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Future of the Denominations: Analysis and Possibilities

Amy L. Sales

For years, the Jewish community has paid far more attention to the renewal of synagogues than it has to the development of the denominations that define and support them. Only recently has the communal lens telescoped to include the denominations in discussions of the future of American Judaism. While initial worries centered on the danger posed by divisiveness among denominations, more recent writing cautions about the dangers of unity. The concern is that unity may portend a post- or transdenominational world in which denominational distinctiveness withers away. In either case, the question remains of whether or not the current denominational structure will hold in the future. Asked to write on this topic, I raised the question with friends and colleagues, both rabbis and laity, casually steering conversation in this direction. Most suggested a short article that might simply say, "As to the future of the denominations, there is none."

Rather than accept a final decree, I want to suggest ways of thinking about the current status of the denominations and possibilities for the future. The analysis focuses on the non-Orthodox world and is based in social science theory and research. Its aim is to broaden internal discussion of the future of the denominations.

Denominational Strength

In order to measure the health and strength of the denominations, we need to look at four distinct but related dimensions. As shown in Figure 1, a denomination has both an institutional and an individual guise. The institutional guise is the infrastructure that gives form to the denomination—its seminary, national congregational body, rabbinical association, and affiliated organizations. The individual guise is manifest in the relationship that American Jews have to the denomination. At both the institutional and individual level, denomination can be declared through affiliation and identification. These are independent acts: A congregation may identify as Reform but not be a dues-paying member of the URJ. An individual may belong to a Reform temple but identify with another stream of Judaism. A denomination's strength, therefore, may be seen in the power and relevance of its institutional structures and in the number and commitment of its adherents.

Recent years have seen declines in denominational affiliation. New organizations—emblemized by independent minyanim, community day schools, and nondenominational seminaries—are choosing to remain outside the denominational system and, therefore, are not offsetting losses caused by the disaffiliation of member organizations. Since most synagogues and day schools are not growing at a significant rate, fewer affiliated institutions ipso facto means fewer denominationally affiliated individuals.

The common theme in individual identification is denomination switching. Our recent national study of Jewish adults, age eighteen to sixty plus, shows that a majority of those raised Conservative or Reconstructionist now identify as another denomination or no denomination at all. The same holds true for one out of four adults raised in the Reform Movement. As opposed to those raised Conservative, those who grew up Reform left the denomination at a relatively early point in their lives.

The denominations are challenged to retain their children as they grow up and to make the particular denomination an important enough aspect of their identity that it holds across the lifespan. The data make clear that the challenge comes less from other denominations and more from secularism or nondenominationalism (i.e., "just Jewish"). American Jews, like their Protestant counterparts,

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Figure 1. Four Dimensions of Denomination

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increasingly identify with no particular brand of the religion. Also note that those raised “just Jewish” show almost no out-migration, thereby contributing to the growth of this segment of the American Jewish population.

Writers on Protestantism in the United States are keenly aware of the large gap between liberal and conservative Christians and of declining interest in religion, and growing secularism and individualism on the liberal end of the spectrum. They cite important and dynamic religious developments happening outside of denominational boundaries (e.g., evangelicalism and nondenominational megachurches) and note the rising number of Christian Americans who describe themselves as belonging to no denomination or simply “Catholic” or “Protestant.” These findings have clear analogies in the Jewish community. The reasonable conclusion is that the current situation says more about American culture than it does about Judaism.

The emerging consensus among scholars of American religion is that the liberal-conservative divide or the tensions among “theological camps” will preclude the demise of the denominations. I do not know if the Christians are better at seeing the future than the Jews are, but the most likely scenario is that the distinction between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Judaism will remain clear and strong. Almost twenty years ago, Wertheimer predicted a situation in the United States similar to that in Israel, with a polarization between the religious and the secular. The trend would be many Jews moving toward “religious minimalism” and a minority (baal t’shuva, converts, rabbinic and lay leadership, religious seekers) moving toward higher religiosity. At the very least, the stark differences between halachic and nonhalachic, secular and religious, and perhaps between observant and nonobservant Jew will be with us well into the future.

Trends in institutional identification are more difficult to ascertain and research in this area would be beneficial. I would suspect that, by and large, unaffiliated congregations are not trying to create a new brand of Judaism and that many of them are in basic agreement with the philosophy and praxis of an existing denomination. When we look at the independent minyanim, we see leadership that, for the most part, grew up in a movement and continues to manifest the impact of that upbringing. How do the unaffiliated congregations, seminaries, and schools align with a particular denomination in terms of values and practice (implicit identification)? And how do participants in these organizations explain what kind of place this is (explicit identification)? Because people do not like to be identified as what they are not (i.e., not affiliated), these places have undoubtedly created language to express what they are. The answers to these questions would help parse out trends in affiliation from trends in identification.

**Denomination and the American Jew**

The future strength of the denominations resides in part on the number and commitment of their adherents. In order to assess future potential, we therefore need to understand what it means to consider oneself part of a denomination.

**Analysis**

When you call yourself a Reform, Reconstructionist, or Conservative Jew, you are evoking a social identity, a sense of self that derives from being a member of a group. We all have multiple groups. For starters, I am woman, psychologist, baby boomer, Red Sox fan, and Jew. Any one of these identities can be salient at any moment in time, can slip into the background, or can join with any other identity. Fundamental to a group identity is self-categorization; that is, considering yourself a member of the group. Beyond that, the identity is multidimensional, encompassing attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs.

- **Attitudes** include your evaluation of the group (how positively or negatively you and the public view it), how central it is to your sense of self, how attached you feel to the group, and the degree to which you see the fate of the group as overlapping with your own fate. When the Red Sox win, I am somehow elevated as if I personally had won. Similarly, when the URJ is cited in the news for a noble position or deed, highly identified members of the movement should feel a sense of personal pride.
- **Behaviors** mark the degree to which a group identity is implicated in everyday life and relationships (friendships, affiliation, ritual behaviors, etc.). For example, in a study of more than one thousand affiliated Jews in Westchester, New York, almost three-fourths said that their synagogue's
denomination was "very important" in their membership decision, second only to their comfort level there. The choice they make is a behavior linked not only to their identity as Jews but, as we learned, to their identification with a particular denomination.

- Beliefs concern the content and meaning of the group identity—knowledge about the experience and history of the group and personal ideas and feelings about these. As religious as the United States is, Americans generally have low levels of knowledge about their own and other religions. As noted elsewhere, Jewish young adults are unsophisticated in their articulation of belief and in their understanding of denomination, commonly basing distinctions on style not substance. Beyond that, we know precious little about what a denominational label means to the American Jew and how well his or her own understanding matches the movement's mission and ideology.

Postmodern identity construction complicates this relatively simplistic formulation. Increasingly, young adults are drawing their religious views not only from their religion's organizations but also from science, philosophy, the arts, and other religions. Their religion is an improvised construction, a "cultural bricolage," with bits and pieces from childhood memories, classes, conversations, magazines, television programs, and Web sites. Jewish identity is thus highly individualistic, complex, fluctuating, and unpredictable. As each person serves as his or her own religious authority, we would expect the gap between the views of the individual and the teachings of the denomination to widen.

Curiously, despite the incoherence of belief and the personalism of postmodern identity, denominational identification does seem to make a difference. Regardless of what Jews think a denomination represents or how important it is to them, the category they check on surveys perfectly predicts their Jewish attitudes and behaviors. Ratings on diverse measures related to Jewish life and values are highest for the Orthodox, somewhat lower for the Conservative, lower still for the Reconstructionist, and lowest for those identifying as Reform. We find this pattern among teenagers, young adults, and adults, suggesting that it is set early in life.

Possibilities

Humans have a fundamental, automatic tendency to sort individuals into categories on the basis of their similarity to or distinctiveness from others. These distinctions are not just a cognitive necessity but may also have an emotional significance, contributing to our self-esteem and our sense of belonging. In other words, classifying Jews by variety of Judaism is inevitable.

The question is whether or not this classification will include denomination and what the movements might do to increase the possibility that it will. American Jews have myriad ways of answering the question. What kind of Jew am I—observant, feminist, progressive, gay/lesbian, environmentalist, Chinese-food-on-Christmas Jew, and so on. Respondents to our surveys who identify denominationally occasionally feel compelled to create categories beyond our checkboxes. A recent survey produced, among others, "Conservadox," "Reformadox," "extremely Reform," "very modern Orthodox," "nonpracticing Conservative." These respondents perhaps feel that they are marginal group members or that the fixed denominational categories do not capture their uniqueness. Nonetheless, their responses are indicative of both the persistence and the limitations of denomination as a social category.

In order to build the adherence of individual Jews, the denominations must not only cultivate declarations of identification ("I am a Reform Jew") but also inculcate the attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs that give form and substance to the group identity. Strength depends both on numbers and commitment, affiliation and identification. The analysis suggests that the greatest need is in the arena of beliefs—imparting the denomination's master story and helping individuals connect their personal narrative to the group's story. If this is not done, denominational identity will lose its importance to the American Jew. If done and done well, members will say "we" and not "they" when they speak of the denomination.

