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From Pew Will Come Forth Torah

by Arthur Green

Judaism is in trouble in America. Almost a third of young Jewish adults consider themselves to be people of no religion. Yes, they still identify as Jews, even expressing some pride in that heritage. But they call themselves non-believers or secularists, Jews by descent or identification, but not by faith.

The numbers are a slap in the face to a Jewish community that is largely organized around religious institutions. The secular alternatives that once offered strong competition to religion seemed to die off rather quickly in the early post-war decades. Yiddishism almost disappeared as the old immigrant generation passed on and it became clear that the vast Yiddish-speaking population of Eastern Europe had been murdered. Jewish Socialism lost popularity due to the Cold War and the “us versus them” view of capitalism and communism that seemed to be demanded by loyalty to America. When the left re-emerged after the late sixties, it was appropriately universalistic in character, leaving no room for secular Jewish separatism. Zionism as an ideology demanded *aliyah* of those who took it most seriously, contributing a significant trickle of American Jews to the Israeli intelligentsia, but leaving our own community without their intense dedication. I for one would love to see a strong culture-based secular Jewish life re-emerge in this country, but I believe it’s an uphill struggle. American society is so defined by its struggle with race that ethnic identities not visible on the skin have little place in this society. We are not seen as “ethnics” by the emerging consensus here. We are accepted (the good news and the bad news) as white; that means we are to check “Other (Caucasian)” on that census form question about ethnicity.

So we are left with religion. But what does that mean for most American Jews, those living outside the ultra-Orthodox ghetto? A few Jewish religious practices remain widely popular. We enjoy a family seder on Passover, lighting Hanukkah candles, apples and honey for the New Year, and maybe even fasting on Yom Kippur. But where is the faith that holds these – and so much more – together? Jewish belief in God, already deeply challenged by modernity and our embrace of Western education, was shattered by the Holocaust, a memory still at the top of Pew’s list of Jewish identity markers. If being a Jew means remembering the terrible events of the Holocaust years, it at the same

moment challenges our faith in a God who rules history with a special concern for His beloved people. The Biblical Job's classic question of faith in the face of unjust suffering is magnified six million-fold for the Jew living after 1945. Jews love to ask questions; we take pride in not being passive followers of our religion. But where are we left? Can a religion survive at the knife-point of unanswered questions?

The Holocaust challenge is joined by the results of two other great battles that traditional religion fought and lost across the twentieth century. One was the struggle against "Darwin," or the entire scientific narrative of earth's origins and the evolution of humanity. The other was the ongoing debate over Biblical authorship and the triumph of a critical perspective showing that religion itself, including its most sacred texts, was a product of an evolving history. Is it any wonder that a third of young Jews see themselves as "without religion?" Perhaps our eyes of wonder should be turned in the other direction. "What a marvel that two-thirds of Jewry still see themselves as religious, as maintaining their faith in the face of all that! How rich and profound that faith must be!" Would that this were true. But I fear that for many of those still on the "Jewish by religion" side of the divide in Pew's questionnaire, the definer is loyalty or nostalgia rather than deep faith. Their children as well, I fear, will soon fall into the other camp.

Some eighty years ago Mordecai Kaplan took up the challenge of articulating a Judaism for the newly educated children of immigrants who had lost their traditional faith. His Reconstructionism, while only marginally successful as a distinct religious movement, is widely thought to be the faith position of a great many American Jews. Kaplan built his Jewish theology on the foundations of American pragmatism, where such concepts as the chosen people and God's rule of history had no place. "God" came to represent the highest values and aspirations of the Jewish people and our tradition. In the post-Holocaust years, however, Kaplan's optimistic rationalism seemed rather pale. The times called forth a different level of inner quest, leading Jewish seekers by the thousands away from Judaism altogether and toward a meditation-based spirituality that was not about facing and answering challenges, but about achieving inner tranquility and a sense of personal balance. Here it was Eastern, mainly Buddhist, teachings that spoke most powerfully, and religions of Western origin were seen to be either shallow or irrelevant to the inward quest.

