

American Jewish Secularism: Jewish Life Beyond the Synagogue

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Abstract

This chapter goes beyond asking whether a Jewish identity can exist independently of religion in the contemporary United States. American Jews have already answered that question in the affirmative. The chapter documents and illustrates the richness of today's secular Jewish culture and expressions of Jewishness beyond religion by exploring how a multitude of trends—intellectual, social, demographic and political—are broadening and transforming Jewish identity and identification in twenty-first century America. Pluralistic market forces and the new information technology provide increasing opportunities for expressions of Jewish secularism and the formation of new forms of community.

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Secularism and the Jews

Secularism and the Jews

The secular patriot and Zionist leader Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky (1880–1940) declared “there are two gates to my heart—the first is for my people and the second is for culture, literature and writing.” These two sentiments were reflected in the emotional outbursts of the Jewish masses at the two largest public gatherings recorded in American Jewish history. The public demonstrations occurred 70 years apart and had little to do with religion or rabbis but instead centered on culture and ethnic ties. The first occurred in 1916 and was the funeral procession of the great Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem through the streets of the Jewish immigrant ghetto of New York City. This was reported by the New York Police Department of the time to be the largest public event it had ever policed.¹ The second event was the solidarity rally by 250,000 Jews from dozens of states on the National Mall in Washington, DC, on a cold December day in 1987, coinciding with the Reagan-Gorbachev summit. It was organized by secular national Jewish community organizations—the National Conference for Soviet Jewry and the Council of Jewish Federations—in support of freedom of emigration and *glasnost* for Soviet Jews.

Clearly, there is more to the Jewish experience in America than religion. For many, Zionism, literature, music, food, and even humor are essential aspects of what it means to be a Jew. This adds layers of complexity. Jewish secularism is as diverse and fractious as American Judaism. American Jews are heirs to three traditions: the pre-modern religion-nation; the Western modernizers who defined themselves as a group with a distinct religion and who adopted the nationality of their host country; and the East European modernizers like Jabotinsky who defined themselves as a secular nationality on the basis of Yiddish or Hebrew culture. Though largely of Eastern European stock, American Jews live in a society similar to Western Europe, a society of unitary nationality but with multiple religious groups. This means contemporary Jewish identification is problematic because self-definition must take into account this historic memory of varying criteria as to what constitutes membership in the Jewish collectivity (Kosmin et al. 1988).

The idea that the Jews are a “people” and not just a faith is ancient. It also means that Jewish identity and identification are very different from that of other religious traditions with which Jews are often compared. For example, the largest gatherings in US history of Catholics, America’s biggest religious tradition, have been open-air religious events, the Masses conducted by visiting Popes of Rome. Jews are different from Catholics and other Christians not just theologically but sociologically. As we shall show, even in the second decade of the twenty-first century, one can find populations of Jews and a distinct American Jewish sub-culture, Jewish social networks, Jewish institutions, and patterns of Jewish behavior that have no connection with religious Judaism *per se*. This essay will demonstrate, through the presentation of both quantitative and qualitative data, the complexity and the richness of contemporary American Jewish secularism and will refute the claims of its critics that it is merely a historical vestige of an immigrant past, as recorded in Irving Howe’s *World of Our Fathers*, a mere step on the supposed path to assimilation and acculturation and so “empty” and “inauthentic.”

The hostility to Jewish secularism in Jewish leadership circles today can in part be traced to the popularity of Will Herberg’s influential 1955 book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*. This is widely regarded as a classic expression of American pluralism, but there was also a deeply anti-

secularist strain in his work. It advanced Herberg's long-running campaign to define Jewish identity in narrowly religious terms. Ironically, the ex-Communist Herberg saw religion's displacing ethnicity as the basis of Jewish identification in the post-war cultural climate. The success of Herberg's project to establish a new paradigm led Jews to be considered one of America's three (now perhaps four) great faith groups. Yet recent studies of religiosity show that Jews are more secular in their observance than Protestants or Catholics (Kosmin and Lachman 1993; Kosmin 2007).

Separation of church and state has been interpreted as prohibiting the government from collecting data on the religion of the population. Nothing in the Constitution prohibits Jews from identifying themselves as an ethnic group or an ancestry, as Hispanics do. However, a legacy of Herberg's influence is the failure of the official cognitive system, the US Census, with the support of Jewish agencies, to allow the recording of Jewish ethnicity or ancestry (Lieberson and Waters 1988). It works to depress national Jewish population counts because of the signal it sends discouraging positive Jewish identification especially among non-religious people of Jewish background. This is especially problematic given the findings of the 1990 and 2001 National Jewish Population Surveys (NJPS). These findings showed a high level of secularization among American Jews, which is reflected in the fact that fewer than half include religion in their definition of what it means to be a Jew, and only a tiny number believe its meaning is solely that of being a religious group (Keysar et al. 1991: 60). The inability to incorporate and do full justice to the concept of "peoplehood" in social surveys and government censuses is not a new phenomenon. It was recorded and recognized by the founders of Jewish social statistics, such as Arthur Ruppin in the bulletins of *Zeitschrift fuer Demographie und Statistik der Juden* (1904–1919 and 1924–1927) and by Jacob Lestchinsky in the Yiddish *Bleter far Yiddishe Demografiye, Statistikun Ekonomik* (1923–1925).

For historical reasons, Jewish secularism contains conflicting ideologies; so its ranks encompass a variety of Jewish nationalists, assimilationists, cultural cosmopolitans and political universalists. As a result, Jewish secularism is more varied than mainstream American secularism, which can be divided along lines of belief and human consciousness between "soft" (pluralist) and "hard" (atheist) forms (Kosmin 2007). Jewish secularism is as diverse and fractious as American Judaism, which is composed of often mutually hostile synagogue groups that do not recognize each other's clergy and will not pray together. Because Judaism is more about practice and ritual than theology, the line between religion and secularism among Jews cannot be drawn only according to views on the existence of God or the validity of Jewish Law. Moreover, teasing out and differentiating the secular from religious and even more the irreligious from the areligious among Jews is a difficult task. Sorting secular behaviors and culture from religious practice is difficult because the boundary between religious practice and "folklore" is permeable and the definition of secular or religious is often only based on the supposed motivation of the individuals involved. This is because many "Jewish" activities and rituals such as a Passover Seder, planting trees on TuB'Shvat or giving charity involve family and collective participation in which the motivations and concerns of the participants may vary widely.

Paradoxically, secular and religious Jews are very similar in their lack of consensus and lack of mutual recognition as to what types of people make up their grouping and what their boundaries consist of. There is no more consensus over who is secular and what constitutes Jewish

secularism than there is as to “who is a Jew?” in terms of a religious category and so “who is a rabbi?” and what is authentic Judaism. For secularism, there is also a definitional problem regarding what exactly is a particularistic or ethnic Jewish secularism and what is a universalistic American secularism. Given the widespread acceptance of Jews in American national life and culture this differentiation becomes more and more difficult to make over time. Probably the best criterion is where an activity is labeled as “Jewish” or a majority of participants are Jewish.

Historically among Jews, language has been one way to distinguish the mundane or the secular from the religious. Yiddish and Ladino were the secular media of communication while Hebrew was and remains the language of prayer and the synagogue. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a robust secular Jewish culture emerged in the Diaspora. Yiddish was destroyed in Europe along with its speakers and it was rapidly abandoned in America in the interests of socio-economic advancement and social integration. Today, most of the cultural and artistic content and activities comprising the “secular Jewish narrative” in America occur in English, which is the home language of the overwhelming majority of American Jews. So, as we shall demonstrate, what was “done in Yiddish” in the early twentieth century urban immigrant ghettos is now done in English in the comfortable suburbs and gentrified inner city neighborhoods of America.

The fact that most Jewish secularism occurs in the medium of English is emblematic of the analytical and definitional problems involved in teasing out what is a particularistic Jewish secularism from mainstream American secularism today. As we shall demonstrate below, this differentiation has become ever more difficult to make in recent years as Jews have become more accepted as part and parcel of American society and as American culture has embraced Jewish culture.

Secularization

Max Weber described secularization as the “disenchantment of the world”—a characterization of the process of rationalization he adopted from the German poet Friedrich Schiller.² By this process, Weber sought to capture the psychic and cultural transformation in which magical elements of thought and symbolism are progressively displaced by empiricism and rationality. Harvey Cox (*The Secular City*, 1965) described secularization as “the deliverance of man “first from religious and then from metaphysical control over his reasons and his language ... the dispelling of all closed worldviews, the breaking of all supernatural myths and sacred symbols.” It is now widely recognized that the process of secularization is dialectic: the more that hearts and minds become “disenchanted,” the more institutions that have specialized in the promotion of the “enchantment” process lose plausibility and authority. The more such institutions lose plausibility and authority, the less the psycho-emotional processes of “enchantment” are inculcated in the hearts and minds of individuals.

How far the process of secularization has progressed in different societies since the end of the nineteenth century, whether the process is unidirectional or not, and what its consequences are for social and political organization and human welfare, is the subject of ongoing debate among sociologists and theologians as well as politicians and social planners. Our more limited concern

here is to discern the extent to which this process has taken hold within the contemporary American Jewish population and in what manner it might be expressed.

If we accept a common sociological definition of secularization, the process whereby religion and the clergy (*halakhah* and the rabbinate) lose their primary significance within society and their hegemonic position with regard to claims of truth and authority, then the 90% of American Jews who are not members of an Orthodox congregation are all secularized in some way. For most American Jews this involves general disengagement from synagogues and a subordination of religious values to secular agendas. It has occurred among Jews in a similar way as for other Western peoples as each society has adopted a more rational and utilitarian basis for its decisions. The by now classical theory of secularization argues that secularization is linked with modernization, industrialization, urbanization and rationalization (Norris and Inglehart 2004). This involves the emergence of democratic societies based on liberal values that emphasized individual rights and inter-group tolerance (Bruce 2002;Waltzer 1984).

The thoroughness of Jewish secularization, which has been the key to so many features of modern Jewish existence, may be best understood in relation to the nature of historical Judaism. Rabbinical Judaism, as developed and practiced for 2,000 years of Jewish history, is a religion of practice and ritual. There is little theology in it, and no required credo or dogma. There are only the required practices, making daily life into a continuous ritual, which created the Jewish community and Jewish identity. The absence of dogma and spiritual intermediaries and the emphasis on prescribed and proscribed behaviors, made total and rapid secularization possible but paradoxically it also allowed secularized Jews to remain Jews, by their own definition, by picking and choosing from the “cafeteria” of traditional Judaism that which appealed to them and could be harmonized with their new beliefs and lifestyle. This facilitated the “reform” and “transformation” of themselves and their culture.

Traditional Jewish law (*halakhah*), based on thousands of years of Jewish texts, has established presumptive personal Jewish status on the basis of matrilineal descent or formal conversion according to strict religious standards. However, that body of law and custom is widely ignored by the great majority of America’s Jews in virtually all facets of their lives. The Reform movement, the largest branch of American Judaism, as well as the Reconstructionist and the Secular Humanist movements, formally abandoned the matrilineal standards of Jewish status assignment decades ago and have radically altered as well the criteria for conversion to Judaism. Indeed, one of the key findings of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS 1990) was that a substantial number of individuals declared themselves as “Jewish” or were so described by their spouses or parents even in the absence of a genealogical basis to such a claim or lack of formal rabbinic conversion. Partly as a result of such findings in the 1990 study, the term “Jews by choice” has come to displace “converts” in the contemporary lexicon of Jewish demography.

Another salient finding of national studies of American Jews since 1990 has been a large and growing population of American Jewish adults who are without religious faith. When asked “what is your religion, if any?” they respond “None,” atheist, agnostic, or secular. They adhere to no creed nor choose to identify or affiliate with any religious community. These are the seculars, the “unsynagogued.” While this fact may be lamented widely within the organized Jewish community, it in fact reflects a much broader trend in American religious life. The

recent *American Religious Identification Survey, 2008* (ARIS), found more than 34 million adult “Nones” who profess no religion, up from just a little more than 14 million in 1990 and a mere 3 million in 1957. This trend has particular relevance to the study of America’s Jews, since adults of Jewish parentage who claim no religion constitute nearly 4% of all American adults without religion, while adults claiming Judaism as their religion constitute just 1.2% of all American adults who claim a religion.

Contemporary American religion has been widely perceived as leaning toward the more literal, fundamental, and spiritual. Particularly since the election in 1976 of President Jimmy Carter, a self-avowed Born Again Christian, America has gone through a period of religious re-awakening. The Jews were seen as undergoing a similar trend as American Christianity. Much has been written about the resurgence of Orthodoxy and the rise of the *Baal Teshuvah* movement while the larger phenomenon of disaffiliation from Judaism and synagogues has been under-reported or ignored despite, as we shall demonstrate, the solid demographic evidence provided by the ARIS and AJIS surveys.

Nevertheless what was highlighted, thanks to the 1990 NJPS, directed by Barry Kosmin, was that the most notable change in American Jewish life since the National Jewish Population Study of 1970 was the radical transformation of the American Jewish family through interfaith or interethnic marriage. As a series of studies has shown, the incidence of intermarriage among American Jews had increased several times over, from less than 10% prior to 1960 to 52% by 1990. The intermarriage rate has flat-lined since 1990 but this is only because the age at first marriage has increased significantly over the past decades (Blackwell and Lichter 2004). The concomitant growth of cohabitation is an obvious index of a secularizing trend. Yet paradoxically, communal concern about the impact of intermarriage upon the Jewish future entirely overshadowed secularism as an independent source of change in most studies and commentary on American Jewry and to some extent as the consequence of high rates of intermarriage (Perlmann 2010; Phillips 2010). This essay looks more directly at questions of secular identification and outlook, secular belief and worldview, secular attitudes, and secular behaviors among contemporary American Jews.

Constitutional and Political Secularism

The vast majority of American Jews are secularists when it comes to the US Constitution and the place of religion in the public square. As US citizens and Jews, they are heavily invested politically and emotionally in separation of church and state. They would regard the idea of an officially recognized Jewish establishment and a Chief Rabbi as unthinkable and as dangerous as an American national church. They do not believe their government should advance or endorse religion or become entangled with it. Strict separation of church and state has been long regarded as related directly to the security and welfare of Jews as American citizens and the bedrock of the United States as a pluralist nation. Thus, the organized Jewish community has been identified by both friend and foe as the backbone of American liberalism and the strongest and most articulate defender of the strict constitutional separation of church and state—and thus the chief proponent of upholding secularism in American society. There are many students of American Jewish life who believe that the struggle to expand separation of church and state in America is one of the greatest contributions Jews have rendered to the enlargement of American freedom.

The First Amendment of the US Constitution is at the heart of this policy. It has two clauses: the first prohibits the establishment of religion at the federal level; the second guarantees its free exercise. Historically, establishment has gone with monarchy and Christian or Muslim domination, and separation with republicanism and equality. The European historical experience under popes and tsars has led to an obvious visceral Jewish preference for the ideas of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, who believed the state should be secular and religion a matter of personal preference. Thus Jews in America were guaranteed individual rights rather than corporate privileges.

Nevertheless at the beginning of the republic, Jews largely accepted the reality of a Christian society. Thus they began with a concern for the free exercise clause, and their aim was to assert Judaism on an “equal footing” with the Christian denominations. This meant the overthrow of state establishments that prevented full political equality. By 1840 formal equality had been won in 21 of 26 states. The last to fall was New Hampshire in 1877. Their aim was to prevent the exclusion of Jews by reference to Christianity and to resist efforts to write Christianity into the Constitution. The battle ebbed and flowed as the nation was subject to periodic evangelical revivals. It was a battle in defense of Jewish rights to secure, for example, military chaplains and exemption from or abolition of Sunday trading (“blue”) laws. The last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed strong attempts to make the government and society thoroughly Christian. Rising numbers and greater assertiveness ensured a Jewish reaction, led by Rabbis Isaac Mayer Wise and Jacob Lilienthal of Cincinnati. They raised Jewish vigilance on church-state laws to the level of patriotic duty, where it has largely remained.

The period after World War Two was the heyday of a unified Jewish political secularism, when the overtly secularist American Jewish Congress pioneered the use of law and social action to combat prejudice and discrimination, with the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League often joining. Viewing itself as the lawyer for the American Jewish community, the AJ Congress pioneered Jewish involvement in landmark Supreme Court cases dealing with church-state separation and civil rights. After 1948, an activist Supreme Court helped ensure that Jewish arguments were largely fought out in the courtroom rather than the political arena (*McCollum v. Board of Education*). The great separationist litigator was Leo Pfeffer of the AJ Congress’s Commission on Law and Social Action, who succeeded in driving most religious symbols and practices out of the public space and the public schools (*Engel v. Vitale* 1962).

