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Secularism and the Future of Judaism

The most recent generations of Americans have led a continuing decline in religious membership and worship attendance, and identification with a single faith, with Millennials seeing the least association since nearly a century ago when we began polling and recording religious and demographic trends in society. A 2010 report from the Pew Research Center finds that “Millennials are significantly more unaffiliated than members of Generation X were at a comparable point in their life cycle and twice as unaffiliated as Baby Boomers were as young adults” (Religion Among the Millennials, 1). New age religions have seen significant growth since before the popularization of the counterculture phenomenon of the mid-1900’s, and the trend does not exclude Judaism. Moving forward in a generation that is seeing less religious affiliation among young people and more of a tendency to seek out community in a non-theistic setting, Humanistic Judaism is key to preserving the culture of the Jewish people.

Decline of Religious Affiliation

Many factors contributed to the changing religious landscape of the United States after 1950, but the search for meaning in religion highlights the disillusionment felt by youth after WWII and the materialism of the golden age of American consumerism. The ‘consciousness revolution’ of the sixties led to a less mainstream spirituality that included personal reflection, therapeutic techniques, hypnosis, astrology, and alternative healing; “all these could be seen as

alternatives to orthodox religion, medicine, and society generally, and perhaps also to the exclusivist claims made by mainstream orthodoxies” (Amore, 608-609). Since many religions adhere to a classic monotheistic view of only one way to salvation, such as the Christian churches theology of “through Christ and Christ alone,” membership slowly began to decline due to the strictness of a religious lifestyle which didn’t fit into the new world view of the baby boomer generation.

A quote from the President of The Society for Humanistic Judaism in the most recent issue of *Humanora*, the organization’s newsletter, clearly states the dilemma facing Jewish (and other religious) leaders: “Thousands of people are ‘Jewish, but...’— that is, Jewish by birth, background, family, or marriage, but not interested in worship.” (Lawrence, 3). This is part of a growing trend in the United States, one of a people who are very familiar with religion choosing to leave it as they enter adulthood.

Currently, decline is normal across all religions in the United States, with the exception of the Muslim community, which has seen an increase in mostly male followers internationally and slow growth in the United States. Over the past few decades, at least 85% of Americans were raised as Christian, yet nearly 20% of adults classify themselves as ‘formerly Christian’ today; 27% of all males in the U.S. fit in to the category of ‘religiously unaffiliated,’ up significantly from 20% in 2007, females inclusion in that category jumped from 13% in 2007 to 19% in 2014 (America’s Changing Religious Landscape, pewforum.org). The disaffiliation phenomena is particularly strong among Christians and Jews.

As a prime example of this classification of American adult, we can look at Senator Bernie Sanders, a prominent American political figure, whose family is of Jewish heritage, yet

who no longer claims to practice a specific religion. Senator Sanders says that as an adult, he has not practiced Judaism and does not attend synagogue, yet he also acknowledges that, “It’s a guiding principle in my life, absolutely, it is” (Sanders, New Hampshire Democratic Town Hall). If more and more adults share this sentiment, but aren’t actively engaging in Jewish communities that celebrate the unique history of their people, the possibility of the loss of culture presents itself as an undesirable consequence to this trend. The more liberal branches of Judaism are presenting an alternative to this possibility, by keeping the sense of connection many former Jews feel to their roots, while eliminating the theological component many find to contradict the reason and science of modern enlightenment.

New Age Judaism

“The most basic unifying factor among the various New Age Judaisms is that each one has sought to bring a sense of spiritual renewal into Contemporary Judaism” (Salkin, 354). As the 60’s led to new movements, Humanistic Judaism took its root. It grew around the communities of *havurot*, one of the earlier non-theistic branches, which focused on an individual’s experience through an emphasis on intimacy, egalitarianism, experience based Judaism, a counter-culture style, and a comfort with doubt and ambiguity (Salkin, 355).

Humanistic Judaism is characterized by the informal nature of the gathering, and a freedom for the individual experiencing it to have his own religious experience, instead of one determined by God. “For Humanistic Jews, the closest we could get to ten commandments would be ‘Ten Strongly Worded Suggestions for You to Consider in Your Free Time.’ Our commitment to Jewish identity is strong because we have chosen it out of all other possibilities, including the possibility of vanishing into general American culture” (Adam Chalom, 12). Humanistic Judaism

is characterized by keeping alive a Jewish identity through the traditions of the Jewish people, but without references to a deity (in more than a purely historical context).

Youth and Religious Affiliation

It is fairly clear at this point that as each generation reaches adulthood, higher numbers of its young adults are choosing to become disaffiliated. A 2014 study by the Pew Research Group on Americans' attitudes towards various religions found that "Christians and Jews are rated more favorably by older Americans than by younger people" (How Americans Feel About Religious Groups, pewforum.org). Additionally, young people in the age category 18-29 felt more favorably about Eastern religion categories such as Buddhism and Hinduism, and essentially neutral about Atheists and Muslims... while the oldest category of Americans, 65 and older, feel slight disfavor towards Buddhists and Hindus, and very negatively about Atheists and Muslims (How Americans Feel About Religious Groups, pewforum.org). This further demonstrates younger generations' coldness towards exclusivity and groups that view those who are different than themselves as being wrong.

The future of membership and leadership in religions greatly lies in the hands of its younger members. It wouldn't be accurate to make the assumption that the future of religion as a whole lies entirely in the hands of youth, but in the case of Judaism in particular, it is in fact, very true. An "important determinant of growth is the current age distribution of each religious group — whether its adherents are predominantly young, with their prime childbearing years still ahead, or older and largely past their childbearing years" (The Future of World Religions, pewforum.org). In 2010, a Pew study found that 20% of the Jewish population was over the age of 60. Compared to the overall demographics of our aging population, this may seem like a

normal proportion, but it is the world religion with the oldest population. Every other religion has greater numbers in younger age groups; only 14% of Christians are over 60, only a mere 7% of Muslims are over 60, and the World as a total averages at 11% of the religious population being over 60 (The Future of World Religions, pewforum.org). With more of its members reaching old age and nearing the end of their involvement in Judaism, whether the next generation will see such high numbers of disaffiliation or not will largely influence the future of Judaism in the United States.

Whether the young members will disaffiliate entirely or just choose not to follow directly in their parents and grandparents footsteps in the more conservative branches of Judaism will also be a determining factor in positive or negative growth. With the data gathered to determine age distribution, Pew also tentatively projected growth between 2010 and 2050 in various religions due to disaffiliation and switching. Christians had the largest net change, one of negative growth by approximately 66 million members. Jews did not experience loss of such large amounts, but considering the ratios of total members to that of Christianity, the negative growth is still significant at a net loss of approximately 300,000 members. Pew estimated that by 2050, 320,000 will have switched in to Judaism, and 630,000 will have switched out (The Future of World Religions, pewforum.org).

Many factors influence the trends, and it will take more than a single generation to grow a community in a continuously positive or negative direction. But from the research I've conducted, I can state that if membership numbers depend on the younger generations, and the younger generations are drawn to secular branches of a traditional religion, then the future

membership and involvement in Judaism will need to look to secularist branches, primarily Humanistic Judaism.

In Conclusion

Although periods of religious revival have been a common occurrence every few centuries, they can't be counted on to increase numbers in the American Jewish community. Judaism has low numbers in the U.S. and worldwide, and is not found in as many international communities as Christianity or Islam, for example. Keeping the culture of Judaism relevant, especially in America, will require adaptation and inclusivity. The Society for Humanistic Judaism states: "Jewish continuity needs reconciliation between science, personal autonomy, and Jewish loyalty" (What is Humanistic Judaism, shj.org). Judaism cannot be let to die out because of religion, a small part of what makes up the Jewish American culture. And while religion is a very important part of Judaism, it is important to its history, not to the sustaining of the overall culture of the Jewish people. The holidays, history, and unique traditions are best practiced and preserved in a non-theistic setting that respects the importance of keeping the Jewish culture alive.

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