A Judaism that will speak to the emerging twenty-first century generations is only beginning to emerge. In contrast to Kaplan's era, its point of departure will be the Jewish mystical rather than the rationalist tradition. A radical spiritualization of Judaism's truth, begun within Hasidism some two hundred years ago, needs to be updated and universalized to appeal to today's Jewish seeker. It offers the possibility of a religious language that will address contemporary concerns while calling for a deep faith-based attachment to the essential forms and tropes of Jewish piety. Mystical religion by its very nature shifts the focus of attention away from the positive/historical and inward toward the devotional/experiential. The question is not: "Do you believe that God created the world, and when?" but rather "Do you encounter a divine presence in the natural world around you?" and "What does that encounter call upon you to do?"

We are not concerned with “Did Israel hear God’s word at Sinai, and how much of the Torah was given there?” but rather “Can you feel yourself standing before the mountain as you hear the words of Torah?” The “events” of Israel’s sacred narrative are read here as myth rather than history, but their voice is made more powerful rather than less as they call forth deep personal engagement and commitment. The God of this religion is not the commanding Other who rules over history, but rather the still, small voice from within that calls upon us to open our hearts and turn our lives toward goodness, even in the face of terrible human evil and the inexplicable reality of nature’s indifference to our individual human plight. This sort of new mystical or Neo-Hasidic piety turns toward the natural world as a source of inspiration, seeing existence itself as an object of wonder and devotion. It finds the miraculous in daily life and tends to focus its religious energy on the building and celebration of human community.

Such a renewed mystical Jewish faith can come in many forms regarding the degree of traditional observance it calls forth. It may serve as a theology that underlies a full “orthopraxy,” a richly detailed observance of Jewish law, as it surely does for some of its most devoted adherents. It may also call forth and justify new forms of religious expression, as it has in Jewish environmentalist circles, among others. These variations in practice will have much to do with the personal needs and backgrounds of those drawn to it, but there seems to be a strong attraction toward fuller forms of observance, as was the case with original Hasidism. This is a religion that is all about cultivating spiritual intensity, awakening the heart. Such a faith, especially in the context of Judaism, seeks expression in traditional forms. But while doing so, it also remains wide open to creative and original readings of the classical sources, always ready to hear the renewed Torah that emerges from within the contemporary community. It understands that observance is never to be seen as an end in itself, but as a means of arousing the heart and as an expression of that heart’s fullness and desire to give, both within and beyond the Jewish community.

It is also obvious to the more clear-minded followers of this approach that it exists in a post-modern rather than pre-modern context. As we seek to re-engage with the wisdom of spiritual traditions in this age, we need to abandon the zero-sum game that characterized all of our religions in earlier times. “If mine is true, yours must be false.” We need to be sobered and humbled by the realities with which we live: the ongoing hatreds by which humanity is still riven, the nuclear age in which we live, and, above all, the threat of collective human self-destruction by disregard for the precious soil, water, and air that sustain our planet as a fit habitation for our species and others. We all need to learn from one another, appreciate both the wisdom and piety to be found throughout the human community, and be willing to work together for the good of all humanity. We understand that the diversity of human religious forms is itself a blessing, that each sacred tradition has much to learn and to teach in our encounter with one another.

Will such an approach to Judaism bring back all of those young Jews who checked the “none” box when it came to religion? Of course not. Many, perhaps most, will remain hopelessly indifferent. Perhaps renewed secular forms of Jewish identity will once again find their place. But this is America, a nation of seekers, where the longing to believe has

deep roots and many branches. There are Jews – and more than a few – who have looked elsewhere for spiritual satisfaction but might well find themselves drawn to the sort of Judaism described here. And in this age of free choice of identities, there will be many non-Jewish seekers attracted by such an open-minded yet powerfully spiritual Judaism. They should be seen as a most welcome addition to the body of the Jewish people as it is re-shaped at this entrance point to an uncertain but exciting new era in our people's history.

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