Denomination as Institution

The future strength of the denominations also depends on the capacity of the institution to add value to religious practice. Indeed, some might argue that as high levels of individualism pull increasing numbers of American Jews into the category of "just Jewish," it
is the institutional support function that will maintain the denomi-
nations in the future.

Analysis

From an organizational perspective, denominations are umbrella
organizations for congregations that share a particular set of be-
liefs and practices. This is not an easy role to fill. Across the Jewish
landscape, umbrella organizations struggle to show their value
added. One model of organizing, as seen at the URJ, replicates loc-
al committee structures at the national level. The education com-
mittee of the local synagogue, for example, links to the national
education department. The idea is that each level does what it is
best positioned to do. The local synagogue connects with its mem-
bers, adapts national materials to their needs and interests, and
shepherds them through their Jewish lives. The national organiza-
tion cannot work with individuals in this way. Rather, it can do
benchmarking and best practices, activities that require aggregat-
ing information across congregations. It can develop prayer books,
textbooks, curricula, and technology, products that are beyond the
means of any one congregation. It can create a common language
and inspire the field with the movement’s vision and purpose.
Note that the national functions provide service to local congrega-
tions and their members and help bring them in line with denom-
national teachings. To be successful, the denominations will have
to perform all such functions excellently.

The denominations will have to demonstrate their value added
so that congregations perceive that the benefits they derive from
affiliation well exceed the costs of membership. When the local or-
ganizations find that they can survive and thrive without the na-
tional, the system starts to fray. For example, the national congrega-
tional bodies have been unable to lead their local synagogues in
fundraising because they themselves are poor models. One could,
however, imagine a system in which the national body and the lo-
cal synagogues worked in tandem to raise funds, inspiring mem-
bers with both the message of the movement and the potential of
the local congregation. The same case can be made for education,
marketing, programming, planning, and other functional areas.

One way the denominations have dealt with the value-added
problem is to create “closed shops,” in which congregations are
expected to hire clergy from within the system. The denominations’
seminaries and rabbinical associations train clergy in the paradigm
of the movement and place them in member synagogues. The rab-
bis thus become key connectors between the local synagogue, the
seminary, and the movement. Think of them as the glue holding
the denominational system together. If we look at the labor move-
ment in the United States, we see that closed or union shops have
not precluded declines in union membership or in the percentage
of businesses abiding by union agreements; but they have guar-
anteed the labor movement’s continuing power in industry and
politics. If the analogy holds, the rabbinical arms of the movements
may not maintain a monopoly in the future, but they can continue
to be a powerful voice in American Judaism and to play a key role
in securing the future of their denominations.

As important as the synagogue-clergy-denomination connection
is, we should remember that the denominations are not just
linkages among congregations but also include schools, summer
camps, campus organizations, Israel programs, and more. The
denominations’ value added is not just the support they provide
to the local synagogues, but the web of institutions they spawn
that give full expression to the denomination. It is from these in-
stitutions that the future leadership of the denominations is likely
to emerge and it is these institutions that are capturing the affec-
tion of the laity in general and donors in particular. Enhancing the
web and all of its nexuses can only help the future strength of the
denominations.

Possibilities

Two forces work in favor of the American Jewish denominations:
the impulse to build umbrella organizations and the need for dis-
distinctiveness and diversity in religion.

Most of the umbrella organizations in the Jewish community
grew out of coalitions of local organizations. The impulse to build
superstructures in the Jewish community remains high, as evi-
denced by the flurry of activity among the independent minyanim
to create national conferences and perhaps a national organization.
As well, the practice of networking is greater today than ever, fu-
eling the expectation that people and organizations will be con-
ected widely beyond their local borders. The opposite pattern in
which a national organization seeds local entities is far less common in the Jewish world. Chabad is a notable exception, sending emissaries from the national office to open Chabad Houses and build congregations from the ground up. As the denominations consider possibilities for the future, they should feel secure in the knowledge that the Jewish tendency is to organize under national umbrellas. At the same time, they might also be stimulated by the Chabad example to seek new ideas for how to grow themselves in the future.

Denomination building is not just growing affiliation numbers but also creating a critical mass of congregations and adherents dedicated to tackling Judaism from a particular perspective. Judaism, vast and complex, requires multiple approaches to understanding; and a healthy conversation about the religion requires strong denominations with clear perspectives, ideologies, and theologies. From a modernist viewpoint, diversity can be dangerous as it can undermine authority. From a postmodernist viewpoint, diversity and choice are the fuel of creative struggle and growth.

Like the Jews, American Protestants are facing the issue of denominational distinctiveness. The common view is that Protestants are rejecting denominations because the distinctions among them are based in issues of little importance to the laity, whether doctrinal disputes, ritual forms, or church organization. The analysis here suggests that we do not know enough about what is important to American Jews to join the argument on denominationalism in American religion. The best way to find out is for those on the denominational frontlines to engage in ongoing, serious, probing conversations with laity about their Jewish feelings and beliefs. The fact that one thousand people showed up at the Jewish-sponsored Great God Debate in Boston this year suggests that such conversations are long overdue.

The academy may provide an object lesson on why it is critical for the Jewish denominations to establish and promote their distinctive perspectives. Universities were built on the disciplinary model with graduate students steeped in the theories, methods, history, and ethics of a single discipline. They graduated fully identified with their discipline, referring to themselves as economists, political scientists, or psychologists. The recent creation of interdisciplinary studies offers a new approach to knowledge building but also potentially undermines the search for knowledge. A program in environmental studies advertises that it combines the insights, methods, and theories of geography, anthropology, sociology, and economics (without adding to students' course loads). Critics note that students in this program can gain only a superficial understanding of these disciplines and will graduate not knowing any one set of theories or methods at a profound level. In the second generation, when the faculty themselves are the products of an interdisciplinary approach, the problem will be even more acute. Interdisciplinary studies work best when each participant is well grounded and expert in his or her discipline. In other words, it is a collective project not an individual one.

Drawing an analogy between academic disciplines and religious denominations does not prove anything about the future, but it can serve as a tool of creative thinking. There is much talk of post- and transdenominationalism and some evidence of their appeal. If the denominations are like disciplines, however, we should be wary of approaches that will yield the kind of superficiality described above. Ironically, interdenominationalism works best when there are strong and well-defined denominations with expert representatives at the table.

The Future Is Not So Simple

The above array of analyses and possibilities argues against my friends who suggested a one-sentence article on the inevitable demise of the denominations. There are, to be sure, many threats to the denominations. At the institutional level there is the disaffiliation of congregations and the emergence of nondenominational organizations. At the individual level there is rampant denomination switching leading to major growth in secular Judaism, low levels of religious understanding, and postmodern constructions of personal religions, to name just a few. As well, the denominations are challenged to prove their value added, to raise their services to a level of high quality, and to articulate a distinctiveness based on differences that matter to people. Most critically, they are challenged to convince American Jewry of the denominations' importance to the future of American Judaism.

Despite these threats, there is no question about the survival of the American Jewish denominations. Although they may diminish.
morph, and be challenged by new forms, they are not likely to disappear. Jews and Judaism are too diverse for there to be a single religious perspective, and the need for religious structures is too great for the current system to be dismantled. There is, however, the critical question of the future power and strength of the denominations. The answer will depend on the denominations’ response to current circumstances.

As suggested above, they have much to learn: They need to research the link between affiliation and identification, the strength and meaning of denominational identification, and American Jews’ knowledge and beliefs. They also need to grasp opportunity. At the individual level, they might consider how to increase their value added; build a stronger, more coherent web of institutions; enhance the number and commitment of synagogues and congregants; and develop a message so strong that it assures a vibrant communal conversation about Judaism.

For various reasons, many in the Jewish community eschew use of the term “denomination,” preferring instead “movements,” “streams,” or “varieties” of Judaism. The choice of alternative language signals an important message about the future place of the denominations. “Varieties” or “streams” puts the denominations on a par with the nonreligious forms of Judaism, a helpful choice if the argument is to be between secular and religious approaches to Jewish life. “Movement” connotes a social movement, with its fundamental opposition to the status quo and its dynamic approach to social change. Embracing this language could bring new excitement to the denominations but only if they strive to live up to its promise.

Judaism has always had internal divisions and was probably never a monolithic religion. The challenge has long been one of balancing differentiation of perspectives and integration of the people. Current efforts to define, measure, and promote Jewish peoplehood represent the forces of integration. But the Jewish task is not simply to figure out what holds us together as a people but also to develop the distinctions that make for a vibrant religion. The denominations are the modern players in this challenge. The outcome will depend on their success in building the strength needed to play their part well.

FUTURE OF THE DENOMINATIONS

Notes


3. For full description of the research and its methods, see Charles Kadushin et al., Still Connected: American Jewish Attitudes about Israel (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2010).


7. Wertheimer, A People Divided.