It was only after 1965, when the Orthodox Jewish lawyers formed the National Commission on Jewish Law and Public Affairs, that the “secularist” consensus among Jewish leaders was shattered by those seeking funding for Jewish day schools from the public purse. The Orthodox lobbied for school vouchers, which were a particular concern of Jewish day school parents. The AJC opposed this initiative in the belief “that the use of public funds to provide vouchers with which students may attend primary and secondary parochial schools is in violation of the First Amendment’s establishment clause and therefore unconstitutional. As such, AJC has opposed voucher programs around the country through grassroots and legislative advocacy and in the courts.” Furthermore, “AJC opposes government funding of social service programs operated by pervasively religious institutions.”

The greatest legal success of the Orthodox minority has been the campaign of Chabad to have Chanukah menorahs displayed on public property alongside Christian symbols “in town squares and shopping malls, alongside highways and byways and waterways,” as the last Lubavitcher Rebbe put it. In the 1980s, Jews went to court to oppose each other while other Americans looked on. The debate is essentially political and ideological about not only the place of Jews in American society. It is part of the overall culture war between liberals and social conservatives over a “values crisis” in American society and whether a religious environment or a neutral secularist one is good for America. This has become a political party divide between Democrats and Republicans. It involves debates over “faith-based initiatives,” contraception, abortion, gay rights, gay marriage, “moments of silence” or religious clubs meeting in public schools and the display of the Ten Commandments. The “high-wall separationists,” including the large majority of secular, Reform and Conservative Jews, believe that religious establishment—state-sponsored Christianity—constitutes the greatest danger facing Jews. They advocate that secularization of the state is far more desirable and less dangerous than the goals of the Christian fundamentalist allies of Orthodox Jews on the “Religious Right,” which aim for the establishment of a “Christian Nation.” There is also some concern that they have a missionary purpose and, ultimately, a conversionary future in mind for all Jews.

The separationist position is still paramount among the communal organizations. The Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), the national communal defense and community relations coalition, adopted the following resolutions at the 2005 JCPA Plenum: “the public policy agenda of the American Jewish community should be guided by what best serves our community’s values and interests ... even where an increased role of religion in the public square may be judicially interpreted as constitutional, we should continue to oppose changes which we consider detrimental to our core values, the interests of the Jewish community, or the pluralistic nature of our society.” They advocate educating Jews and non-Jews about the historic role of separation of religion from the state and the right to free experience of religion by insisting on the neutrality of government to “neither endorse nor unduly inhibit religious practice, and ... not extensively entangle government and religion.”

Through its various resolutions at its national conferences, the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), American Jewry’s largest synagogue body, also advocates a strict separationist and pluralist policy. The URJ has passed resolutions that opposed federal aid to private schools, prayer in school and tax-credits for religious private schools. Surprisingly for a religious body, it is also concerned with the rights of non-believers. “We affirm not only the freedom to practice religion as one chooses, but also the freedom not to practice any religion and not to be subjected to government action that supports any particular religion or that favors religion, in general, over nonreligion” (April 28, 2006).

Having noted that political and constitutional secularism remains the norm except for the Orthodox synagogue bodies, what are the opinions of the Jewish public? Polls show that most Jews endorse the communal organizations’ positions and are firm supporters of a “naked public square.” A 2000 survey conducted for the Center for Jewish Community Studies in Philadelphia researched Jewish views on church and state and compared a representative sample of American Jews and a representative sample of non-Jewish Americans that mirrored the Jewish sample in educational level and geographic distribution.

Regarding issues like religion in public schools, government aid or vouchers for religious schools, and the display of Christmas mangers or Hanukkah candles on government property, the study found that American Jews remain firmly separationist and very secularist when compared with other Americans. For example, 59% of the non-Jewish Americans in the study favored allowing nondenominational prayers to be read in public school classrooms. By contrast, only 20% of the Jewish public favored allowing such prayers.

When asked whether “I am pleased when political leaders publicly affirm their belief in God,” only 30% of the Jewish public said yes to that question, compared with 70% of their non-Jewish counterparts. When faced with the statement: “Democracy in the US works better if Americans are religious,” scarcely more than 1 of 10 rank-and-file Jews agreed.

Liberalism as a political ideology has been intimately linked both historically and conceptually with secularism and opinion polls confirm that political liberalism is closely allied to secularist values in US politics. A central tenet of American Jewish life has been that Jewish security depends on those American traditions and institutions that protect individual freedom, an open society, pluralism, gender and racial equality. This liberal political bias is reflected in the strong support among Jews for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). This factor also accounts for why Jewish women’s organizations like Hadassah are very prominent in the “pro-choice” coalition favoring legalized abortion.

According to the AJC’s *2007 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion*, American Jews are more likely (43% as compared to 28%) to describe themselves as “liberal” than as “conservative,” while 31% describe themselves as “moderate.” Political pundits have long predicted the end of Jewish liberalism, as well as the end of the exceptional Jewish loyalty to the Democratic Party. The supposition is that Jews are becoming more like other Americans. But the results of recent elections show this not to be the case. The Jewish population’s political profile (Democrat vs. Republican) differs from that of most other white Americans as dramatically today as it has at other times going back to the 1930s. And this difference tracks the difference in Jewish belief—or disbelief—in miracles and the Jews’ generally secular outlook compared to other American ethnic and religious groups.

Since the 1970s the US political environment has witnessed the rise of organizations like the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition, as profiled by Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Pat Buchanan. Through their filter, the main political issues and divisions have focused on social, moral, and cultural values—not economics. The Republican Party appears to have increasingly become the natural home of religious America but not of Jews generally—only of the Orthodox minority. Along with America’s other “strongly religious” groups, the Orthodox subscribe to the Republicans’ conservative social and family values, lobbying hard for faith-based policy initiatives. The Republican Party is more sympathetic to Christian Zionism and strong support for Israel. Yet domestic political concerns still seem to have more influence on Jewish political partisanship. In terms of political party affiliation, the *Annual Survey* reported that 58% of American Jews identified as Democrat, 26% as independent, and 15% Republican. But there have been clear divisions between the religious movements in the last few presidential elections. While Democratic candidates received the majority of Jewish votes by wide margins, the Orthodox community has largely supported Republican candidates. Yet for the politically secularist Jewish majority, the Republican Party’s louder support for Israel and its rhetoric

about the nation's Judeo-Christian heritage have failed to appeal. Since the Republican Party has become increasingly associated with the policies of the religious right, it is not surprising that American Jews have remained the most solid Democratic Party constituency among white voters. Their social liberalism overcomes their economic and foreign policy interests.

American Jews' political secularism also is a factor in their attitudes towards identification with Israel. Historically, one of the most significant ways in which American Jews have expressed their solidarity is through their commitment to and involvement with Israel, whose founding was inspired by the secular ideology of Zionism. However, the image of Israel as a secular, liberal state has been transformed over the past two decades. Aside from the Orthodox, there has been an increase in the willingness of American Jews to criticize Israeli society and particularly its religious-nationalist coalition governments' domestic policies and their record on liberty, human rights and gender equality. This distancing largely relates to a clash between American secular values and the increased power, influence and sense of triumphalism of Orthodox Judaism in Israel. Israel does not have separation of religion and state and denies Jewish religious pluralism. Moreover, Israel's Orthodox Jewish state establishment and the Orthodox political parties prevent religious pluralism and the recognition of Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist rabbis, marriages and conversions in Israel. Recently this *kulturkampf* has gone beyond the "Who is a Jew?" battles of the 1980s and 1990s waged by American Jewish organizations. The recent trend towards exclusion of women from certain public functions like singing as a result of ultra-Orthodox pressure is likely to alienate more American Jewish women and Jewish liberals.

How Do American Jews Define Their Group Identity?

The multiplicity of meanings of what it is to be a Jew in America has long been recognized by social scientists. Given the multi-faceted nature of "Jewishness," group identity is not an either-or question. Hence good surveys offer a series of possibilities, any of which can be chosen. In 1990 NJPS asked, "*When you think of what it means to be a Jew in America would you say that it means being a member of a religious group; an ethnic group; a cultural group; a nationality?*" Multiple choices were permitted. Being Jewish as defined by cultural group membership was the most popular preference. Using the responses to the religious identification question, 80% of Jews of no religion (Nones) and 70% of Jews by religion chose the cultural group identity. "An ethnic group" was chosen by 68% of Jews of no religion and by 57% of Jews by religion. About 40% of both these groups defined it as "a nationality." Furthermore, there was a low level of support for the religious group preference—only 49% of Jews by religion and 35% of Jews of no religion considered being Jewish as being a member of a religious group (Kosmin et al. 1991). It is not just Jews with no religion who reject the religious group concept and alternatively opt for cultural and ethnic criteria as the meaning of being a Jew in America.

In NJPS 2000, the question was repeated. An additional option for what it means to be a Jew in America was added: "a worldwide people." And indeed it received the same 75% support as cultural group.

The concept of 'peoplehood' echoes a Jewish value that is meaningful to young people. The longitudinal *Eight Up* study, which followed a cohort of young persons raised in Conservative synagogues from their bar mitzvah year to college, highlighted these patterns. Whereas religious observance declined over an 8-year period, with high attrition in synagogue attendance, these

young people continued to express pride as Jews and to feel connected to the Jewish people. The value of caring for fellow Jews instilled in them was maintained through the college years with a sense of responsibility to help Jews in need around the world. To quote one college student: *“To me being Jewish also holds religious value but the first thing that comes to mind when considering being Jewish is the community I am part of”* (Keysar and Kosmin 2004).

Figure 1.1 presents the responses for 1990 and 2001 but limited only to Jews who identify by religion. It confirms that Jews consider themselves as more than purely a religion despite the strictures of Herberg and the American Council for Judaism. It is noteworthy that a cultural group and a people far outscored religion as the group identity in both years.

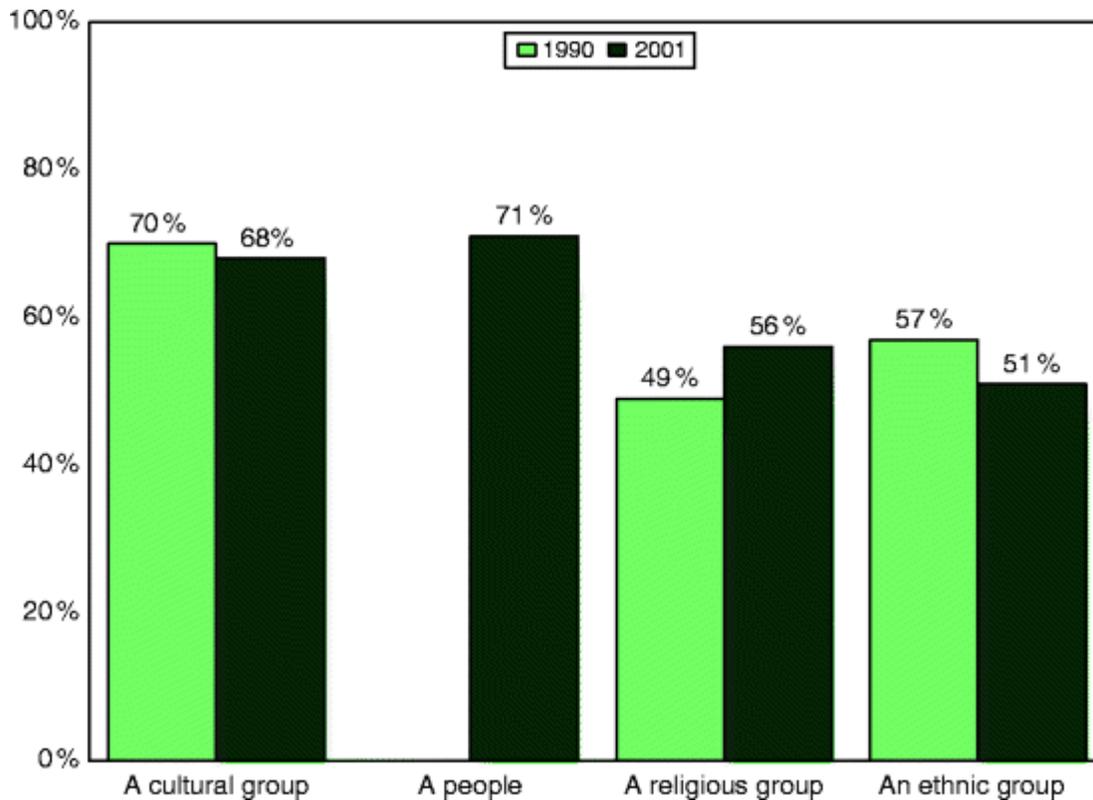


Fig. 1.1
 Meaning of being a Jew in America, Jews by religion (Source: NJPS 1990: *“When you think of what it means to be a Jew in America would you say that it means being a member of a religious group; an ethnic group; a cultural group; a nationality?”* AJIS 2001: *“Do you regard being Jewish for yourself primarily as being part of...”*)

The Secular Trend in Jewish Connections

The findings concerning Jewish connections and behaviors go a long way to explaining the responses to the Jewish group identity question. The trend data in Jewish connections and behavior shows clear declines in religious connections and growth in some secular ones. The percentage of Jews who never attend religious services aside from a family life-cycle event climbed from 27% in 1971 to 35% in 1990 to 41% in 2000. Yet according to NJPS 2000, 52% of respondents regarded being Jewish as very important in their life, 65% claimed to read a Jewish newspaper or magazine and 55% had recently read a book with Jewish content

(NJPS 2000 Report p. 7). By way of contrast, only 46% of households belonged to a synagogue according to NJPS and only 28% always or usually lit Shabbat candles, a ritual which had fallen in popularity since 1990, when the rate was 36%. Local surveys reportsurprisingly low rates of private observance of the Sabbath in communities. The percentages of those who never light Shabbat candles are: Las Vegas 63%, New York 58%, Washington 58%, and Miami 50%. Household membership in secular Jewish organizations among Core Jews has remained steady over the past two decades. It was 27% in NJPS 1990 and 31% according to AJIS 2001. Obviously, these statistics show that for the majority of American Jews, what is “important” about being Jewish has to include more than purely religious acts.

Regional differences also suggest that a secularizing trend is under way because the growing communities of the West all score lower than average on religious practice. For example, only 15% of Western households keep kosher at home; only 22% usually light Sabbath candles; and only 36% belong to a synagogue (NJPS2000 Report p.8). According to AJIS 2001, only 38% of households belonged to a synagogue in 2001. This survey inquired of the 62% of unaffiliated respondents why they did not belong. Among the 15 reasons offered, the most popular at 20% was that they did not believe in God, which was far ahead of some more mundane reasons such as cost (8%), intermarriage (8%) and life cycle (3%). The atheist response extrapolates to around 460,000 Jewish households. The devolution of local services in Jewish communities leads to wide disparities in patterns of affiliation, but it is not clear whether the local patterns are demand or supply driven. For example, membership in non-synagogue Jewish organizations including JCCs varies widely by community from a high of 60% in Worcester, Massachusetts, to a low of 25% in Philadelphia.

Seculars and Demography

There are no lists or official counts of secular Jews. Only a minority of Jewish secularists are members of organizations aimed at encouraging secularism in its various forms. Secular Jews run the full gamut from those hostile to the Jewish religion, to those neutral or indifferent to it. Of course, the definition of who is a secularist varies according to the ideology of the person defining the term. For Satmar Hassidim and members of Neturei Karta (fervently Orthodox sects), any Jewish Zionist or supporter of the State of Israel is a secularist. The same could be said with regard to anybody associated with other modernist trends, such as gay synagogues or female rabbis.

There are essentially three ways open to demographers to estimate the secular Jewish population. One can count those who distance themselves from any form of religion and consider themselves Jewish because they were raised as Jews or have Jewish parents. These are defined in NJPS 1990 and AJIS 2001 as Jews of no religion or JNR and often now referred to as Jewish “Nones.” Secondly, one can count the number of Jews who define themselves as “Just Jewish” without any attachment to any Jewish synagogue denominations. These are ways of self-identification. Thirdly, one can look at the way people describe their worldviews, or more specifically whether they regard their outlook as “religious” or “secular.” As will be shown below, the three “demographic” definitions all produce roughly the same numbers and proportion of the Core Jewish population around 30–40% of American Jews.

The AJIS 2000 and ARIS 2008 Jewish population totals provided here are higher than those emanating from NJPS 2000 as a result of methodological differences. Mark Schulman, a distinguished survey methodologist who undertook one of the two UJC-commissioned independent audits of the NJPS 2000 study, discovered a series of methodological flaws and statistical problems that led him toward the same conclusions. He is reported as stating that the survey inflated “the proportion who are most religiously identified,” and there was a “skew toward Jews who are more religiously identified” (JTA, Sept. 29, 2003). Certainly, the number of secular and cultural Jews, or JNRs, reported by NJPS 2000 was several hundred thousand persons fewer than reported by AJIS 2001.

Jews of No Religion (JNR)—Nones

Jews by religion are the majority of American Jewry. However, the trend in Fig. 1.2 (which includes estimates of the number of children and so the overall Jewish population) illustrates a consistent decline in their absolute number and share of the population since 1990. The ARIS time series suggests that the adult Jewish by religion population (JBR) seems to be declining currently by around 22,000 persons a year while the adult no-religion population (JNR) rose by an average of 28,000 a year in the 1990s and 24,000 a year in the 2000s.

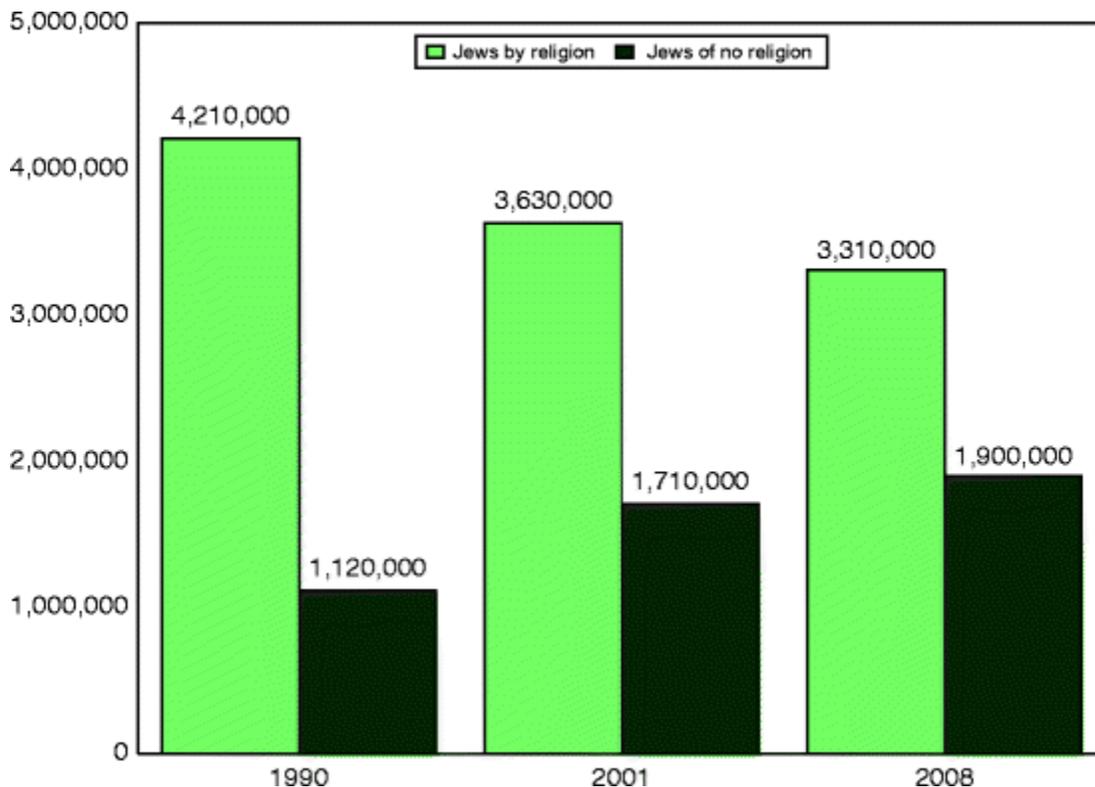


Fig. 1.2
Demographic trends by Jewish identity type, 1990–2008 (Source: NJPS 1990; AJIS 2001; ARIS 2008)

Jews are more prominent in America’s no-religion population than in its religious population. Among religious adults, Jews by religion constitute 1.2% of the population, or about 2,800,000

adults. Among adult American “Nones,” Jews of no religion constitute 3.8%, or about 1,290,000 adults (Kosmin and Keysar 2009a, b). The no-religion fraction of the Jewish population (JNR) has risen from around 20% in 1990 to around 37% in 2008. Over the same period, the Nones’ share of the US adult population grew from 8 to 15%. These figures once again confirm that the Jewish population is further ahead in the process of secularization than Americans in general.

The ARIS surveys provide insights into the social profile of the JNR adults. They are slightly more male and slightly younger than JBRs. Perhaps because of their relative youth they have lower incomes and are less likely to be homeowners. A majority are college graduates. They are no different in terms of educational attainment or political party affiliation (41% Democrat v. 13% Republican) from JBRs. However, their geography is distinct. American Jews like the national population have been moving their residential center of gravity south and west for several decades. The influence of these Jewish Nones makes the total Core Jewish population less Southern and more Western since 34% of JNRs reside in the West compared to 21% of JBRs. The close resemblance between religious and secular Jews on most social indicators is noteworthy because there are much wider and more significant differences between religious Americans and secular Americans (Keysar 2010).

There is an important sociological and statistical caution that needs to be emphasized in this connection, because we must distinguish individual from household identity and characteristics. In national and local Jewish surveys, the type of Jewish identity is recorded as a personal characteristic; but synagogue membership is recorded as a household characteristic. Yet the reality of contemporary society is that people with differing identities and outlooks often reside in the same household. Therefore, there are many Jewish Nones (JNR) who live alongside spouses or parents who are Jewish by religion (JBR). Hence, there are many JNR individuals living in synagogue-affiliated homes. This phenomenon means that a count of synagogue household members is not necessarily a count of the religious Jewish population. A corollary of this occurs with rituals and practices that are individual and household or family characteristics. For example, fasting is an individual characteristic; but kashrut or having a mezuzah on the front door is a household characteristic. This social reality accounts for some of the fluidity in the population counts we record.

The population of Jewish “Nones” has several components or sources of origin. There are individuals who abandon Judaism in their teenage or adult years. There are persons with two Jewish parents (i.e., secular or cultural Jews) who were never raised in a religion. There are children of intermarriage brought up in a compromise “religiously neutral,” i.e., secular home. And finally, there are children of intermarriage who were raised in Christianity, but who switch to no religion (or atheism, agnosticism, humanism etc.) and embrace their Jewish heritage.

Aside from the general American trend away from religious identification, the numbers are fueled by two recent demographic and social trends unique to Jews. The first is the growth in the number of Jews of mixed-religion parentage raised without religion but who identify with their Jewish ancestry. This population grows every year as an echo effect of the high intermarriage rate, which was over 50% by 1985. By 2008 the children of JNR parents were entering the adult population, generating further growth in the JNR population between 2001 and 2008. The other recent phenomenon was immigration, particularly of Jews from the Former Soviet Union after

1979. These Jews and their children are mainly secular in orientation. Another new infusion into the American Jewish population is Israeli immigrants, who also tend to be more secular in identity and outlook. Both Israeli and Former Soviet Union immigrants, unlike most other secular American Jews, tend to be politically conservative.

“Just Jewish”

National and local studies of American Jewish communities record the denominational affiliation of respondents and their households. Those who distance themselves from the main branches of Judaism often fall into the category “Just Jewish.” In NJPS 1990, about 4–5% of Jews by religion reported their denomination to be “Just Jewish.” NJPS 2000 provided by far a higher estimate—30% “Just Jewish” in a more religiously connected sample. Most “Just Jewish” respondents are indeed secular, as AJIS 2001 found. While a minority indicated a “religious” or “somewhat religious” outlook, they did not belong to Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform congregations.

Recent local studies, as shown in Fig. 1.3, report a wide range of “Just Jewish” responses, from as low as 11% in Cleveland in 1996 to as high as 48% in Southern Maine in 2007 and 47% in Las Vegas in 2005. Local studies, with anywhere from 421 respondents in Southern Maine to 1,808 in Miami, vary in methodology and terminology. Some of the local studies use additional terms for secular respondents, such as “no denominational identification—religion is Judaism” and “all secular—includes humanist, secular and no religion but consider self Jewish.” Nevertheless, the recent rise in the proportion of “Just Jewish” responses to the denominational question in surveys since 2000 is an indicator of declining identification with the synagogue movements and so with religious Judaism. As such it is yet another manifestation of the secularizing trend among American Jews.

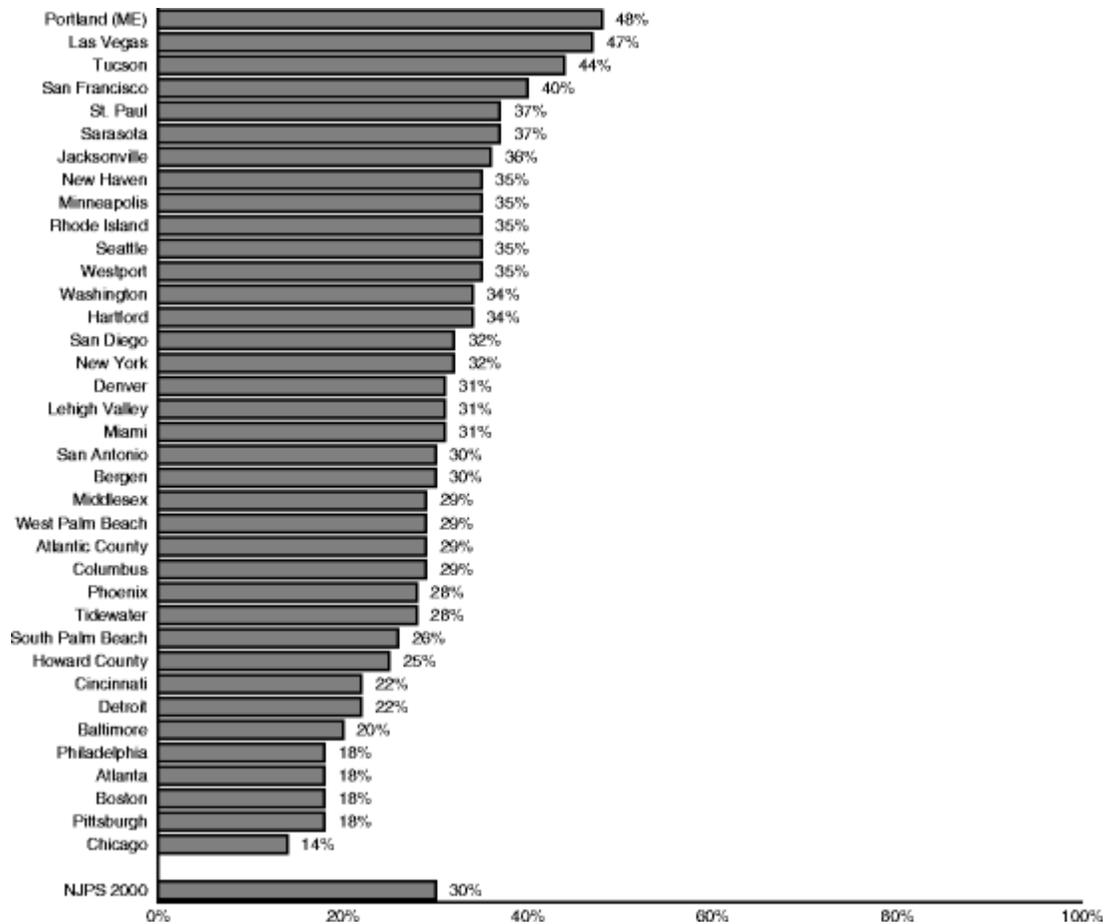


Fig. 1.3
Percent just Jewish/secular respondents in local Jewish community studies 2000–2010 (Source: Sheskin2012)

Secular (Dis)belief

Jews have very different patterns of belief compared with other Americans. In ARIS 2001, survey respondents were asked about the nature of the Divine, i.e., their belief in the existence of God, and how God helps them personally. First, respondents were asked whether they agreed (strongly or somewhat) or disagreed (strongly or somewhat) with the proposition: *God exists*. The replies for the Core Jewish population and the total US population are summarized in Fig. 1.4.

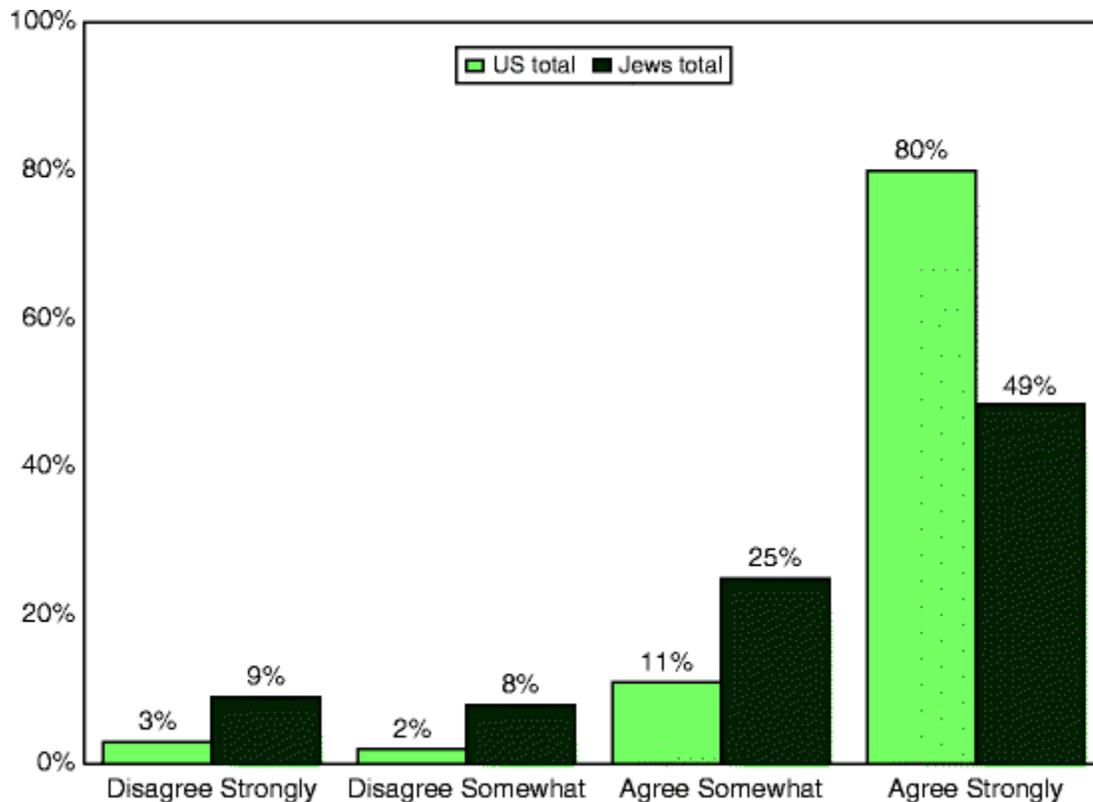


Fig. 1.4
 Belief that “God Exists” (Source: ARIS 2001 adults only) (percentages do not add to 100% because *Don't Know* and *Refused* responses are excluded)

Over 80% of the populace strongly agrees that God exists. Christian groups were likely to strongly affirm God’s existence. At the top of the belief scale were Pentecostals and the Protestant denominations, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, with 97% agreeing strongly with the proposition “God exists.” At the other extreme were the Jews, among whom only 49% of Jewish adults agreed strongly that “God exists,” a score only slightly ahead of the skeptical “Nones” at 45%. A further 25% of Jews agreed “somewhat” that God exists. At the other end of the spectrum, it appears that 17% of Jews take an atheist position compared with only 5% of all Americans. The remaining 19% of Jews, unreported in the chart, are uncertain.

Inasmuch as the great majority of Americans and two-thirds of Jews profess a belief in the existence of God, it is interesting to probe further and to see whether there is any difference in the intensity or quality of that belief. All the respondents, regardless of how they replied to the question whether God exists, were asked their view of God’s relationship to themselves as individuals, whether they agreed (strongly or somewhat) or disagreed (strongly or somewhat) with the proposition: *God helps me*. Figure 1.5 illustrates that slightly fewer Americans believed in divine intercession—that God directly assists them—than agreed that God exists. In fact, 9% fewer believed “very strongly” but 4% more “agree somewhat,” so the net loss from agreement with the first proposition (Fig. 1.4) was only 5% of the adult population. Thus, most Americans firmly believe in a personal, active divinity.

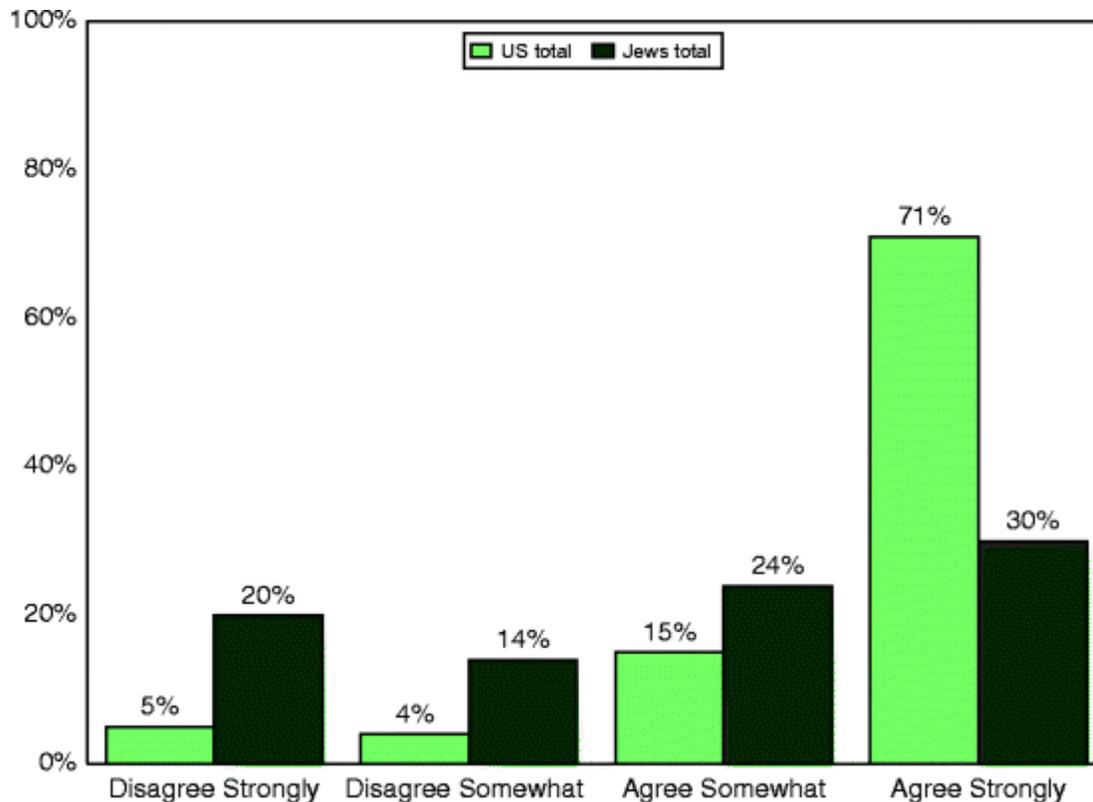


Fig. 1.5
 Belief that “God Helps Me” (Source: ARIS 2001 adults only) (percentages do not add to 100% because *Don't Know* and *Refused* responses are excluded)

However, this question on intercession reveals quite a large gap with the Jewish view. Figure 1.5 shows that only 30% of Jews strongly agree that God helps them, compared to 71% of all Americans. And whereas 74% of Jews thought God exists only 54% imagine an active personal divinity. Those skeptical about a personal God amount to 34% of all Jews but only 9% of all Americans. It is interesting to note that twice as many Jews were uncertain or unable to provide an answer than were Americans in general (12% vs. 6%). One can perhaps conclude from these results of these two questions that around one-third of Jews are confirmed theists, 17% are deists, 17% are atheists and another one-third are very uncertain or uncomfortable about theological and belief questions and so possibly agnostics.

Secular Outlook

One recent innovation (Mayer et al. 2002) in survey research regarding worldviews and religion has been the introduction of a question about the respondent’s secular or religious outlook. This represents an attempt to apply in practical research the concept German phenomenologists have referred to as *Weltanschauung* (sometimes defined as worldview or world-outlook).³ The concept of *Weltanschauung* was meant to resolve one of the fundamental paradoxes of social science: *how to construct objective statements about what is essentially a subjective realm of experience*. The concept of “outlook” is particularly well suited to describe the broad orientation

of people to ideas they treat as plausible and to the very criteria by which they bestow plausibility. The value of this concept is that it is drawn directly from the ordinary experience of the everyday life of people and employs a metric or method of measurement that emerges directly from the language of that experience. That is the distinction between those who describe their outlook as “religious” and those who describe their outlook as “secular.”

People, including Jewish adults, will often describe themselves as “religious” or as “secular” in ordinary discourse about their views of life. It is the contention here that the degree of secularism in the outlooks of America’s Jews is an important source of differentiation in both the overall US population and within the US Jewish population, yet it is not so subtle as to require deep, long qualitative interviews or life-course studies. People can be asked quite directly to describe whether they think their outlook is mostly religious or mostly secular. Their replies to such a question yield a distribution of answers that readily appear to be associated with a whole host of other indicators of opinion, belief, affiliation, association, and practice as well as demographic attributes.

The value of studying people’s “outlook” as a means by which to differentiate various segments of the population is that it allows the social scientist to step out of the circular logic of the identification-identity paradigm. The concept allows one to view the “objective” facets of behavior associated with affiliation and identification as the consequence of *meaningful intentionality*. To say that someone is “secular” or “religious” is respectful of their own subjective perceptions about the universe. It also makes no unwarranted inferences about the strength or weakness of psychic attachment to a heritage, ancestry or group loyalty—as the concept of “Jewish identity” implicitly does. It thus allows social scientists to characterize the subjective state of mind of the observed population without imposing a possibly invidious construct like *identity*.

Secular Outlook Among All Americans

The American Religious Identification Survey 2001 (ARIS) provided for a direct comparison between the total Core Jewish Population, both JNR and JBR, and the total US population. Beyond the question of adherence (“*What is your religion, if any?*”), the first question bearing on religious orientation asked respondents to place themselves along a continuum of positions in response to the following: “*When it comes to your outlook, do you regard yourself as: (a) religious, (b) somewhat religious, (c) somewhat secular, or (d) secular?*” Therefore, ARIS 2001 made it possible to place the religious-secular outlook of Jews in the wider context of American patterns.

Figure 1.6 shows how different Jews are from all Americans on the religious-secular continuum. Jews tend to answer either “somewhat religious” or “secular.” Americans as a whole are four times as likely to say they are “religious” as are Jews whereas Jews are more than three times as likely to say their outlook is “secular.”

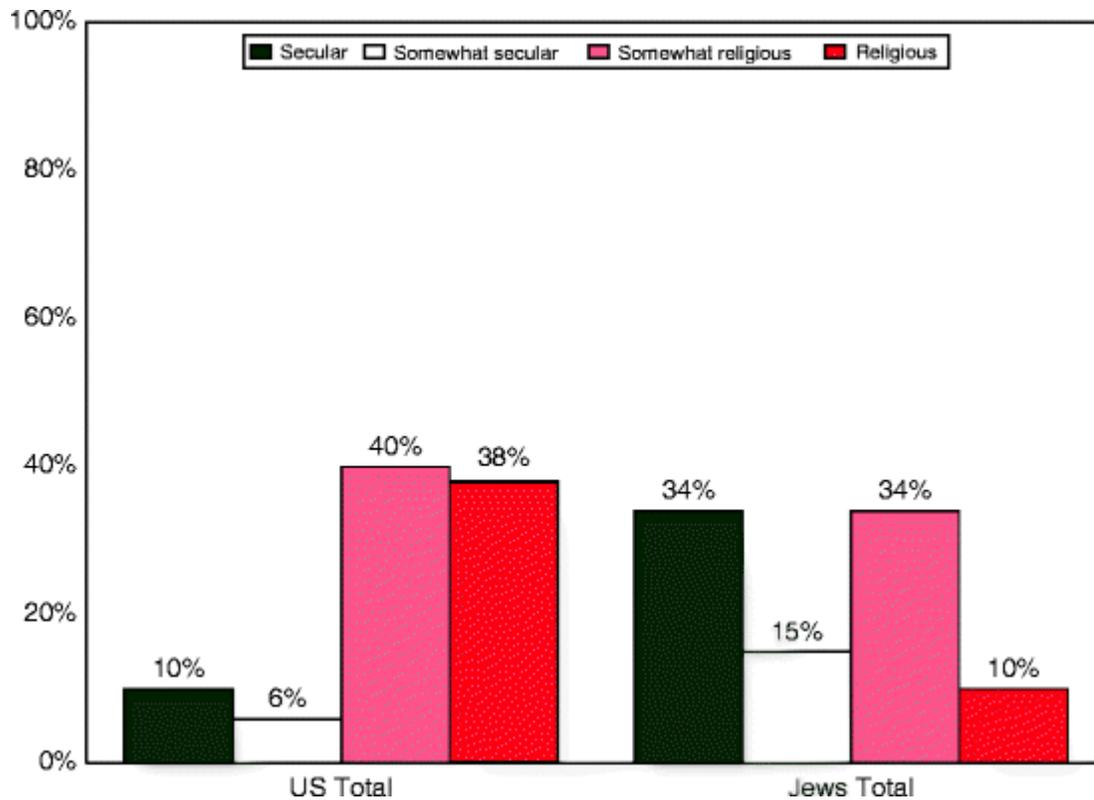


Fig. 1.6
 Secular outlook among all Americans and among Jews (Source: ARIS [2001](#) adults only: “When it comes to your outlook, do you regard yourself as: (a) religious, (b) somewhat religious, (c) somewhat secular, or (d) secular?”) (percentages do not add to 100% because *Don't Know* and *Refused* responses are excluded)

Secular Outlook Among Jews

Not only fewer Jews than members of most other American religious groups belong to a temple, synagogue or any other religious institution, also Jews are the most likely to describe their outlook as “secular” or “somewhat secular” among all major religious groups.

Figure 1.7 highlights several important points about the religious outlook of America’s religious Jews. More than 40% of America’s Jewish adults (those who identify as Jewish by religion) describe their outlook as “secular” or “somewhat secular.” That figure increases significantly when the parameters of the Jewish population are defined to include the “Jewish Nones,” those individuals who see themselves as having no religion but describe themselves as being of Jewish parentage or Jewish upbringing. Among those of Jewish ancestry who identified with no religion, 64% said they were secular or somewhat secular. Among American adults in general, the “secular outlook” population was only 16%.

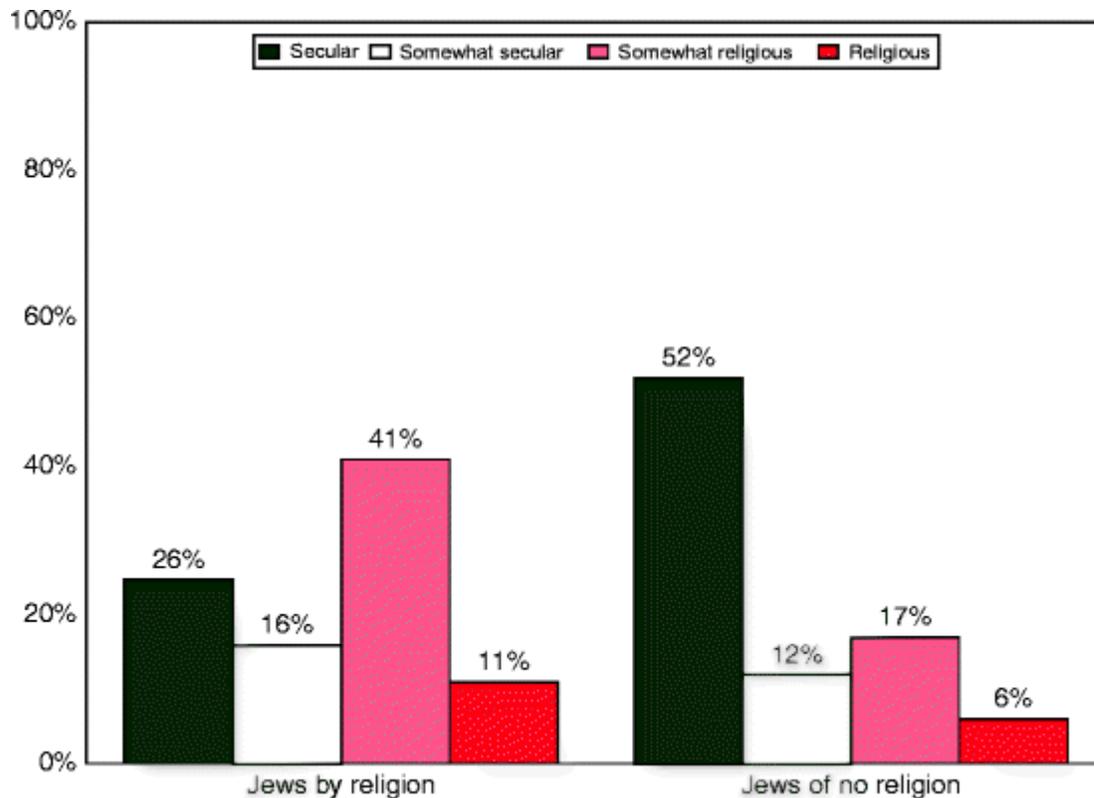


Fig. 1.7

Secular outlook for Jews by religion and for Jews of no religion (Source: AJIS 2001 adults only: “When it comes to your outlook, do you regard yourself as: (a) religious, (b) somewhat religious, (c) somewhat secular, or (d) secular?”) (percentages do not add to 100% because *Don’t Know* and *Refused* responses are excluded)

It is striking to note that identifying religious Jews are much less likely (11% vs. 37%) to say they are religious than other religious Americans. Thus, we can observe that both Jews who say their religion is Judaism and those who do not are very highly secularized compared to other Americans and form a unique population.

Secular Outlook and Belief

The American Jewish Identification Survey 2001 (AJIS) was a special supplement to the national ARIS. This examined the pattern of beliefs of the total Jewish population of just over four million adults, both the religiously identifying Jews (JBR) and the Jewish Nones (JNR). It provided further depth and validation of the overall outlook question summarized in Table 1.1. About 14% of respondents who identified themselves as Jewish by religion could be classified as atheists or agnostics. Among those who indicated Jewish parentage and/or upbringing, but who profess no religion, about 26% can be characterized as atheist or agnostic. In other words, about 623,000 adults of the approximately four million who comprise what has been called the “core Jewish” adult population (about 17%) hold beliefs that can be described as atheist or agnostic—those who might be described as the “hard-core seculars.” Such a state of non-belief is found in about 5% of all American non-Jewish adults.

Table 1.1

Jews by Religion identification with branch of Judaism and the religious-secular outlook continuum—AJIS 2001

Branch of Judaism	Religious	Somewhat religious	Uncertain/DK/refuse	Somewhat secular	Secular	Total percent
Secular humanist ^a		14		19	67	100
Reconstructionist ^a		20		65	15	100
Orthodox	56	28	2	2	12	100
Conservative	7	54	4	14	21	100
Reform	7	43	2	18	30	100
Just Jewish	7	20	13	22	38	100

Note: Categories provided by respondents in reply to: “*What branch of Judaism do you identify with, if any?*” [Total N = JBR adults in residential households]

^aThese categories are based on very small samples, making generalizations difficult.

It is further instructive to note that a substantial minority of those who profess a belief in God nevertheless do not believe that God helps them. About 30% of those who identify their religion as Judaism and profess a belief in God disagree somewhat or strongly with the proposition that “*God helps me.*” The data on outlook and beliefs underscore the point that America’s Jews differ quite a bit on the fundamentals of religious faith from most Americans.

These findings discredit the casually made assumption that for Jews, secularism and assimilation go hand in hand. The data on religious beliefs among American non-Jews would suggest that, in fact, secularism and especially atheism are far from normative in American society at large. As such, secular Jews could hardly be said to be assimilating into American culture. Quite the contrary: their distinctive pattern of secularism and non-belief may well set them apart.

Secular Outlook and Denominational Identity

As we have discovered among American Jews, *identifying* oneself with Judaism as a religion does not preclude thinking of that identification in secular terms. As such, it appears that a secular outlook and its associated beliefs or lack thereof, as held by many Jews, is not synonymous with a lack of Jewish identification. Rather, outlook and beliefs are distinct components along with identification of a stock of knowledge and a wellspring of affinities that link individuals to larger social entities from a family to a community to a people. It remains to be seen below what is the association between one’s position along the religious-secular continuum and the more objective indicators of Jewish communal affiliation such as synagogue membership.

Table 1.1 looks at how America's religious Jewish adults (JBRs) identify with the branches of Judaism, the organized denominations of the Jewish congregations, broken down by their position along the religious-secular continuum. It calls attention to a number of interesting insights. First, it suggests that those with a "secular" or "somewhat secular" outlook are to be found in significant numbers in each of the branches of American Judaism. Despite the small sample, one would expect the majority of those who identify with the Secular Humanist branch of Judaism to describe themselves as secular. By contrast, the majority of those identifying with the Orthodox branch of Judaism describe themselves as "religious." Interestingly, nearly half of those who identify with the Reform branch (48%) describe themselves as "secular" or "somewhat secular," as do more than a third of those who identify with the Conservative branch of Judaism (35%). This discrepancy could be a result of the survey methodology, which chose a random adult household member to interview who may not be the synagogue member.

It should be emphasized that statistics in Table 1.1 pertain only to adults (three million in 2001) who described their religious identity as Jewish. The survey did not inquire of Jewish Nones (1.1 million) whether they identified with any of these branches of Judaism. These AJIS findings were confirmed by the 2008 Pew US Religious Landscape Survey. They too showed that the religious beliefs of highly involved and committed American Jews are closer to those of American Nones, those who are religiously unaffiliated (Cohen and Blitzer 2009), than other religious Americans. In other words, most non-Orthodox congregationally affiliated American Jews are secularized.

Jewish Organizational Affiliation Patterns

As a small minority with a history of persecution, Jews have a felt need and desire for solidarity and cohesion, but this is not easy to achieve given their ideological diversity. Since religion is and has long been a divisive rather than unifying factor among American Jews, the trend has been to establish "non-religious" or "soft secular" non-denominational organizations at the local and national levels. In effect, Jews have separated religion and state in their national and public organizations, with the result that Jewish communal leadership has been lay and not rabbinic. The social welfare and community relations organizations try to eschew religious attachments, while simultaneously trying not to give offense to any synagogue grouping, so as to attract a wide membership. The philanthropic Jewish federation system, with its plethora of welfare and social services, is the prime example of this secularized form of organization.

As far as individual Jews are concerned, the most popular secular or non-denominational membership organization is the Jewish Community Center (JCC) or "Y." JCCs have long served a range of constituencies in virtually every community in North America, providing health and fitness services, early childhood and adult Jewish education, Jewish cultural activities, teen groups, camping programs, and crafts. Aside from the synagogue, no other Jewish institutional network attracts as many participants as do the JCCs, which number more than 300 (including "Y"s and campsites) in the United States. Long regarded as "the *shul* with a pool," the JCC movement has over the past two decades embraced the Jewish continuity agenda and has provided resources for Jewish education and Jewish culture as central to its mission. To the extent that JCCs do make Jewish life a centerpiece, they do not focus on religion. The focus is on Jewishness, rather than Judaism. In other words, JCCs are overwhelmingly secular institutions.

The more than 350 Jewish Community Centers, Jewish Y’s, and youth camps in North America are Jewish institutions. Yet they are also more than that. The 2010 Annual Report of the JCC Association (JCCA) emphasizes “... an exalted mission ... dedicated to enhancing the well-being of their communities in a multitude of ways. That means JCCs care about the spiritual, cultural, physical, psychological, and economic health of the people who come to the JCC to learn, to play, and to grow.” JCCs are a locus of Jewish life outside of the synagogue. And they are pluralistic community centers, where everyone can feel welcome. JCCs go to great lengths to signal their inclusiveness through their programming by offering Jewish activities and many non-Jewish activities too.

Their efforts are essentially successful. Overall, the JCCA claims to serve “2 million users,” of whom, as we shall show below, only one half are Jewish. Jewish camps serve nearly 85,000 children, Jewish and non-Jewish. The country’s most famous Y—the 92nd St. Y, on Manhattan’s Upper East Side—is a Jewish institution, but also a civic institution. Its lectures, programs and classes are open to all who can afford it, which is also true of its downtownsatellite, 92Y Tribeca. A stunning list of speakers has turned the Y into an intellectual cynosure, where politicians, artists, and authors routinely draw large and diverse audiences.

How do JCCs remain distinctly “Jewish”? They claim by focusing on culture, values, and education. The JCC of Greater Rochester (NY) states its mission as “strengthen[ing] Jewish identity and promot[ing] Jewish continuity.” The JCC of Southern Nevada vows to “emphasize Jewish culture, identity, and values.” “We have a long history of serving people just like you,” says the JCC in Indianapolis—“you” being anyone who lives nearby and enjoys what the JCC has to offer. However, not all JCCs emphasize diversity so strongly. The focus may be changing. The 2010 JCCA report stresses “recommitting to our Jewish mission” and engaging members in more discussions about “the type of Jewish lives they want to lead.”

The AJIS estimated that around one million or one-fourth adult Jews resided in a household where somebody claimed JCC membership. Having previously noted that many members of synagogues have a predominantly secular outlook, it should not come as a surprise to find that as Table 1.2 below demonstrates, the majority who are members of the “non-religious” JCCs are nevertheless more likely to describe their outlook as “religious” or “somewhat religious.” Given the activities that take place on the premises, such as co-ed swimming and sports, it is unlikely that many are strictly Orthodox. Nevertheless, we can observe that over one-third of JCC members have a secular outlook of some kind; so it seems these institutions are successful in attracting a wide range of Jews.

Table 1.2
JCC affiliation by the religious-secular outlook continuum—AJIS 2001

Affiliated with a JCC etc.?	Religious (%)	Somewhat religious (%)	Uncertain/DK/refused (%)	Somewhat secular (%)	Secular (%)
Yes	42	33	12	28	13

Affiliated with a JCC etc.?	Religious (%)	Somewhat religious (%)	Uncertain/DK/refused (%)	Somewhat secular (%)	Secular (%)
No	56	62	47	69	84
No answer/DK/Ref	2	5	41	3	3
Total percent	100	100	100	100	100
Total percent of JCC members	16	46	4	18	17

Note: Categories provided by respondents in reply to: “*Is anyone in your household affiliated with a Jewish community center or some other Jewish community organization?*” [Total N = JBR/JNR adults in residential households]

Looking at these same findings from the perspective of the “secular” and the “religious” sub-populations, more than three times as many of those describing their outlook as “religious” (42%) report membership in a Jewish community center or some other Jewish community organization as those who describe their outlook as “secular” (13%). Obviously secular Jews have more options for participating and joining general sports and recreational facilities than religious Jews, who are concerned with dietary restrictions (kashrut) and Sabbath observance. Thus, Table 1.2 shows that those who are not members of such organizations are more apt to describe themselves as “secular” or “somewhat secular.” In short, it appears that a “secular” outlook is associated with a relatively low level of affiliation with the organized Jewish community in general. This probably reflects the balance between those American Jews who are primarily “Jewish secularists” and those who are more universalist-oriented “American secularists.”

Outlook and Friendship Patterns

This division among secular Jews is also apparent from an analysis of social networks. To be sure, friendship networks are likely to be related to one’s affiliation with voluntary community organizations. Those who are members of a synagogue or a Jewish Community Center are more apt to make Jewish friends there. Table 1.3, which reports the relative difference in the Jewish density of the friendship network according to the AJIS in 2001, suggests that those who are “secular” or “somewhat secular” are also likely to have proportionally fewer Jewish friends than those who describe their outlook as “religious” or “somewhat religious” but the range across the outlook spectrum for having a majority of Jewish friends is not particularly wide: 61–40%. This suggests secular Jews are definitely more socially integrated into the wider society, but the vast majority of them are not socially isolated from other Jews. However, one in four has no Jewish friends. This is understandable sociologically. Yet, to put this statistic in perspective it appears that one-tenth or more of religious outlook Jews also operate outside Jewish friendship networks, saying that ‘none’ of their friends is Jewish.

Table 1.3

Jewish friendship network by the religious-secular outlook continuum—AJIS 2001

Proportion of friends Jewish?	Religious (%)	Somewhat religious (%)	Uncertain/DK/refused (%)	Somewhat secular (%)	Secular (%)
All or mostly	45	28	16	22	15
About half	16	33	17	25	25
Some	22	23	15	23	35
None	11	14	22	24	23
D/K or Refused	6	2	30	6	2
Total percent	100	100	100	100	100

Note: Categories provided by respondents in reply to: “*What proportion of your closest friends would you say are Jewish?*” [Total N = JBR/JNR adults in residential households]

The findings in Table 1.3 are noteworthy in a larger historical context. As recently as 1990, NJPS reported that 45% of those who were Jewish-by-religion described their friendship network as “all or mostly Jewish.”⁴ By 2001, just 20% of those who are Jewish-by-religion describe their friendship network as “all or mostly” Jewish. Thus, it appears that there is a general trend for Jews to have a less densely Jewish friendship network. Indeed, as shown in the exhibit above, only among those who describe their outlook as “religious” does one find 45% who have a friendship network that is “all or mostly” Jewish. This trend is a logical concomitant of the lowering of social boundaries with greater social acceptance of Jews in American society and of course higher rates of intermarriage with gentiles. However, in the new transformative American Jewish social environment, this does not necessarily indicate assimilation. It is possible and common now for Jews to mix with non-Jews in “Jewish spaces” since there is a greater presence of non-Jews in the synagogues of the liberal streams of Judaism and the JCCs have more and more non-Jewish members.

Secularist Organizations

Organized philosophical secularism has always been weak in the US in terms of membership organizations and their numbers. As a minority within a minority, Jewish secularists may not be

a well-known group to the majority of Jewish Americans. In some ways, Jewish secularists stand proudly apart from religious Jews—and mainstream Americans as well. While many Americans see the US as being divided by politics (liberals vs. conservatives) or class (the 1% who are wealthy vs. the 99%), secularists often emphasize the differences between believers and non-believers. Their attitude is summarized nicely by the slogan of the secularist journal *The American Rationalist*: “An Alternative to Superstition and Nonsense.”

For all that separates Jewish secularism from religious Judaism, Jewish secularists tend to be liberals (like the majority of American Jews). Indeed, many Jewish secularist organizations see social justice as an outgrowth of their secular Jewish values. The Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO), which lists 24 affiliate groups in North America, uses its website to endorse same sex-marriage, national health care, and the Occupy Wall Street movement. The Sholem Community states, “We view a Secular Jewish identity as ... committed to justice, peace, and community responsibility.” The Workmen’s Circle, whose roots are in secular Judaism, makes “the pursuit of social and economic justice” a cornerstone of its mission. And the “secular, progressive voice” of the magazine *Jewish Currents* is often raised in opposition to social and economic inequality.

Interestingly, the CSJO does not shy away from invoking Jewish *continuity* as a concern, something that more conservative (and more religious) organizations do as well. “For us the continuity and survival of the Jewish people are paramount.” They are not alone. The Center for Cultural Judaism (CCJ), rebranded as the Posen Foundation US in 2011, has invoked continuity as well. “The vitality of the Jewish people will be determined” by how effectively Jewish institutions engage secular Jews in Jewish life; and it says “Jewish continuity depends in part on reaching this population and enabling them to celebrate their Jewish identity and pass it on to the next generation.”

All three organizations, on their websites or mission statements, equate secularism with modernity, implying that religious ideas may be antiquated, if not obsolete. The CSJO strives to “create identity that is relevant to contemporary life.” The CCJ used the word “modern” almost synonymously with “secular.”

The main non-theistic organization offering Jewish rituals and life-cycle events is the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ), founded by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine in 1969 in Detroit, where in 2005 around 3% of Detroit Jews identified with Humanistic Judaism. The SHJ claims to have 10,000 members in North America. It now has 28 congregations led by 14 specially trained Humanistic rabbis. This brand of Secular Judaism is not new, although it can be seen as a product of the liberalizing trends in Judaism dating back to the Reform movement, and even earlier. In 1986, the idea of a Judaism based on reason, skepticism, and human agency was codified in the charter of the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews (IFSHJ), which also emphasized human rights, Jewish survival, and the diversity of the Jewish people.

Today, the IFSHJ, the SHJ, and a handful of fellow traveling organizations in the world of Secular Humanistic Judaism affirm human agency above almost all else. “It was the power of human beings ... that has always been at the heart of Judaism’s continuity,” says the IFSHJ’s webpage. The idea of replacing God with mankind, and blending that conceit with an emphasis on Jewish culture and ethics, has yet to catch on, although a core of committed Humanists keeps

the movement alive. There are more than 30 secular congregations in 16 states, according to the IFSHJ website, including 12 congregations in New York and California alone. The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York City boasts a flock of around 100 families. Its rabbi, Peter Schweitzer, explained its ethos in an interview. “Judaism for us is a secular, cultural heritage, the cumulative experience of the Jewish people.”

“We view the Torah as an important literary and societal work. We do not see it as sacred text,” says the Sholem Community, in California, which might be considered a cross between a JCC and a Reform temple, if that temple’s liturgy was scrubbed of references to God. Likewise, the City Congregation takes a critical, scholarly stance towards religious texts. Far from being holy, “these texts are treated with the same dispassionate scrutiny that we would use to examine any sources of learning.”

Both the Sholem Community and the City Congregation emphasize Jewish learning, albeit from a strictly secular perspective. In 2012, the Sholem Community opened a “Secular Yeshiva” to train lay people as secular Jewish leaders (the Yeshiva course is also offered to those who simply want an intensive secular Jewish education). Among the subjects covered are “History and basic idea of secular Jewishness,” “Critical examination of Tanakh (Bible),” and a course that explores “Developing Secular Jewish life-cycle and holiday ceremonies in community and home settings.” The City Congregation encourages its members to participate in a course called “Judaism 101: Standing on One Foot,” which subjects Judaism’s “core ideas” to modern, secular scrutiny. A second course, “Ancient Tales and Legends,” views the Bible through an anthropological lens. “Discover the truths and real history of the Bible,” reads the course description. “Find out how this ‘sacred’ text is a disguise for a political tractate that supports the priesthood and the Davidic Dynasty.”

One thing that the City Congregation and the Sholem Community have in common with traditional synagogues is that they put an emphasis on Jewish holidays and life-cycle observances, i.e. weddings, bar mitzvahs and funerals. Of course, neither organization feels any misgivings about secularizing them. Jewish holidays, for the City Congregation, are devoid of religious meaning; they are “cultural expressions of the cycles of nature and human life and of events in Jewish history.” The City Congregation also omits prayers that mention God, which both highlights the human contribution to history, and makes for shorter services. But the City Congregation also revises traditional prayers, replacing God with humankind, and putting a particular emphasis on human agency.

It is also worthy of note that the founders of some of the general non-theistic congregations also have been Jews. For example, Felix Adler founded the Ethical Culture movement in 1877 and more recently Paul Kurtz started the Council for Secular Humanism in 1980. Harvard University’s current Humanist Chaplain is a Humanistic rabbi, Greg Epstein. Jews are also disproportionately found among the members of other Secular Coalition organizations such as the American Humanist Association, Center for Inquiry, and American Atheists (President, David Silverman). Jews attracted to these organizations often have an occupational background as natural scientists, or as bio-medical and information technology professionals, and include several Nobel laureates. Only a minority of Jewish secularists are members of organizations

aimed at encouraging secularism in its various forms. Secular organizations run the full gamut from those hostile to the Jewish religion, to those neutral to it, to those indifferent to it.

Secular Behaviors

Jewish secular behavior is the myriad of non-religious, irreligious and areligious Jewish activities from “kosher style cuisine” to Jewish scouts and the Maccabiah Games. Apart from the small minority of ultra-Orthodox Jews for whom religion is an all-encompassing lifestyle, the vast majority of American Jews participates in a secular Jewish cultural, leisure or social activity of some kind during any given year.

We can, therefore, conclude that Jewish secularism is pervasive in contemporary Jewish life. It is not known because it has gone largely unrecorded in NJPS and local community surveys, which concentrate on the observance of Jewish religious rituals and religious education. In fact, in the interest of economy, most of the proposed secular and cultural questions were deleted from NJPS 2000. The result of this bias is that the secular population emerges only as a residual group and we learn about it mainly by default. This essay is a retort to this past neglect. Its concern has been to present empirical evidence and analysis so that we are more able to recognize and understand the secular space in contemporary Jewish life.

American Jewry has been undergoing a process of “detraditionalization” and transformation for more than a century. The evidence for the rejection of Halakhah by the Jewish public is clear from survey evidence. For instance, NJPS 2000, which as we noted earlier was biased towards over-sampling religious Jews, still reported that 87% of American Jews fail to observe kashrut outside their homes. The rejection of rabbinic and communal authority and the strength of their embrace of individual autonomy is obvious since 73% responded that “they are bothered” when told by others “the right way to be Jewish.”

Secular Jewish Culture Today

Introduction

Most of Jewish life in America today uses the English language and has a distinctly secular flavor. And, unlike Jewish religious life, which poses barriers to non-Jews and to non-religious Jews—*secular* Jewish culture has the potential to engage a truly ecumenical audience and it is flourishing as never before. This section surveys aspects of this vibrant Jewish cultural life beyond the synagogue, and attempts to limn both high culture and the new, popular culture. The notable expressions of Jewishness in the contemporary US include everything from lectures at the 92nd St. Y, to art and photography exhibitions, to “Old Jews Telling Jokes”; from the revival of Yiddish, to the new appreciation of Baruch Spinoza; from the newly launched *Jewish Review of Books* to Sarah Silverman, Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David, whose comedy is both Jewish-inflected and universal. There is a revival of Jewish musical traditions such as Klezmer,

Sephardic and Mizrahi melodies and recreational Israeli folk dancing. There are more and more commercial films and documentaries on Jewish topics feeding commercial cinema and the popular annual Jewish film festivals in all the major cities.

This cultural production and consumption operates in a mixed market with commercial, non-profit and philanthropic support. Some is sponsored by grants from bodies such as the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, but Jewish cultural production is also often the result of private individual initiatives. The performers and producers are both professional and amateur. The performances and activities take place in a wide variety of spaces and locations: communal, civic and commercial. Nevertheless, the audiences and participants, both Jewish and gentile, seem to recognize and appreciate their involvement with these activities and events as an engagement with “Jewish culture.”

The National Foundation for Jewish Culture (NFJC) “invests in individuals,”⁵ and since 1960, it has supported writers, artists, filmmakers, and scholars, although it now focuses more on the creative arts. The NFJC claims that the logic of supporting culture is simple, and obvious: Jewish culture matters, and it can be a gateway to Jewish life for young Jews and the unaffiliated. “Over the last ten years there has been an explosion of interest in Jewish culture—both in the US and worldwide—in the areas of music, literature, film, and theater. There is a critical need to support individuals who create content for ... new theaters, magazines, Web sites, and museums.”⁶

Literary Culture

Literature is one of the sustaining elements of Jewish American culture; indeed, it is almost impossible to imagine Jewish culture (or any culture) without a literature of its own. The appetite for Jewish books (however broadly defined) is healthy. For a sense of how healthy, one can examine the proliferation of Jewish book fairs. Numbers tell part of the story. The number of authors participating in Jewish Book Council (JBC) author tours has quadrupled over the past 8 years.⁷ During the 2011–2012 season, the JBC scheduled more than 800 events at JCCs, Hillels, and other Jewish organizations around the US.⁸ As Robert Pinsky, the Former Poet Laureate, has noted, “Jews buy books.”⁹

Those events tend to foster a sense of connection. “How to describe the feeling of walking into these fantastic Jewish Community Centers filled with readers eager to hear from you?” writes author Randy Susan Meyers. “I felt as though I were finally meeting every aunt, uncle, and cousin I’d ever wished for. Warmth and love was present everywhere.”¹⁰ Today, those festivals connect more people than ever, with Jewish book fairs in the major coastal cities, but also Austin, Texas; Detroit; St. Paul, Minnesota; Houston; St. Louis; Ann Arbor; and Buffalo, New York.

Even with so many book festivals, one or two stand out. Billing itself as “the largest and most respected Jewish Book Fair in the nation,”¹¹ the San Diego Jewish Book Fair is an enormous, multi-day affair, featuring a large and diverse list of authors, highbrow to low-, popular and niche. Like many book fairs in the US, San Diego’s is open to everyone. Not all the Fair’s selections are specifically “Jewish.” A biography of Rin Tin Tin was among the books being sold (and signed by its author, Susan Orlean) at numerous fairs in 2011. The Buffalo JCC’s annual

book fair, which is subsidized, in part, by a special fund called “People of the Book,” may outdo even San Diego for eclecticism: it offers an acrobatics performance by a pair of 20-something French twins who have entertained secular and ultra-Orthodox audiences.¹²

In New York City, the Sephardic Book Fair was held not in a synagogue, but, appropriately enough, at the Center for Jewish History.¹³ That a Sephardic Book Fair exists is striking evidence of the diversity of Jewish culture; of the appetites for all forms of Jewish literature; and that enough people care deeply enough about Sephardic literature to dream up such an event and make it a success.

Jewish “literary culture” is not limited to book fairs. It is expansive, and it has numerous tributaries. One can look at The Jewish Writing Project, which encourages Jews to submit their reflections on Jewish identity¹⁴; the National Yiddish Book Center’s Translation Prize¹⁵; Jewish literature courses in colleges; a wide array of book-themed websites and blogs, including the Jewish Book Council’s “Prosen People”¹⁶ blog, the “People of the Book” blog,¹⁷ and the “Whole Megillah” blog, for “writers of Jewish-themed content.”¹⁸ There is also the Jewish Book Carnival, a traveling (online) resource that collects links to articles and reviews dealing with Jewish books.

A popular feature of many Jewish organizations’ activities is a book club focused on Jewish themed books. This fosters social engagement alongside cultural consumption. Taking their cue, in some cases, from the success of Oprah’s book club, Jewish book clubs—including one called, with tongue in cheek, Ofrah’s Book Club¹⁹—are also thriving online. The largest is the Jewish Book Council’s: Each month the JBC selects a new book (usually a novel) and invites its roughly 4,300 Twitter followers to discuss it—in real time—by leaving comments with the hashtag #JBCBooks.²⁰

How many Jewish reading groups and book clubs exist? While it is impossible to know, it is clear that Jewish book clubs are one way of finding a Jewish community outside of a synagogue. “Being Jewish for many of us is not only a religion or an ethnic designation, but a cultural existence,” explains the website for the MazorNet Book Club.²¹ Building on the idea that culture can unite people, these clubs emphasize community and shared experience. The JBC’s website says that “Book clubs are a platform to engage with one’s community and inspire conversation,”²² and lists the following five reasons to start one’s own Jewish book club: “Social engagement, Meet new people, Engage in conversation about Jewish issues, Cultural connection to Judaism, Educational and intellectual exercise.”²³

Culture unites people, if sometimes in friendly disagreement. If anyone realizes that, it is the Jewish Book Council. As Josh Lambert, a young scholar of Jewish literature, says: “The Jewish Book Council does more than any other contemporary organization to ensure that Jews across the country and around the world who might not be able to pray together, to eat together, or to agree about just about anything else can at least laugh at, argue about, and be scandalized by the same books.”²⁴

Case Study: Spinoza

The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) led a quiet life, within circumscribed borders. Born in Amsterdam; steeped in traditional Jewish learning; banished, tersely, by the Dutch Jewish community for crimes so unspeakable, they have never been spoken of, at least not in print. Yet three centuries after his death, Spinoza receives a degree of attention uncommon for a rationalist philosopher who wrote in Latin. “He’s enjoying this incredible renaissance in philosophy and in popular culture,” said Steven Nadler, a Spinoza scholar, at a roundtable discussion. “I mean, there are Spinoza Bagels at Trader Joe’s.”²⁵ Between the Spinoza bagels and two Spinoza plays, a Spinoza novel, and an array of *tchotchkes* bearing Spinoza’s likeness, the famous heretic is enjoying quite an afterlife. On January 23, 2012, *The Weekly Standard* noted the “recent surge of interest” in Spinoza²⁶—a reference to the growing shelf of popular and scholarly books. But Spinoza was showing up in other, less expected places.

“Centuries Later, Spinoza Back in the Fold” ran a recent headline in the *Forward*. The article went on: “After more than 350 years of enforced exile, Baruch Spinoza has been invited back into the Jewish community—at least by the people who participated in a mock trial and symposium at Theatre J in Washington, DC.”²⁷ The mock trial and symposium—or the “Spinozium” as it was cleverly called²⁸—was held at the Washington DC JCC. A sold-out crowd had come for 6 hours of discussions about Spinoza’s life, his ideas, and his relevance.

The Spinozium was a terrific example of creative, compelling Jewish culture being produced for a broad audience. Following panel discussions, interviews, and “closing arguments,” a symbolic vote was taken and the audience had its say: Spinoza was symbolically permitted “back into the fold,” 350 years ex post facto. That aside, there was one other major difference between 1656 and 2012. This time, the proceedings were broadcast live on the Internet through the JCC’s website.

The Spinozium provided a (relatively) brisk overview of Spinoza’s life and heresies. But it did not quite end there. That evening, a sold out performance of “New Jerusalem,” a play about Spinoza’s trial, was staged in the same auditorium, with a fresh-faced actor starring as the young philosophe in danger of being excommunicated. Written by the playwright David Ives, “New Jerusalem” was, at first glance, an unlikely success. Given a play that delves into matters of free will, ontology, theodicy, and other abstruse ideas, one would not necessarily expect a large audience. And yet, by dramatizing, indeed inventing, Spinoza’s trial and excommunication, it managed a kind of alchemy, making difficult ideas exciting and accessible, and drawing a broad audience of non-Jews and non-philosophers.

The humor helped. “New Jerusalem” sold out one show, and then another, and then 26 more over 2 years. By the end of its second successful run, nearly 11,000 tickets had been sold.²⁹ But “New Jerusalem” was only a small part of the Spinozophilia. A second play, dealing more darkly with Spinoza’s torment following his excommunication, was read aloud on April 1st as a prelude to the Spinozium.³⁰

As Spinoza’s star has risen in the cultural arena, scholars, too, are focusing more attention on him. Over the past several years, a growing shelf of scholarly books, with titles attesting to Spinoza’s singular place in Jewish history and his profound influence on Western culture, have been written. They include *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave us Modernity*; *The*

First Modern Jew: Spinoza and the History of an Image; and the evocatively titled *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*. There was also *The Courtier and the Heretic*, about Spinoza and Leibnitz, and a novel, *The Spinoza Problem*.

Literature

The May 2012 issue of *Moment* magazine featured a symposium of 17 novelists debating the perennial definitional question: “Is there such a thing as Jewish fiction?”³¹ As early as 1997, *Tikkun* magazine had noted a “surprisingly uncelebrated movement—the resurgence of Jewish writing in America.”³² Eight years later, Jewish writers such as Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Michael Chabon had all produced small (if highly accomplished) bodies of work, and all three had entered the bestseller lists. Englander had even reached Amazon’s top ten list with a book of stories about Orthodox life.

Who would have predicted this literary renaissance? Jewish-American fiction was supposed to have died in the 1960s, the 1970s, and again in the 1980s. In part this was determined actuarially: As the great postwar Jewish novelists (Roth, Bellow, Malamud, Bashevis Singer) slid into their senescence, their readers began to dwindle. Besides, as Jews supposedly assimilated, there was no Jewish story worth chronicling. What was left to write about?

Quite a bit, it turns out. One could turn to hundreds of recently published novels and short stories about Israel, the Holocaust, the new immigrant experience and the riddle of Jewish identity, as well as Jewish novels set in foreign countries, in other eras. Broadly, it amounts to an incredible flourishing of Jewish literary creativity that belies the post-mortems. Jewish American fiction has stamina. The old voices—like Philip Roth’s—are yielding only slightly to the new voices—like Philip Roth’s.

As a result, Jewish-American fiction—not to mention non-fiction about Jewish themes, another cottage industry—contributes enormously to Jewish American culture. Max Apple, Steve Stern and Philip Roth soldier on. Cynthia Ozick continues publishing solid, well-crafted novels and essays. And for every *succesd'estime*, there seems to be a best seller: After Howard Jacobson’s *The Finkler Question* won the Booker Prize, sales spiked around the English-speaking world. Michael Chabon published *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union*, which might be classified as Yiddish detective noir. It debuted at #2 on the *New York Times* bestseller list³³ and will be made into a movie by the Coen brothers.³⁴

A handful of now-prominent Jewish American writers coming from Orthodox backgrounds now classify themselves as completely secular. Start with Nathan Englander, an ex-Yeshiva *bocher* from Long Island who describes his current lifestyle as “radically secular.”³⁵ Englander’s first book, a collection of stories called *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, was a bestseller in the US, and went through 13 printings in hardcover alone.³⁶ Some of those stories were drawn from the world Englander left, but Englander has suggested that he sees

his own Jewishness as a simple ontological fact. “I see the world through Jewish eyes,” he has said, explaining what being a “Jewish writer” might mean in his case.³⁷

Of another generation, and somewhat more accomplished, is Rebecca Goldstein, a novelist and professor of philosophy. Her latest novel puckishly titled *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction*, suggests that even secular people may harbor religious impulses that they channel into secular projects.

Jonathan Safran Foer’s two novels, *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, have both been *New York Times* bestsellers; Gary Shteyngart, a Russian-born novelist whose latest book, about a nebbishy, bookish Jew with a much younger Asian girlfriend, was also a *New York Times* bestseller. Shteyngart has wrung humor out of recalling his miserable Hebrew school experience; he has described himself as “more than slightly doubtful”³⁸ about God’s existence, and he once jokingly proposed that secular Jews offer their own version of Mitzvah tanks, welcoming religious Jews into vans not to lay phylacteries, but to expose them to the joys of secularism.

Philip Roth may be the standard-bearer for cultural Jewishness, its greatest champion. “There’s more Jewish heart at the knish counter at Zabar’s than in the whole of the Knesset,” says a Roth character in *Operation Shylock*. Roth is also the most outspoken secularist. Roth blurbed Susan Jacoby’s *Freethinkers*, a history of American secularism. His recent novella *Everyman* is at least partly about confronting mortality without the consolations of religion or a belief in the afterlife.

One can glean a lot about Jewish American fiction by considering Goldstein’s thoughtful secularism, Englander’s born-again secularism, and Roth’s fierce and scabrous secularism. For these writers, religion either provides a kind of fuel, or at least grist, for fiction. One might also wonder, in making a religion out of writing, whether these writers have—as Goldstein might theorize—managed to sublimate their religious impulses into a secular project or perhaps obsession.

Magazines and Periodicals

The Jewish influenced secular touchstones of yesteryear—*Commentary*, *Partisan Review*, and *Dissent*—have either disappeared or lost influence of late. *Moment* magazine and *Tikkun*, independent fora that struggle to survive, are more ostensibly Jewish and though they cover secular culture they also claim religion as their beat. Though print media is in trouble there are signs of a recent renaissance in Jewish periodicals, Jewish magazines, newspapers, and journals on-line.

The *Forward* is the grandfather of secular Jewish newspapers. At its peak, in the 1930s, the *Forward*’s circulation reached 275,000.³⁹ By 2000 that had fallen to about 26,000 for the English edition and around 5,500 for the Yiddish edition, whose continued existence is an achievement in itself. Meanwhile, the *Forward* has applied its enterprise towards staying relevant. Each week it posts a podcast in iTunes that covers Jewish politics, news, and culture. (“What makes a sandwich Jewish?” the host wondered on a recent episode.⁴⁰) And like every

newspaper nowadays, it builds an audience online. The *Forward's* website frequently drew between 45,000 and 60,000 visitors each week between September 2011 and February 2012.⁴¹

The *Forward* has stiff competition, however, which may be the strongest sign of the overall health of Jewish periodicals. Among mainstream Jewish magazines, the current on-line leviathan is *Tablet*(www.tabletmag.com), which, for many readers, is among the most exciting developments in Jewish life over the past decade. *Tablet* began publishing in June of 2009, and today it draws roughly 5,000 readers a day.⁴²

When *Tablet* was first launched, its editor, Alana Newhouse, described its mission thusly: “*Tablet* is for a particular kind of reader who has an interest in engaging with Jewish identity and culture, perhaps the way they are not currently living it. So if they are currently living with it by practicing religious ritual, they might want to engage with art if they haven’t before. If they are constantly engaged with Jewish culture, they might want to read an article about religion and religious practice.”⁴³

Tablet's coverage is skewed towards culture, politics, and the endless and evergreen subject of what Jews are doing, saying, creating, and fighting about around the world. Although it includes a section called “life and religion,” the balance is certainly skewed towards “life,” meaning that *Tablet* engages both the religious seeking a dose of culture, and cultural Jews seeking a (smaller) dose of religion.

But it is hardly the only recently launched Jewish periodical to garner attention. The *Jewish Review of Books* debuted in spring 2010, bearing all the hallmarks of its namesake, the *New York Review of Books*, namely seriousness and quality (contributors include Leon Wieseltier, Adam Kirsch, and David Biale). *The Jewish Review* is, in many ways, a throwback, reviving the 3,000-word critical review-essay. With support from a major philanthropy, the Tikvah Fund, the *Jewish Review* has amassed 7,000 subscribers and an average distribution of 20,000.⁴⁴

The furthest thing imaginable from the high-toned *Jewish Review* is the magazine *Heeb*, which brands itself a “take-no-prisoners” magazine for the “plugged-in and the preached-out.”⁴⁵ Irreverent, crass and self-consciously hip, *Heeb* covers Jewish “arts, culture and politics” with the goal of shocking the bourgeois. *Heeb* was originally intended to be “secular, irreverent, political, and funny,” according to its founder, Jennifer Bleyer, although it may have gone too far when it published photos of Rosanne Barr dressed as Adolf Hitler while baking cookies.⁴⁶

Another magazine, which might be considered a distant cousin to *Heeb*, is *Zeek: A Journal of Jewish Culture and Thought*, which sees itself as bold, forward-thinking, and spiritually engaged. *Zeek* calls itself as the first online Jewish magazine, meaning that its legacy stretches back slightly more than a decade. But it is still going strong, holding itself up as the vanguard of Judaism. “*Zeek's* mission is to be a catalyst for conversations about the Jewish tomorrow,” its website says. “We believe that Judaism is undergoing a paradigm shift that we must not ignore if we want Judaism to be a vibrant religion and culture.”⁴⁷ Collectively, *Heeb*, *Zeek*, *Tablet*, the *Forward*, and the *Jewish Review* offer a stereoscopic view of Jewish life, culture, and politics, but websites like *Jewish Ideas Daily*, which aggregates long form articles and essays about Jewish matters, also covers a broad swatch of Jewish subjects in one website.

Carving out more of a niche is *Habitus: A Diaspora Journal*, whose very title seems intended to question notions of home and exile. *Habitus* began in 2006 with a print run of 2,000.⁴⁸ The most incredible thing about it, 6 years later, is that it has survived. “Literary magazines come and go like fireflies,” says an article in *Library Journal*. *Habitus*, meanwhile, has thrived “with exemplary creative and journalistic work.”⁴⁹ Each issue takes a different city as a theme/subject. According to editor Joshua Ellison, “*Habitus* is not just about cataloguing distinctions. It’s a way of using the whole world as raw material for creating a more complete picture of ourselves.”⁵⁰

The biggest trend in journalism—the shift away from paper and ink, towards pixels—has not bypassed Jewish journalism. While making it harder to thrive in print, it has offered a platform for anyone who cares to stake out a home online. Even a small circulation magazine like *Jewish Currents*, which offers “a progressive, secular voice” and has only recently poured its efforts into the internet, attracted over 130,000 unique visitors to its website in 2011, for a total of 1,100,000 total visits.⁵¹ Although it draws more modest traffic—generally between 300 and 500 people a day—the blog website “unpious.com,” which features “voices on the Hasidic fringe,”⁵² has carved out its own niche. *Unpious* offers a platform to ex-Orthodox Jews currently living secular lives, and was started by Shulem Dean, a man in his mid-30s, who abandoned Orthodox life after being threatened with excommunication from his Haredi community.

Jewish Studies on America’s University Campuses

The late historian Leon Jick, of Brandeis University, once expressed shock that the field of Jewish Studies could expand so greatly, so quickly in American higher education. To underscore his shock, he invoked the forefathers of Jewish Studies, the inventors of the modern, critical study of Jews and Judaism: “Would Zunz, Steinschneider, or even Graetz have believed that in 1969 some fifty professors of Judaica, to a considerable degree American-born and -trained, would gather at a major American university established by Jews to consider the status of their profession?”

Those “fifty professors”—48, actually—comprised the inaugural gathering of what later became the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS). Now at a twenty-first century AJS conference more than 1,000 sociologists, anthropologists, Yiddishists, historians, and professors of literature, religion, and Hebrew gather. The field has expanded and lost its sense of being marginal in the academy. Jewish Studies are no longer a sideshow and have become a respected part of the academic mainstream.

The growth of Jewish Studies—from a fledgling field devoted to biblical and religious scholarship, and then the Holocaust, to a cynosure of Jewish intellectual life, not to mention cultural life—is one of the major American Jewish success stories of recent decades. The story of Jewish Studies’ evolution can be told partly through statistics. In 1969, Jewish Studies was so tiny that two scholars—Salo Baron of Columbia and Henry Wolfson of Harvard—were at the center of it. Between them, they had taught almost 80% of the nation’s Jewish studies scholars. The following decade was critical. Despite fears that, as one scholar put it, “the field would be destroyed” by a horde of rabbis seeking teaching positions, Jewish Studies thrived. Enrollment increased. Faculty positions increased. One could attribute this to a confluence of several factors. “American Jewish intellectuals were enjoying widespread access to the university,” writes

Professor Marc Dollinger. “At the same time ... Jews across the country were searching for ways to discover their ‘roots.’ ”

The growth continued through the 1980s and 1990s. In 1992, 4,000 Jewish Studies courses were offered at 410 institutions in the US and Canada; and those institutions counted 104 endowed professorial chairs among them. Today, Jewish Studies is larger and more popular than ever, due in part to the infusion of money from wealthy donors. Millions of philanthropic dollars are spent supporting Jewish Studies programs each year. The effect is demonstrable.

A variety of schools around the country have benefited from the Jewish Studies Expansion Project, a collaborative project of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation and the Foundation for Jewish Culture. Between 2008 and 2012, the Project provided fellowship money to a dozen colleges and universities. In total, more than 1,400 students⁵⁴ were enrolled in courses taught by teaching fellows during the first 2 years of the project. A promotional video on the Foundation for Jewish Culture’s website shows grateful students from the recipient universities.

In terms of content, Jewish Studies courses on America’s university campuses have largely focused on traditional religious texts and early periods of Jewish history alongside the Holocaust and Israel. This resulted in the neglect of the relationship between Jews, modernity and secular culture particularly in the United States. However, since 2000 this has begun to change largely as a result of the support of the Posen Foundation’s initiative the “Posen Project for the Study of Jewish History and Cultures.” Its goal is to support the creation of unique courses that explore Jewish secularism as a historical, intellectual, and sociological phenomenon. By offering 3-year grants to colleges and universities (initially in Israel), the Foundation encouraged Jewish Studies departments to expand their offerings to include courses dealing specifically with post-Enlightenment forms of secular Jewish identity. By 2012, over 40 colleges and universities had developed courses in Jewish secularism that raised provocative questions about Jewish life in the modern era.⁵⁵

“Jewishness Beyond Religion: Defining Secular Jewish Culture,” at Bard College, explores how a multitude of trends—intellectual, social, and political—had the effect of broadening Jewish identity after the Enlightenment. By asking the question, “in what ways have Jews redefined what it means to be Jewish in the modern period?” it examines “how Jewishness was redefined...in secular terms,” a shift both “radical” and “typical.” Most of the courses, not surprisingly, focus on the modern era; the line-of-demarcation is typically the Enlightenment. “Secular Jewish Thinkers,” taught through the History department at the University of California, Davis asks the question, “Is it possible to be Jewish without believing in Judaism?” It begins with pre-Enlightenment philosophers such as Maimonides and traces the origins of Jewish secularism back even further—to Biblical sources. The course explores the secular Jewish tradition as a kind of genealogy—one in which secular Jewish thinkers drew inspiration from their (religious) forefathers, then subverted their ideas to break with tradition. That course goes on to survey groups of secular Jews (“Weimar heretics,” “American heretics,” and “feminist heretics”) and individual thinkers (Spinoza, Hess, Heine). Indeed, Spinoza is a central figure in many narratives of Jewish secularism.

“Secular Jews from Spinoza to Seinfeld” at Dickinson College includes excerpts from Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* as well as Rebecca Goldstein’s biography *Betraying Spinoza*. It also includes, for good measure, clips from episodes of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *Seinfeld* (see below). *Betraying Spinoza* also crops up in “The Rise of Secular Jewish Culture,” taught at Hampshire College, and “Judaism, Secularism, Modernity,” taught at Goucher College. Another Goucher course, “The Modern Jewish Experience,” is perhaps the most eclectic: Spinoza, Philip Roth, and Michael Chabon sit cozily next to Sigmund Freud and Arthur Hertzberg on the reading list. That is not the only course that uses literature to broach complex questions of Jewish identity. At Hampshire and Graduate Theological Union, two other Posen-sponsored courses use very different *literatures* to examine Jewish secularity. “Literature of the *Haskalah*: Secularization and Sexuality” (GTU) uses “literary production—satire, romance, poetry and autobiography” to examine the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, and its role in Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, “Creative Betrayals: Secular Jewish Literature from the Bible to Modernity,” at Hampshire College, explores how modern Jewish writers used literature, drama, and poetry as a vehicle to “declare their independence from traditional Judaism.”

If there is a common thread to all the courses, it is that they underscore the heterogeneity of the modern Jewish experience the link between modernization with secularization. “The modern world has brought forth a proliferation of Jewish identities, including many that are primarily secular,” reads the course description for “Topics in History: Secular Judaism,” taught at Hunter College. That course, like others supported by Posen Foundation grants, explores, as does “Jewish Experience in a Secular Age: A History of Modern Jewish Identity,” taught at Muhlenberg College, “at the multifaceted ways that Jews constructed modern, secular Jewish identities in the wake of those transformations.”

According to some estimates, over 40% of Jewish students take a course in Jewish Studies at some point during college. The more striking statistic, of course, is the one that can be deduced from that: The majority of students who take Jewish Studies courses are not Jewish. The diversity of students is mirrored, to a degree, by their professors. In 2008, about 8% of AJS’s 1,700 members were found to be Protestant, Catholic, some other religion, or totally non-religious, and 18% disavowed any connection to a Jewish denomination. All of which suggests that Jewish Studies has become truly diverse in the twenty-first century, and that the Jewish story is more than ever seen as complex, multi-layered, and—perhaps most signally—relevant and important.

This raises a question: What is the purpose of Jewish Studies? Is it, as some claim, the transmission of Jewishness from one generation to another (“Seeding the future”)? Or is it something else, something more in line with the purpose of the humanities in general? The debate is an evergreen one among scholars, rabbis, and philanthropists. The purpose of AJS, claims Robert Seltzer of Hunter College, is “the advancement of Jewish knowledge for its own sake.” Without going so far, some professors would disagree; they see the field as having a salutary purpose. At Boulder, one of the goals of Jewish Studies is to “help answer our most pressing [contemporary] problems.” Jack Kugelmass, an anthropologist at Florida, gives a contrarian answer. “Jewish Studies is not designed to make Jews more Jewish,” he says, “but to make non-Jews less non-Jewish.”⁵⁶

The one surviving institution that provides an organic link to both the historical heyday of secular Jewish culture in Eastern Europe and Jewish studies is the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Founded in Vilna, Poland (now Vilnius, Lithuania) in 1925, it relocated to New York City in 1940 to continue its mission to preserve and teach Eastern European Jewish history and culture. YIVO's archives are a formidable resource for scholars—24 million letters, manuscripts, photographs, films, sound recordings, art works, and artifacts illuminating topics from Yiddish theater to the Jewish Labor Bund. Equally impressive is its current programming: YIVO offers lectures, symposia, and classes (including Yiddish classes) to the general public.

The new information technology allows residents at any location to access YIVO's website, which includes a link to the YIVO *Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, the digital version of which (it also exists between hard covers) receives about 20,000 hits a month.⁵⁷ There's also a video archive of past events, organized chronologically (among them programs on Leon Trotsky, S. Ansky, and Sholem Aleichem). More than three-dozen events from 2010 are available to be viewed online, along with nearly 30 events from 2011 as well as YIVO's 2012 conference on "Jews and the Left."

Museums

The idea that what is American can be Jewish, and what is Jewish can be American, is best expressed in the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, which opened in 2010. A recent visitor to the Museum's webpage might have seen an advertisement for "an evening"⁵⁸ with the drummer Max Weinberg of Bruce Springsteen's E-street band, which can itself be considered a piece of Americana. Not far from Weinberg's headshot is the museum's elegant logo: three diagonal stripes meant to evoke a flame. The flame, of course, is an important Jewish symbol, and this flame, constructed from red and blue stripes, set against a white background, seamlessly integrates both Jewishness and American-ness.

Everything about the museum, from its name to its architecture (heavy on glass, suggesting the absence of boundaries), to its location ("steps from Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell"), to, finally, its vast holdings, suggest the successful miscegenation of Jewish and American ideals. The museum's mission statement does an excellent job of conveying its values by stating that the museum hopes to "inspire ... people of all backgrounds" by imbuing them with "a greater appreciation for the diversity" of the American Jewish experience.⁵⁹

Far from being unique, the National Museum of American Jewish History is merely one of scores of Jewish museums that espouse pluralistic values and court broad audiences. "The CJM [Contemporary Jewish Museum] makes the diversity of the Jewish experience relevant for a twenty-first century audience," reads the mission statement for this San Francisco Museum,⁶⁰ which further bills itself as "a welcoming place where visitors"—implicitly all visitors, from every background—"can connect with one another through dialogue and shared experiences with the arts."

The impulse to universalize goes hand in hand with the tendency to secularize. In the case of Philadelphia's National Museum, both tendencies, secularism and universalism, went too far, according to a critic from the *New York Times*. "The museum leans heavily toward the right-hand side of the Jewish-American hyphen," he wrote, and continued:

"It is as if the museum so wanted to generalize from the Jewish experience and justify its mission as a beacon celebrating political and ethnic freedom, that it misses much of Judaism's particularity. The outline of the story becomes generic; it simply taps into the contemporary identity narrative. We never really understand what Judaism has been as a religion, as a collection of beliefs and laws... The exhibition makes it seem as if the culmination of the American-Jewish experience was an amorphous cultural Judaism."⁶¹

Indeed the museum reflects a twenty-first century secular Jewish sensibility as it invites visitors to not only *identify* with Jewish history and themes, but to see themselves as a part of a larger narrative that incorporates Jewish and American plotlines, and seeks to blur, if not quite erase, the distinction. To facilitate that, these museums offer the idea that Jewish themes, ideas, and lessons can also be *universal* themes and ideas. Those themes may be lachrymose, and the lessons grim, as is the case with some Holocaust museums. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington, DC, is one example. Featuring alarms about genocides and crimes against humanity committed in Sudan, Syria, Congo, and Bosnia, the message is clear: the Holocaust is not unique; large-scale atrocities happen everywhere, and are still being committed today.⁶² Some museums also assert that Jews, given their experience with persecution, have a special obligation to intercede when (and where) atrocities are being committed. In May 2012, The William Breman Jewish Heritage and Holocaust Museum in Atlanta showed an exhibit about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.⁶³ The resonance with Jewish experience is strong, and obvious.

In Holocaust museums, the *shoah* is elevated nearly to the level of sacredness, in terms of its uniqueness, its incomprehensibility, and its ineffable nature. This is quite different from what happens at Jewish art museums. These museums' exhibits may be varied in their themes, but if anything is sacrosanct, it is the idea of artistic freedom.

One can see Jewish museums as temples of a sort: temples of culture and memory. Of course, not all Jewish museums are alike. The Jewish Museum of Maryland, for instance, certainly conveys a different version of Jewish history than, say, a Holocaust museum. "We combine art, rare objects, historical photographs, oral histories, videos and hands-on activities in engaging, informative exhibitions," its website says.⁶⁴ One exhibit takes Jewish food seriously. A May lecture on the history of the knish, by Laura Silver, is hardly about the burdens and responsibilities of memory, as one can tell from the event description:

*Are you a knish lover? Laura Silver is! Join us for a lively discussion of the history of the Knish and a sampling of Knishes from around Baltimore.*⁶⁵

But not all Jewish museums emphasize universalism. "Share your story," encourages the Contemporary Jewish Museum's website, asking visitors to "take pride in your cultural heritage" by contributing photos that illustrate "what it means to be Jewish." A lecture at the Oregon Jewish Museum on "Voting Jewish" also suggests that being Jewish implies a specific set of

values, even politics.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, both museums embrace Jewish pluralism: “share your [Jewish] story”—whatever it happens to be.

Film Festivals

The appetite and market for Jewish film both fiction and documentary is significant today. Film is not just a medium of entertainment but also education and so lends itself to integration into Jewish Studies courses in history, social science and on Israel. The National Center for Jewish Film located at Brandeis University was founded in 1976 to collect, restore and exhibit a collection now amounting to 12,000 reels of feature films, documentaries, and newsreels. This content feeds into academia, film festivals, and burgeoning TV programming on Jewish topics. In 2011, Jewish film festivals were held in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Atlanta, Boston, Washington, DC, Miami, Louisville, Hartford, and many other cities. Jewish film festivals have proliferated, along with other Jewish culture, over the past decade. The content is international and it is an especially vital outlet for the small Israeli film industry. “It’s the new religion,” says Adley Gartenstein, president of the Film Movement, who estimates that 500,000 people attend Jewish film festivals each year. “A lot of Jews find it easier to embrace their Judaism through culture rather than a synagogue.”⁶⁷

In 2011, film critic J. Hoberman, along with a fellow critic, Scott Foundas, curated a special film series at the Walter Reade Theater in New York City. Hosted by the Film Society of Lincoln Center, and featuring movies culled from Hollywood’s “new wave” of Jewish films, it was called—perhaps inevitably—“Hollywood’s Jew Wave.”⁶⁸ The 10-day series, which featured *Annie Hall* (1977), *The Producers* (1968), and *Funny Girl* (1968), was a natural fit for New York City audiences. The underlying message was that though Jews may have “invented Hollywood,” as the film scholar Neal Gabler claims in his Hollywood-sized biography of Jews and the movies, for several decades after the birth of the talkies, few Jewish-themed films were created in Hollywood.

Given the present hunger for Jewish films, it was only a matter of time before someone thought up a Jewish version of Netflix. The Jewish Film Club, which debuted in May of 2011—and was created by Gartenstein himself—offers subscribers a different independent film every other month, either streamed or via DVD. The Jewish Film Club selects films that “explore what it means to be Jewish and to be part of the Jewish culture.” The Club’s goal, according to its website, is to “spread the wonder, richness, and diversity of the Jewish culture, as expressed through film.”⁶⁹

Comedy

A society’s comedy reflects its values and concerns. Jewish humor—or more broadly, Jewish comedy—is one of the great expressions of cultural Jewishness. Jewish comedians as individuals were the backbone of much of early Hollywood and network television. However, the current generation of Jewish comedians is much more “out” as Jews. Take just one popular example: the TV show “Seinfeld” which aired from 1989 to 1998 and proved that Jewishness could appeal to Middle America. Jerry was an irreverent cultural Jew who never went to temple in nine seasons. Yet “Seinfeld” was the Jewish show par excellence, its quirky characters sitting around, parsing social mores; they seemed recognizable New York Jewish types. Scholars of “Seinfeld” may

recall Jerry's dentist, Whatley. "It's our humor that sustained us as a people for 3,000 years," he insists,⁷⁰ before Jerry corrects him ("5,000") and accuses him of converting to Judaism solely for the ethnic jokes. Interestingly the montage of Seinfeld clips dubbed into Yiddish with English subtitles has been viewed more than 220,000 times on YouTube.⁷¹

Larry David the co-creator of *Seinfeld* went on to create the acclaimed, long-running HBO series (2000–2011) *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. The episodes in this improvised and daring show focus on the neurotic David's social insensitivities but they also include more ethnic Jewish cultural references than *Seinfeld* and illuminate the milieu of the secular liberal Hollywood Jewish entertainment world.

On the eve of the 2008 General Election, the comedian Sarah Silverman posted a video on YouTube⁷² that has since been viewed over two million times. Smiling sweetly, and looking every bit the nice Jewish girl next door, Silverman launched into her *spiel*. "If Barack Obama doesn't become the next president, I'm going to blame the Jews," she deadpanned. "I'm making this video to urge you, all of you, to *schlep* over to Florida and convince your grandparents to vote Obama." Silverman herself is secular. She has declared herself culturally, rather than religiously, Jewish. "Personally I have no religion," she has said. "I'm a Jew in that it oozes out of my pores uncontrollably."⁷³

And then there's Marc Maron, a Jewish comedian whose book, *The Jerusalem Syndrome*, and whose extremely popular podcast, "WTF," have been platforms for a more classic Jewish-comedic sensibility. Maron belongs to a class of comics that Woody Allen once called the bombastic neurotic. Maron's show has 230,000–450,000 downloads a week,⁷⁴ depending on his guests, making it one of the most popular podcasts on iTunes.

In a more wholesome vein, there is the phenomenon of "Old Jews Telling Jokes." The title is pretty straightforward. It began with videos of old-timers repeating their best shtick on camera. "Old Jews Telling Jokes" began as a website, which then spawned a book, a DVD, a Twitter feed, and now an Off-Broadway show, "Old Jews Telling Jokes on Stage." Before the Old Jews phenomenon took off, many of these aging *tumblers* would have been fading into the sunset. Now some will be famous. The most popular "Old Jews" clips have ricocheted around the web, winding up in the inboxes of Jewish sons and daughters. Lou Charloff's video has been watched 250,000 times since it was posted 2 years ago.⁷⁵

Finally, there's Jon Stewart. Post-*Seinfeld*, Stewart may be the world's most popular ambassador of cultural Jewishness. In an interview, *Daily Show* writer Rob Kutner was asked whether if there is "a lot of Jewish humor on *The Daily Show*." "There definitely is," he said. "I think *The Daily Show* has a strong pull for Jewish people. First of all, it tackles some of the typical Jewish liberal issues."⁷⁶

Conclusions

An Overview of Contemporary Jewish Secularity

Secularity is the most prominent characteristic of modern Jews, who constitute the most secularized religious group anywhere. However, the idea of a modern, secular, culture is

relatively recent, and we can find communities, even today, where it is almost absent. Jewish secularization has been the main factor in the accommodation of Jewry to the modern world. Jewish success in arts and sciences, and Jewish prominence among progressive political leaders, are both tied to and stimulated by secularity.

Vast numbers of Americans who regard themselves as Jewish or who are of Jewish parentage and upbringing simply have no faith, in the conventional religious sense of that term. They adhere to an identity that is rooted in an ancient faith. But their claim to that identity implies little or no commitment to its religious roots. The Jews of no religion (JNR) population is that segment of American Jewry that denies theism and clearly rejects all forms of religious affiliation and is not interested in replacing one form of religious Judaism or membership of one synagogue group by another. We would claim that Jewish secular (non) belief covers a larger group than just the self-identified JNR population. It consists of both those who reject supernaturalism—deny miracles and an active deity—and those who reject the authority of the rabbinate and Halakhah. Secularism among this population advances at different speeds in the three realms of belonging, believing and behavior. Yet overall the data validate Perlmann's (2010) observation that it is "the sociology not the theology" that explains the process. For if we include also those Jews who are devoted to the American separation of religion and state, then around 90% are secular in terms of that belief. Political secularism usually translates into sociological liberalism and non-judgmentalism regarding lifestyle choices especially as regards sexuality, which is an aspect of secularization.

Political secularism and the secular trend have wide-ranging ramifications for a broad network of religious, educational and social service organizations that collectively comprise the organized US Jewish community. Because that community is voluntary in nature, as are all ethnic and religious communities in the United States are, its members determine the criteria on the basis of which they include or exclude fellow members. That is they get to decide from whom they seek support to sustain the community and upon whom and for what purposes they expend the resources and voluntary associations they share in common. Who is defined in and who is defined out matters greatly. So do the criteria on the basis of which such definitions are made. To be successful and attract membership and participants, Jewish institutions have to cater to their natural constituency. It is thus worthwhile reiterating how secularized American Jews are today.

- More Jews than most other Americans respond "None," when asked "What is your religion, if any?"
- More Jews than members of most other American religious groups regard their outlook as "secular" rather than as "religious."
- Fewer Jews than members of most other American religious groups belong to a temple, synagogue or any other religious institution.
- Fewer Jews than members of most other American religious groups agree with the essential proposition of religious belief that "God exists."

There is a paradox in the data presented here: Jews were supposed to assimilate into American society, yet their exceptionalism persists. They are not like the rest of America. By virtually any measure, America is essentially a Protestant society. It is a land of spiritual searchers, associational religion, and belief in personal salvation. However, this hardly describes the majority of Jews. Indeed, it better describes only Orthodox Jews, who are of course a small

minority of Jews (more than 80% of our sample of “Jews by religion” identified themselves as Conservative or Reform).

In short, most Jewish hearts and minds are not part of Main Street America. Rather, the well-educated Jewish masses appear to emulate the secular elites of Europe. Whom do American Jews most resemble from a sociological and demographic perspective? The Dutch or Scandinavians: an affluent population with low fertility, well-educated and emancipated women, low levels of religiosity, strong communitarian values, tolerant social attitudes, liberal outlook, and center-left voting records. To the sociologist, American Jews look as though they belong more in the suburbs of Stockholm or Amsterdam than they do in Atlanta or St. Louis.

In liberal American democracy, Jews seem to be able to successfully co-exist outside the national consensus without being stigmatized for their deficiency in religious enthusiasm. Perhaps this is because the United States is going the way of other advanced democratic nations, which have moved more dramatically to religious indifference. It is interesting that the proportion of Americans stating they have no religion was 2% in 1957, 7% in 1990 and 15% in 2008. Therefore, American Jews with their high degree of secularism can be described either as aberration and outlier or alternatively perhaps as the pioneers of a new American disposition.

The Implications of the Rise of the New Secular Jewish Culture

American Jewry today can best be described collectively as an affinity group built around affection for and pride in an evolving “secular Jewish culture.” According to NJPS 2000, 84% of Jews affirm that, among other characteristics, “being Jewish is learning about Jewish history and culture.” The richness and fecundity of contemporary Jewish culture shown above is more than enough to sustain a purely cultural/secular Jewish identity. If one wants to be a cultural Jew, one could *easily* construct an identity based on a plethora of (non-religious) Jewish things. What then is the essence of secular cultural Jewish identity today? It has three basic, almost essential, ingredients:

- a basic *awareness* of one’s Jewishness (whatever that means to the individual);
- some sense of connection to, or kinship with, with other Jews, no matter how tenuous;
- a special concern with Jewish life, culture, issues, politics, ideas or questions, including the question of what it means to be a Jew.

All three of those ingredients are nurtured and nourished by a thriving American Jewish culture, a culture with much to recommend it, including the fact that it is open to everyone--a signal value of secularism. It is neither isolated nor isolating. The new secular culture is also powerful because it is a spontaneous development often nurtured by cultural entrepreneurs. Yet it has no proselytizers, elected leaders, dogma or a dedicated movement literature.

There are both “pull” and “push” factors favoring the appeal of secular Jewish culture today. The pull is the sheer vitality, dynamism, quality and broad content we documented above. Moreover, new content is constantly being created. The push is the lack of attraction of religious Jewish life for so many Jews. Aside from issues of belief, there is the fact that so many Jews feel excluded because the Jewish religion is constructed around family ritual; and Jewish festivals are often organized around family participation, especially inclusive of school-age (or younger) children. This is both to reinforce Jewish identity among children and to tie families into the communal institutions’ educational offerings. Marriage is thus expected to reinforce Jewish identity,

especially in its communal expressions, which results in non-married Jewish women especially experiencing exclusion from Jewish religious life. Empty-nesters and singles (especially if they are older) too sometimes feel alienated by the Jewish community because of this familial orientation.

Secularism is not an organized movement among American Jews. It is a social and cultural phenomenon. It takes multiple forms and varies across different contexts and social environments. Formal membership in voluntary organizations has declined in the age of “bowling alone” and individualism. Nowadays there is a bigger menu of competing markets and activities and the pattern of involvement is episodic and fits a much more complex lifestyle. Jewish secularism is an unstated assumption that provides cohesion for disparate communities.

Secularism is malleable and flexible. It can accept different communities and groups as it has no authority structures to defend and no hierarchy to buttress. Secularism does not partake in a zero sum game. It is not about gains and losses; it is about new metaphors and the diffusion of ideas and behaviors. It exploits the reservoir of the Jewish public’s deep psychological sense of connectedness to its heritage, values, commitments, and family. It relies on an umbilical cord of sentiment and belonging defined informally by the individual not an institution. Unlike the Jewish religion, secular Jewish culture welcomes non-Jews to get involved. Jewish Community Centers are open to the wider community and have large numbers of non-Jewish members. In some smaller Jewish communities, Jews are often only a minority of the membership. There is recognition that without the non-Jewish members the institution would not be viable. This sort of practical approach to market forces is an asset of Jewish secularism because it both accepts the economic realities of modern society as well as the social reality of Jews as a numerically small minority in American society.

While Jews feared that they would assimilate into America, it was actually *America* that was becoming more Jewish. There is a category of Jewish culture that can be easily distinguished from, say, Southern white, Asian-American or African American culture, or even *mainstream* US culture, whatever that is. And yet in reality and practice, there is no distinct Jewish community but rather an assortment of communities. The incredible proliferation of (secular) Jewish culture in the US is thriving, rich and diverse, Jewish secular institutions are open to everybody—unlike the religious institutions, which may claim to be open and inclusive, but generally are not. This lack of need to show a mother’s *Ketubah* (religious marriage certificate) to join or participate is particularly relevant and important when so many Jews now live together with non-Jewish family and household members. In effect, secular cultural activities do the recruitment and missionizing that synagogue Judaism signally fails to do. What is happening today in the US is the creation of a secularized Jewish culture that has a natural continuum to its historical sources, based on a synthesis with modern life, science and technology, and globalization processes, which include connections with Israel.

In a pluralistic society, there are multiple intellectual, social and cultural options but as we have shown many Jews are still attracted to Jewish options. Contemporary American Jews are still different from other groups in American society even as they are different from Jews in the past. The paradox is that this gap appears to be a consequence of the total self-confidence on the part of America’s Jews as Americans. For according to NJPS 2000, 84% of American Jews reject the

proposition that they feel outsiders in American society. Our data suggest that such self-confidence has resulted in the willingness of large and growing numbers of Jews to shuck the religious rubric as the basis for self-identity and adopt a cultural one. Although most unaffiliated Jews are indifferent to rabbinical exhortations, our research shows that many are intensely proud of their Jewish heritage and feel a strong connection to fellow Jews. There exists a very substantial population of Americans whose personal sense of Jewishness, rooted essentially in the matrix of personal relationships borne of ancestry, family life, education and social connections, remains yet to be anchored to suitable institutional arrangements and programs that can harness them into the bond of group solidarity.

Most American Jews regard themselves as individual choosers making choices from a vast array of Jewish expression. The Jewish community can nurture and fortify these attachments through cultural and educational programs using the burgeoning new communication platforms. The web seems an especially favorable medium for cultural connections and expression for a dispersed and migratory population but less so for traditional Judaism and religious rituals. Cyberspace is essentially secularizing because it threatens authority by robbing the rabbinate of monopoly of its knowledge and by democratizing knowledge through easy access to information. Thus, the increasing role of the virtual community offers the possibility of re-engaging millions of secular and secularizing Jews. Mathematically, at least, secular culture can be a potentially effective and productive strategy for Jewish communal renewal in the twenty-first century.

History may repeat itself in coming years, with the re-emergence of a substantial community of avowedly secular Jews, as existed a century ago, only this time with the technological means to transmit their rich Jewish culture from generation to generation.

Notes

1. Vast Crowds Honor Sholem Aleichem; Funeral Cortege of Yiddish Author Greeted by Throngs in Three Boroughs, *New York Times*, 5.16.1916.

2. Hans Gerth & C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 51.

3. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Book, 1966, 1967). p. 15 “The sociology of knowledge must first of all concern itself with what people ‘know’ as ‘reality’ in their everyday non- or pre-theoretical lives.”

4. See *Highlights*, p. 35.

5. <http://jewishculture.org/>

6. <http://jewishculture.org/about/>

7. <http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/tours/>

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48. <http://forward.com/articles/9676/a-magazine-for-the-far-flung/>
49. <http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6625170.html>
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51. Jewish Currents promotional materials.
52. <http://www.unpious.com/>
53. Facts, data, and information in this section drawn primarily from Kristin Loveland's excellent 2008 paper, "The Association for Jewish Studies: A Brief History," delivered at 2008 AJS conference.
54. <http://jewishculture.org/jsep/>
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