



*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.*

Is Judaism compatible with modernity? Many American Jews are beginning to question the easy assumption that it is. Not only are they growing critical of what modernity has wrought, but they no longer believe that embracing modernity guarantees Judaism's survival. These Jews smile at the naive optimism of an earlier generation that considered itself wholly at home in America; Jews in our day are more likely to consider themselves strangers at home—at once part of America and apart from it. Where the watchword a generation ago was synthesis, we prefer to speak of "tensions," such as the tension between assimilation and identity and the tension between being an American and being a Jew.

This critique of modernity is not limited to Jews. In questioning the benefits of modernity, American Jews are actually well within today's cultural mainstream—a mainstream that has increasingly veered away from liberalism and toward what it perceives to be "traditional values." Churches, synagogues and seminaries around the country are critically reassessing modernity in different ways. Paradoxically, in reassessing modernity we Jews are being very modern indeed.

But at least two critical issues distinguish Jews from the mainstream and put us in conflict with contemporary culture. The two issues, unsurprisingly, are central concerns of American Jews: interfaith marriage and Israel.

American Jews used to be at one with contemporary culture on the question of interfaith marriages. Most Americans believed that Protestants should marry Protestants, Catholics should marry Catholics and Jews should marry Jews—the famous triple melting pot of religion, which most denominations buttressed by refusing to sanction marriages that crossed religious lines.

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 particularistically Jewish state, we do dissent from the pluralistic and universalistic values of con-

temporary 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 *klal 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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