Tribalism ultimately lies at the heart of the conflict between Judaism and modernity. Judaism and modernity must forever remain incompatible. If Judaism is to survive, we must remain tribal.

In recent years, however, religious differences no longer remain a socially acceptable barrier to marriage. Most American churches, including the Catholic church, now consecrate interfaith marriages with few if any preconditions. According to pollster George Gallup, about 80 percent of Americans approve of interfaith marriages. Except in Jewish circles, such marriages are viewed sympathetically as an indication that old religious and ethnic antipathies are dying out. Jews are practically alone in being troubled by this development: We are now the only major American religious group that actively fights to prevent interfaith marriages. In so doing—and this is a policy that as a committed Jew I support—we necessarily set ourselves apart from the mainstream of American culture. The bulk of Americans, liberals and evangelicals alike, sanction interfaith marriages, while Jews committed to Jewish continuity oppose them.

Our support of Israel as a Jewish state represents the same kind of dissent. Mainstream American culture is extremely uncomfortable with the idea of a state that privileges a particular faith and people. Don’t most of us, after all, recoil from the idea of a Christian state? The Law of Return—guaranteeing Israeli citizenship to all Jews—seems, in terms of the values of contemporary culture, particularly odious. Shouldn’t people of all faiths be treated alike?

We have become experts at answering these objections, so much so that we forget that Israel, by its very nature, history and reason for existence is out of step with some of the central values that we associate with contemporary culture. Israel was created, in part, as a response to our discontent with modernity’s impact on Jews. In supporting the idea of a particularistic Jewish state, we do dissent from the pluralistic and universalistic values of contemporary culture. As in the case of interfaith marriage, however, we have not yet come to terms with the implications of this dissent with respect to our relationship to modernity as a whole.

The link between these two dissents is tribalism, the special ties that relate Jews one to another and separate Jews from everybody else. The Hebrew term is klad Yisrael, what Solomon Schechter called “Catholic Israel.” Tribalism is largely alien to the values of contemporary culture, for tribalism, to borrow Werner Sollors’s terminology, operates on the traditional principle of descent rather than on the modern principle of consent. To be sure, modern Judaism has been influenced by consent—witness the rising numbers of Jews by Choice. Yet descent—real tribalism—remains paramount: That is why we view interfaith marriage as wrong (one spouse is not a member of the tribe) and the Law of Return as right (Ethiopian and Russian Jews are members of the tribe).

If this analysis is correct, then ultimately tribalism lies at the heart of the conflict between Judaism and modernity and, notwithstanding earlier predictions, Judaism and modernity must forever be incompatible. For without tribalism there is no Judaism, there is no Israel, there is no Jewish future. If Judaism as we know it is to continue, we must be tribal and we must be willing to transvalue tribalism into a positive direction, at least for us. If that means deviating from some of modernity’s core values then, in my opinion, deviate we must.

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