewish ethnic identity? Indeed it may—but a numerically diminished one. Besides, when it comes to Jewish continuity, it's not Israel that American Jewish leaders agonize over. It's the Diaspora, Ashkenazic Jewish heritage. And here, my sense of



realism leads me to side with the pessimists. For while communities built on Jewish religious practice will thrive, those based on ethnicity will fall sway to assimilation. If this is the fate of other ethnic minorities, why should Jews be any different?

In the past twenty years, we've seen the rise of Jewish spirituality; the resurgence of Orthodoxy; and the Jewish renewal movement, which has attracted secular and liberal Jews for whom Orthodoxy holds little appeal. Judaism seems to have gotten a second wind.

But appearances can be deceiving. For while the resurgence is highly visible (witness the dramatic growth of Orthodox synagogues, yeshivas, and kosher restaurants), the numbers tell a different story. More people leave the fold than join it. The percentage of Orthodox Jews in America has remained at eight to ten percent for many decades.

Similarly, the trend towards religious rebirth is not what it seems. It is built on the shaky foundation of free choice, and is inherently unstable. As for the current enthusiasm for spirituality, it may be a steady flame or a cultural brushfire that burns itself out. My hunch is the latter.

In the absence of a binding religious center, the acids of modernity will continue to erode the Jewish ethnic community. The Jewish future will be characterized by a small religious core, surrounded by a large but weak periphery.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF SECULAR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM? Secular Humanistic Judaism replaces Judaic monotheism with a rational, humanistic belief system. It assumes (as I do) that Judaism cannot sustain itself without a central, core ideology. In other words, culture alone is insufficient.

Humanistic Judaism faces two formidable challenges. According to a 1991 study,* when a sect adopts the beliefs of the culture around it, it levels off and declines. Moreover, the *degree difference* between a sect and the general population is the biggest factor for success (the study involved Christian sects, but its findings apply equally to Jews). Hence the first challenge: the lack of differentiation between Secular Humanistic Judaism and the general secular culture.

Postmodernism poses the second challenge. As a contemporary movement, it poses a worldview where nothing is for certain. Truth is relative; values are

subjective. Rationality, objectivity, and individualism are all passé. These were the values of the Enlightenment; they're also the values of Secular Humanistic Judaism, which, in a postmodern climate, is no longer on the cutting edge. In many circles, it finds itself on the defensive.

These powerful trends should not lead to despair. My assessment is pessimistic, but not fatalistic, for that is not the humanist way, and winds that blow one way can unpredictably change direction. There is great purpose in standing against the current. The best we can do is hold fast to our principles, chart a course based on the firmest evidence, and ally ourselves with those of common vision.

If Secular Humanistic Judaism is to survive, it must lay the institutional groundwork for that survival. Having a message is not enough; as Humanistic Jews, we need to throw our resources behind education and promotion. We must commit ourselves to a mission that reaches far beyond the present generation. In doing so, we should be inspired by the fact that we are championing the values that make a civilized existence possible.

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* *The Churching of America 1776-1990*, by the sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark.