

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

What Do American Jews Believe?

A Survey of Recent Articles

Whatever else American Jews may believe in, it is doubtful the majority of them believe in Judaism.” So the editors of *Commentary* (Aug. 1996) assert at the outset of an extensive (nearly 80-page) symposium on the state of belief among American Jews. Forty-seven Jewish thinkers and rabbis from various points on the denominational spectrum take part.

Two of Judaism’s fundamental convictions—that the Jewish people were chosen by God at Sinai to serve as a model for the rest of humanity, and that they were to follow His commandments (*mitzvot*) in the scripture of the Torah—are expressed in a benediction recited every day in virtually every synagogue: “Blessed are You, God, King of the universe, Who has chosen us from all peoples, and has given us His Torah.” Yet despite this popular usage, laments Jack Wertheimer, a professor of Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (Conservative), fewer and fewer American Jews seem to be making the blessing’s message their own.

The weakening of religious faith among the nearly six million American Jews is reflected in the declining membership in synagogues and the rising rate of intermarriage with Gentiles. The magnetic pull of American secular culture is a powerful assimilative force. “There is a sharp dissonance between traditional Jewish perspectives and the prevailing cultural outlook within American society,” Wertheimer observes. “As a result, some of the most basic categories of Jewish thought are eroding.”

But what is Judaism? The estimated 4.8 million Jews who belong to the synagogues or temples of the four main branches of Judaism—Conservative (2 million), Reform (1.3 million), Orthodox (1 million), and Reconstructionist—hold a variety of views about the most basic elements of the faith.

Are Jews the chosen people of God? Yes, says David Novak, a professor of modern Judaic studies at the University of Virginia. However, David M. Gordis, president of Hebrew College in Boston, largely rejects the notion. “Every community and culture is unique and the concept of chosenness is more mischievous than useful,” he says.

Are all the commandments of the Torah binding? “The challenge of observing the commandments without picking and choosing is precisely what makes them commandments,” argues David Berger, a historian at Brooklyn College and an Orthodox Jew. David G. Dalin, a Conservative rabbi and a professor of American Jewish history at the University of Hartford, thinks otherwise: “Divine revelation since Sinai, I believe, continues (in part) in the form of new interpretations of the Torah, and reevaluations of the *mitzvot* contained therein by the rabbis of each generation. Not all of the commandments have been binding for all people, in all lands, at all periods of Jewish history.”

This is the main division in Judaism today, asserts Marshall J. Breger, a visiting professor of law at Catholic University of America: the split between those—Orthodox and some Conservative Jews—who accept Jewish law (*halakhah*) as binding, and those—Reform and most Conservative Jews—who instead regard the law “as some kind of historical archive for spiritual inspiration.” In the latter camp are “the great majority of American Jews,” according to Eric H. Yoffie, a Reform rabbi and president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. For them, he says, “there is no leader or institution with the authority to impose commandments; the autonomous individual decides for himself or herself.”

Susannah Heschel, a professor of Jewish studies at Case Western Reserve University and the daughter of the eminent Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–72), is an example. As a feminist, she doubts that commandments “unfair to women” were the work of God. “I feel I am a Jew without a home,” she confesses. The “rigidity” of modern Orthodoxy does not appeal to her, yet Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform Judaism, despite their “many wonderful, thoughtful decisions equalizing the status of women and men,” seem, she says, to lack “the intense prayer and devotion that fill the little hassidic *shtiebl*, or prayer house.”

American individualism is not the only serious challenge to traditional Jewish life, notes

Political Shepherds

A recent argument that liberals should wake up to the political power of religion and use it—made by Amy Waldman, an editor at the *Washington Monthly*, [see *WQ*, Spring '96, pp. 120–121]—leaves Alan Pell Crawford, writing in *Chronicles* (Aug. 1996), cold. He is the author of *Thunder on the Right* (1980).

Every few years secular intellectuals “rediscover” religion, almost always concluding that it must be a good thing because it seems to make better citizens of the faithful—better liberal Democrats, in this case. The neoliberals at the Monthly seem to believe that the imitation of Christ is important because it will make us all more like Bobby Kennedy.

Susan Sontag—no right-winger she—once derided the attitude of such philosophes as “religious fellow-traveling.” What intellectuals always want, Sontag wrote in the early '60s, is the personal, political, and societal advantages of religious faith without actually having to believe in anything. They are for “religion” in a general sense, which, Sontag noted, is of course meaningless. You cannot practice “religion” in general any more than you can speak “language” in general; you speak English, French, or Farsi; you practice Catholicism, Buddhism, or Santeria. You’re either a snake handler or you ain’t.

Jon D. Levenson, a professor of Jewish studies at Harvard University. The “melting pot” also beckons. Today, nearly three out of 10 married Jews-by-birth are wed to Gentiles. “The illiberal truth that intermarriage is Jewish suicide has not been well-received among that most liberal of groups, American Jews,” Levenson writes.

For centuries, rabbinical law and tradition held that only children born of a Jewish mother were Jews. In 1983, however, the Reform movement expanded the definition to include children born of a Jewish father. This “threatens the religious unity of the American Jewish community as never before,” asserts Conservative rabbi David Dalin.

Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University (Orthodox), in New York, agrees. Genuine religious unity is inconceivable to him when the Reform wing “has embraced patrilinealism, ordained gays and lesbians as Reform rabbis, and otherwise given enthusiastic ecclesiastical approval to almost every

avant-garde liberal movement in the general society. Extremes beget extremes, and significant segments of Orthodoxy are moving in the opposite direction, demanding conformity, and associating almost automatically with the more (or even most) right-wing political movements both in America and Israel.”

Yet despite all the serious problems besetting American Jews as a community, many of the pessimistic symposium participants remain hopeful. “Demographic data suggest a grim future for Judaism in America,” concludes Jon Levenson, “but there is more in heaven and earth than is comprehended in demographic surveys. I sense a deepening concern about the erosion of the moral foundations of society and mounting doubt that secularism can repair or sustain them. Among Jews, probably the most secular group in America, this rethinking has barely begun. Its fruits remain to be seen.”

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

Justice in the Laboratory

“An Injustice to a Scientist Is Reversed and We Learn Some Lessons” by Daniel J. Kevles, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 5, 1996), 1255 23rd St. N.W., Washington D.C. 20037.

For a decade, Nobel laureate David Baltimore and immunologist Thereza Imanishi-Kari endured an ordeal worthy of Kafka. It started with “whistle-blowing” by a postdoc-

toral assistant. Imanishi-Kari was accused of faking data for a paper co-authored by Baltimore. He strongly defended her and was forced to quit the presidency of Rockefeller